

FOURTH SUNDAY OF LENT, 2026

Today's Gospel is the story of The Man Born Blind, John 9:1-41. In this Gospel passage, the Lord Jesus performs the wonderful work of giving complete and perfect vision to a man who was blind all his life. Can you imagine what it would be like to have experienced only darkness your whole life long, and then suddenly have the world in all of its glorious light and color revealed to you? That would be nothing less than being born again. When such a marvelous thing happens to someone, who wouldn't rejoice? The Jewish leadership in Jerusalem in 30 A.D., that's who. A marvelous thing had been done, but it hadn't been done according to regulations. If it wasn't according to regulations, it had to be bad. Such was their narrow, crabbed mindset. A man blind from birth had been given sight, but it was a Sabbath, and some work had been involved, and therefore, they insisted, that marvelous deed of charity and power was somehow invalid.

At this point, given the sad reality of revived anti-Semitism in our world, I feel obliged to say that a narrow and crabbed attitude about religion and law is hardly limited to some Jews. It is found among some Catholics and Protestants also, as well as among Muslims, Buddhists, atheists and . . . well, everyone, really.

Of course, I am at at this time and in this place talking mainly to Catholics, and so I address to Catholics this warning against developing an attitude about religion and law that is so crabbed and narrow that it can reject a full scale miracle if it isn't done according to regulations, and completely miss a work of the the Lord, if it hasn't been properly authorized at church headquarters.

This is something that St. Patrick (March 17) experienced. Patrick - Patricius - was ordained a bishop by the bishops of post Roman Britannia to minister to Christians in Ireland, mainly slaves captured by Irish raiders, or descendents of those slaves. When St. Patrick started to minister to the heathen Irish and call them to saving Faith in Jesus Christ, the bishops of post Roman Britannia were outraged. Who authorized this? When St. Patrick answered that Jesus Christ authorized this at the end of St. Matthew's Gospel, they were not mollified. Clearly, if Jesus Christ really authorized something, it would come through us! There are procedures that have to be followed! Amazing things were happening. Thousands of pagan Irish were coming to Jesus Christ. Sons of notorious pirates and slave raiders were becoming Christian monks. Daughters of Irish chiefs were becoming nuns. Sons and daughters of Ireland were also becoming sons and daughters of God in great numbers. Amazing things were happening, but all that the bishops of post Roman Britannia noticed was that these things were happening without proper authorization from them. Just who did this Patricius think he was?

Patricius knew who he was - "Patrick, a sinner . . . a most uneducated man, least of all the faithful, and greatly despised by many." Patrick, when he was 16 years old, committed some sin big enough that it disturbed some people 40 years later. We have the response he made to his accusers among the bishops, but we don't have what they wrote. Consequently, we don't know what that sin was. We only know that Patrick didn't deny it, but only said that it really wasn't relevant to the mission he received from God. His irritated accusers failed to notice a man risking his life daily to bring the Good News of salvation through Jesus Christ to a violently pagan nation, let alone the astonishing success of his mission. They only noticed that he had been a rotten teenager. Well, they also noticed his poor education. They didn't notice the wonder that a man carried off by slave raiders at age 16 (thus interrupting his education) was

now bringing the nation of his captors to Christ. Instead, they noticed his poor spelling and grammatical mistakes.

The story of St. Patrick is an amazing one, even more wonderful than sight being given to a man born blind. The dates given for St. Patrick's life and ministry in early Irish annals differ. In my view, he was born in post Roman Britannia around 415, was carried off by Irish slave raiders around 431, escaped Ireland in 437, entered the clergy, and was ordained a bishop and sent to Ireland in around 460. It seems that some level of Roman order was preserved in the north of Britannia, which still had an organized Church. That Church sent Patrick off to be bishop for the Christians, mainly slaves or descendants of such involuntary immigrants, in northern Ireland. Once in Ireland, Patrick began to do something unexpected, calling the native, pagan Irish to Faith and to Baptism, to Good Works and to the Eucharist. Even more unexpectedly, they began to heed his call in great numbers.

The proper response would have been "By the Lord has this been done, and it is wonderful in our eyes!" Instead, the bishops of northern Britannia became increasingly irritated. Sometime around 470 they took disciplinary action against Patrick. We still have St. Patrick's "Confessio", his response to their charges, although we do not have their charges against him. Judging from St. Patrick's "Confessio", the angry bishops seem to have stated openly that St. Patrick's mission to the heathen Irish lacked proper authorization, and hinted that he was somehow making money from it.

St. Patrick's "Confessio" was not a "confession" in the modern sense of the word. It was actually a defense, and an angry one at that. Humanly speaking, he had the justified anger of a man who was heroically risking his life daily, only to get mud thrown at him by distant, hostile observers. Divinely speaking, how could preaching the Gospel ever be unauthorized? Miraculously, God gave him deep love for the nation that once carried him off into slavery, a love that would not rest until each and every child of Ireland was safe on the way to Heaven. Why couldn't the bishops back in Britannia see that as marvelous?

Well, we can see that it was marvelous. We don't know how his problem with the bishops of Britannia was resolved. The best guess is that the Roman Church, presiding over all the Churches, intervened, and recognized Patrick as the first bishop of the new, Irish Church.

What happened really was marvelous. Patrick brought the Christian Faith to the enemies who had enslaved him in youth, and to the furthest edge of the world he knew. With God's help, he founded a new kind of Church, truly Catholic but also proudly barbarian, a Church that enthusiastically honored Rome's Saints Peter and Paul, but that had no nostalgia for the faded Roman Empire. Behind the St. Patrick's Day parades and such silly things as green beer, there is a remarkable man. Behind that remarkable man is the same Lord Jesus Christ, Who once gave sight to a man born blind, even on a Sabbath Day, and now gave saving Faith to a new nation, even without proper administrative procedures.

The Lord does will that His Church have a due chain of command and proper channels of communication. But He is free, and His people are free, and His wonderful deeds sometimes happen outside that chain and those channels. When that happens, may we, unlike the Pharisees, be able to say "By the Lord has this been done, and it is wonderful in our eyes!"

