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Letting Go & Letting God

21 Centuries of Faith

Kathleen Atkinson, OSB



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Brigid of Kildare

(450–525)

*I would like the angels of heaven
to be among us.
I would like an abundance of peace.
I would like full vessels of charity.
I would like rich treasures of mercy.
I would like cheerfulness to preside over all.
I would like Jesus to be present.*

It takes courage—and an Irishwoman—
to lay forth her requests in such a way,
but this was Brigid of Kildare:

Her prayer sings
and has been memorialized in many a ballad.

Her enthusiasm celebrates
a playful intimacy with her God.

Her longing exposes
a heart of compassion for any in need.



Shutterstock: Dublin

Saint Brigid of Kildare, or Brigid of Ireland, was born in Faughart, near Dundalk, County Louth. Several legends are told about her family origins. Some say her father was Dubhthach, an Irish chieftain, and her mother, Brocca, a slave of his court who had been baptized by Saint Patrick. Other sources, however, suggest that Brigid's mother was Portuguese, kidnapped by Irish pirates and brought to Ireland to work as a slave in much the same way as Patrick had been. It's been said that shortly after Brigid's birth, she was sent away to Murroe in East Limerick to be educated within another family until she came of an age to be useful to the household. It has also been suggested that parts of her biography were adapted from the pagan goddess Brigid, the goddess of fire, after whom she was named.

The actual historical details of her life, however, are secondary to the love and veneration held by the Irish people for the woman called "Mary of the Gael." Venerated as a saint in Catholic, Anglican, and Orthodox traditions, Brigid is considered one of Ireland's three patron saints, along with Patrick and Columba. Her feast day, February 1, is the traditional first day of spring in Ireland, thereby perpetually connecting Saint Brigid with the renewal of the earth, the promise of abundance, the hope of new growth, and the eternal cycle of new life.

Inspired by the preaching of Saint Patrick, Brigid consecrated herself to God at an early age. Numerous stories testify to her piety and uninhibited generosity to anyone in need. In fact, many of Brigid's earliest miracles seem to have rescued her from giving something away that belonged to another. Sent with the other young women to collect butter made from the milk of the cows, she gave all of hers to the poor. When restitution was demanded, Brigid was miraculously in possession of the milk she had given away and more. Similarly, as a child she gave a piece of bacon to a dog, only to find it replaced when she was about to be disciplined. She reportedly could never refuse the poor who came to her father's door, dispensing milk, flour, and clothing to all. The saint's unbounded charity angered her father, and when she finally gave away his jewel-encrusted sword to a person with leprosy, Dubhthach realized her disposition was indeed best suited to the life of a nun. Brigid thus finally got her wish and was sent to a convent.

Immediately young women were drawn by Brigid's holiness and joined her. At age fifteen, she and seven others approached Bishop Mel to establish a convent near Croghan Hill. According to legend, when they appeared before him, a fiery flame rose from above Brigid. At Bishop Mel's request, Brigid then founded a convent at Ardagh, the first convent of strict religious observance to be established on Irish soil. She went on to found many more monasteries throughout Ireland. Through them, thousands came to receive instruction in the Christian faith.

Brigid's most famous foundation is at Kildare, the "Church of the Oaks." It was a double monastery, including men and women, with Brigid presiding over both communities. A woman of wisdom and common sense, Brigid's genius for leadership and organization was widely recognized. She established schools, set sisters to work making vestments, and organized the episcopal government of her city. Bishops, priests, chieftains, and kings frequently came to seek her counsel. More than anything else, however, Brigid continued to be renowned for her hospitality, with special regard for the poor and infirm. Kildare became a place of holy pilgrimage for all; from the prominent and powerful to the lowly and forgotten, Abbess Brigid presided, counseled, and served with her very hands-on approach to leadership. Brigid died at the age of seventy-five, but accounts of her miraculous healing and care continue into the present.

Prayer

Jesus, I thank you.
 I delight in your abundant gifts of life and love.
 Let me not cling to them but overflow to the world.
 Let me not be cautious in loving but passionate.
 Let me not be guarded in welcome but extravagant.
 Let me live and dance and sing with the heart of an Irishwoman
 named Brigid.

Connecting With Brigid of Kildare

The Irish are an oral-based culture filled with great stories, many of which were put to music and sung as ballads. The story of Brigid was transmitted in this way. It is filled with legends that may or may not be accurate in historical detail. It is, however, filled with truth.

Brigid teaches us the truth of God's lavish generosity. Because God has first been so generous, we must do the same. The beauty of nature, in all of its wildness and abundance, serves as a reminder of God's gift. God cannot be tamed or controlled; God will not be bottled up in antiseptic creedal statements nor confined to certain locations deemed sacred. Brigid reminds us that God is Life: creative energy, fiery anointing, wellspring of charity.

Brigid's charity took no stock in prudent financial planning for the future. Revered as the patron saint of Irishwomen and mothers, she embodies the Christian mandate for hospitality. Throughout the centuries, mothers have eaten less so that their children may be fed. They have toiled into the night after the family is asleep and awakened at dawn to prepare for the day. Brigid was an abbess of renowned influence and a distinguished scholar who considered Jesus' command to clothe the naked and feed the hungry to be her greatest calling.

Her story calls us to do the same.

Reflect and Pray

- ✠ Trusting in God's abundant love and giving, write a litany of desires: "I would like..."
- ✠ Reflect on the litany you wrote. What are you learning about yourself from it? What do you learn about your priorities and your worldview; your relationship with God?