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FAITH FOCUS - Our Patron Saint has done us proud, but have we done the same for him?

By the time you read this I will hopefully be celebrating St Patrick's weekend in bright sunshine some 2,000 miles from home, but my thoughts will still be on our patron saint, writes Alf McCreary in the Belfast Telegraph.

St Patrick's Day is special to me because even from my boyhood in south Armagh it had a special resonance.

Even then, I felt the aura of Patrick among the green fields of Ireland, and I wondered why our Presbyterian Church had no service on March 17 while my Catholic friends and neighbours went to church and celebrated joyfully afterwards.

It's a pity that most of the headlines here in recent years have been about drunkenness and the bad behaviour of students in the so-called

Holyland in Belfast, and from this distance I hope that things improved this year.

The modern universality of St Patrick was illustrated this week by the shared lecture in Armagh about our patron saint by the Church of Ireland Primate Archbishop Richard Clarke and the Roman Catholic Primate Archbishop Eamonn Martin, with input from Cardinal Dolan of New York.

The worldwide appeal of Patrick was underlined to me also last year during one of my Caribbean Princess cruises into Belfast, when I spoke about Belfast Harbour.

One of the young stewards on the vessel was a devout Catholic from the Philippines who asked me earnestly where he might find traces of St Patrick in Ireland.

Sadly, however, not all the places bearing his name here have a true association with Patrick. Historians are not certain that he worked as a slave at Slemish, or that he visited Lough Derg or Croagh Patrick, or that he was present at all the springs and wells in Ireland bearing his name.

However, there is strong evidence that he founded his first church in Armagh and that he

moved to the east Down area with the powerful tribes of his time - even though there is no strong confirmation that he is buried at Downpatrick.

What is clear, however, is his deep spirituality and great courage in returning to Ireland voluntarily after his captivity here as a slave, and his mission to bring Christianity to Ireland.

One of the most comprehensive pictures of Patrick is contained in his short autobiography, titled *Confessio*. It is written in rudimentary Latin, but an English translation is available in most good bookshops, and it is well worth reading.

Some years ago, I wrote a detailed life of Patrick in a book to mark the millennium in Armagh, and titled *St Patrick's City - the Story of Armagh*.

The beginning of his *Confessio* is direct and humble: "I am Patrick, a sinner, most unlearned, the least of all the faithful and utterly despised by many".

This, remember, is the man who braved all sorts of hardships to come back here and spread the Gospel, who had the backbone to speak up for Christianity at a time of flux and danger, and who had the political skill to retain the support of some of the most powerful people of his day.

By the time he wrote his autobiography, Patrick had the privilege - not given to everyone - of surveying the success of his life's work.

As Professor John Coulson has pointed out in his Concise Biographical Dictionary of The Saints, Patrick "had before his eyes the success of his work. The whole island was almost entirely linked up, even to its remotest parts, with churches and monastic foundations, in which flowed a strong tide of conversion.

"A vigorous native clergy was in position: a native bishop had been nominated to succeed him".

Professor Coulson concludes rightly: "The Irish people have responded with a degree of human affection undimmed by the passage of the centuries. On March 17 they celebrate his feast all over the world with a fervour which makes his cult perhaps the most living one of all fifth century saints".

St Patrick has indeed done us proud, but can we truly say that in our shared and divided Irish history thus far, we have done the same for him?

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