



*We proclaim a crucified Christ*

1Cor1.23

## **PATRICK ORATION**

**Delivered by Most Rev Peter A Comensoli  
Ninth Archbishop of Melbourne**

**15 March 2019  
Park Hyatt, Melbourne**

You have to feel just a little bit sorry for Palladius of Poitiers, sent by Pope Celestine I as the first Bishop of Ireland. Usually being the first earns you some kudos, but not for poor Bishop Palladius. Having arrived in 431 AD, he was unceremoniously banished in the same year to northern Britain by one of the clan kings. Whilst leaving behind the foundations for a few churches, some books, relics and two companions – he did not manage to leave behind a community that had the strength to flourish beyond its hidden existence.

The second Bishop of Ireland, on the other hand, sent the following year in 432, also by Pope Celestine, fared somewhat better. He headed north, successfully connecting with the small Christian groups already there, and then systematically went about converting the clan leaders of the old religion to Christ. By the time of his death, Ireland was acknowledged as a Christian country, and his name became synonymous with that land. His name of course was Patrick, second Bishop of Ireland, but *Numero Uno* in status.

St Patrick is something of a colossus for the Catholic Church in Melbourne. He stands at the pinnacle of a deep cultural heritage that has marked us out as the most Irish of cities in Australia. The Churches, schools and other buildings named after him – along with those who followed him – are like beacons that criss-cross the city in a kind of Irish saintly trail. Melbourne is deeply Patrician, and his saintly presence runs deep within our psyche.

But how well do we know him? We can tend to rely on the fables and stories about Patrick to paint a picture of him. The miraculous Patrick who founded Christian Ireland; the story-telling Patrick who used a shamrock to convert a people; the banisher of snakes Patrick; the converser with ancient ancestors Patrick. These ideas of Patrick have created an impression of him that has a certain hold over us, even today. But is this the real Patrick?



## Archbishop of Melbourne

For example, Patrick is often portrayed as a local lad done good. But historians tell us that he was probably a Roman Britain, who first encountered Ireland as a slave in his teens. He converted to Christianity there, but soon escaped to Britain and onto Europe, taking up studies in the faith and growing in missionary zeal. We owe a great deal to the anonymous Christians who inspired, formed, and educated him. So, Patrick was a foreigner when eventually he was sent to Ireland as a bishop, and he remained somewhat an outsider among many of the local Celtic clans, the bearer of a new religion and strange customs.

There is also a habit of portraying Patrick as the missionary founder of Christianity in Ireland, but we bishops only get sent to existing local Churches. There were already small Christian groups in Ireland before Patrick arrived, established by missionaries who had gone ahead of him. The seed of faith had already been planted. But, unlike the civilisations of Europe, Ireland under clan leadership lacked real communities or townships. What Patrick did most effectively was to embody (incarnate) the Christian faith into the existing culture and draw people together into like-minded, faith-minded communities.

One more impressionistic image of Patrick is worth keeping in mind. While he was certainly an extraordinary missionary, travelling the length and breadth of Ireland, he was not an institution builder. It was later Christians who built the great Catholic institutions that seeded our own country. What Patrick did was to form small Christian communities within existing social structures, leaving behind fledgling monasteries and parishes within the larger rural clans. These communities then became the Gospel leaven that gave rise to Christian families and neighbourhoods within the broader society.

While Palladius might have left behind a few buildings, Patrick was the true seed planter. He may not have converted the entire country, but he sowed a Gospel energy among local neighbourhoods of grace. Others may have established the institutions, but he fed the people with a deep knowledge of the Christian faith.

We might therefore describe Patrick as a man of deep faith and missionary discipleship, sent to a foreign people to plant the Gospel of Jesus Christ among them, to bring fresh heart to existing local Churches, and to sow seeds of faith within the wider non-Christian society. Tonight, we rightly celebrate St Patrick's Day and all that this Saint has brought to our city, but it is the real Saint that we are called to follow out into the streets of Melbourne.

I stand before you tonight a new but already proud Melbournian Catholic, cherishing a history of Christian fidelity and social contribution that has manifested itself in parishes and schools, in hospitals and universities, in aged care centres and welfare agencies, at parliament, on sporting fields and in the professions. This Melbourne Catholic presence has been an influencer in the city, a marshaller of the troops, a political force for good. Built on the foundations of St Patrick, it has nurtured, educated and healed – hatched, matched and dispatched – countless Melbournians for generations.



