

Reflections on the Prayer of St Patrick

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The Prayer of St Patrick is a prayer of protection and empowerment. It does not merely protect against danger, sickness, and evil, but actively strengthens the person who is praying, layering one source of strength upon another, building an edifice of protection, transforming the world both within and facing the person in prayer, and culminating with the remarkable and transformative experience of total immersion in Christ. It is a prayer especially meaningful for those days of struggle and challenge, when, as St Paul says, we must:

¹¹ “Put on the full armor of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil’s schemes...¹³ Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand.” (Ephesians 6:11, 13)

The best way to see this process of protection and fortification is to take the sections one by one. Any one of these sections can be places where we pause, reflect and discuss. A question for further discussion is offered in brackets at the end of each section.

The prayer begins by calling on the Holy Trinity (of course, St Patrick is famous for using the image of the shamrock- 3 leaves in one leaf- to explain the Trinity to the people of Ireland), but then turns to the major doctrines about Christ. We seldom think of these basic creedal statements of faith as protective and strengthening, but beliefs are not just something we hold in our thoughts but also guide our lives and give us the place where we stand fast. They become the first layer of armor and strength as we step forth in the battle against the dark powers that threaten us. [How do our beliefs- how does our faith- strengthen and guard us?]

The next section calls upon all the ranks within the community of the faithful for assistance and support, beginning with our angelic brethren and companions, and enumerating the several categories of the faithful. As the list of those within the community of the Church grows, a mighty host of Christians throughout the life of the Church is gathered to stand together in prayer for this battle. The person who is praying knows he/she is not alone but joined in solidarity by countless others. [How does our connection to the many faithful Christians throughout the life of the Church empower us? Do we feel their presence? How does it help?]

Next comes the section calling upon God’s glorious creation for protection. This passage is unusual in that it weaves the person praying into the strength and beauty of the created world. The physical world here is recognized as part of God’s loving work; as we integrate ourselves into its wonders we share in and can partake of its greatness. [So many people turn to nature for strength, inner peace, renewal and inspiration. Why is this so?]

The passage that follows is one of the two best known and loved sections of the prayer, and is often used, along with the last section (Christ with me, etc...) as a "shortened" version of the prayer. This section beautifully details the ways in which God is called upon to illuminate and guide the Christian. The physical senses are, in a way, 'anointed' by the prayer so as to become avenues of God's direction and protection. The prayer speaks of God's "eye," "ear," "hand," and "word" as taking on the work of those that belong to the one praying and, essentially, as becoming the "eye," "ear," etc. of the one praying. [So much to discuss here- for example: What does it mean for "God's word to speak for me?"]

The next section lists the many adversaries faced by the one praying, and marshals all he/she has invoked thus far in defense against those foes. These adversaries are described in ways meaningful to people of St Patrick's time but represent foes we face even today. [What kind of adversaries, challenges, battles, troubles, and enemies do we each face? How can this prayer enable us to face them? For example, when I was undergoing chemotherapy I chose to pray this prayer every day. The prayer has many important aspects that made it so helpful to me; for example, one thing I heard in this was protection against the destructive elements in the chemo- the "poison" and the "burning." Protection against those, I felt, enabled me to access the positive aspects of the treatment without fearing that the treatment might kill me- which it could. I also saw the cancer as one of the enemies to "oppose my soul and body," and in this prayer I found strength to fight it.]

The final section (before the conclusion, which repeats the first paragraph and therefore is omitted in this version) is the heart of the prayer: Christ is now the shield encasing every part of the person praying; He is present on every side, and present also within and without. Everything and everywhere is transformed; no place and no one is to be feared, because Christ is everywhere present and fills all things. [What does this mean to you? How does it change how you think, how you act, how you see and think of others, and how you live?]