## Archbishop of Melbourne

Yet I cannot deny that I also stand here tonight amid the darkest days of our proud history in this city. An earthquake as occurred, and the landscape has shifted permanently. What, until recently, offered a sure footing and a familiar vista, is now broken ground and crumbling edifices. What has been a source of pride and comfort, built by our forebears, no longer captures people's minds and hearts, and leaves our children indifferent. At this time of deep crisis and humiliation, might it not be time to let go of the past and begin anew?

So, this is the proposal I want to put to you tonight, wounded but proud; shaken but determined: that the future of the Christian faith in our city lies in letting go of the old landscape of a Catholic Melbourne, and instead re-beginning the work of Patrick, re-planting our city with the seeds of the Gospel, re-discovering a knowledge, language and pedagogy that can transform lives. It is a proposal to make the move away from the institutional centre and relocate ourselves among our local neighbourhoods of grace.

Where might we find these places? Well, we might take a look at Christ the Light Parish, up north in Mernda, the newest parish of Melbourne. They began with a handful of Christians in 2012, and are now averaging 500 at Mass each Sunday, without a church in which to gather. Or we might go and discover Resurrection Parish, out West in St Albans South. They're averaging 3,000 weekly attendees, with Masses in five different languages. Or we could head East to St Joseph's Springvale. There's 2,500 of them gathering there each week.

These are just a few of the many local communities spread throughout Melbourne – within the tram tracks and beyond – where we will discover saints among us. They gather to worship God on Sundays, while still enjoying their footy. They participate in small faith groups during the week as they juggle work and family. They belong to evangelical movements and organisations of charity, reaching out to the broken and struggling. They teach the Catholic faith and morals to their children because it matters. They strive to live lives according to the way of Jesus Christ.

These saints are living witnesses to hope, speaking from within the ordinary life of our city, reminding the centre (including the hierarchical centre) of a Gospel way of life that is not institutional, but local and personal. You already know them: the Newsagent owner, the local GP, the telco consultant, the bank officer, the footy coach, the shop assistant, the office worker. These hope-filled Catholics are a part of Melbourne, not separate from it, and they are you. Together, we are to be a leaven of faith, hope and love among our neighbours, in our city, for our society. But we need new Patricks to reignite us.

So what might be done to nurture, support and encourage the saints among us today? When Patrick was sent to Ireland, he carried with him a deep knowledge of the Christian faith, drawing on what he had learnt from the great educators of his time. He carried with him what CS Lewis would come to call that 'deep magic' by which people find meaning to their questions, and purpose for their lives. He carried with him a fire to light the way.



## Archbishop of Melbourne

The deep magic that Patrick took with him to Ireland is still accessible today for Catholic Melbourne. It's there in our biblical faith and our intellectual tradition. It's there in our liturgical practices and spiritual heritage. It's there in our saintly witnesses, like Mary MacKillop and Mary Glowrey, daughters of Melbourne. It is there in you and me.

But this deep magic is in need of a re-awakening among us. It means rediscovering for today the manner in which Patrick brought the language of the Gospel and knowledge of the Christian faith into a people, captivating them and illumining their culture. It is about supporting and growing holy families with the boldness of the Gospel. It is nurturing young people in their faith with reasons for hope. It is walking with the poor among us as fellow pilgrims in grace.

The landscape of Catholic Melbourne has permanently shifted, and we cannot return to a once familiar territory. New ground needs to be prepared, and the soil turned, so that the Gospel seeds may be re-planted among us and our children. This will mean a return to the sources of our Christian tradition, which still bristle with Gospel energy, to find there the resources we need to educate a new generation. A helpful 'yes' to funding and facilities and a fair deal, but a far greater 'yes' to being formed anew, free and faithful in Christ.

Patrick was not an institution builder in society, but a Gospel planter among the locals. He did not establish structures and entities; he proclaimed a message of hope to a people. He equipped a band of disciples to be the leaven for their society. Might not these be the markers for our way into the future? For surely our task is not to reinforce crumbling structures on fractured ground, but to find new ground to build new communities of grace.

This is our task ahead: not to foster a nostalgia for the past, but to stake out a new territory. I want to invite you to join with me in becoming the new Patricks for today, carrying with us across broken terrain that precious flame of deep magic, to ignite new beacons of light throughout our city.

May we go there with Patrick, who went there before us.