**Poor Clare Sisters**

**‘Our Friend Patrick’**

**Day 1 - March 8th 2022**

***Sr. Elaine Kelly***

Thank you, Fr. John, for the honour of us being here tonight and to all the people who run this amazing parish. As Martina echoed and I will echo as well, it is just so great to be back for this Novena; I love Downpatrick and the people. I know so many of you, it has been a privilege to live here for two years and to still be connected.

When Martina and I left in November last year, to join the Poor Clare’s; it caused me to think really hard as I had put down roots in Downpatrick but I also realized that I had to say, *yes again to the Call*; I knew that God was restoring all that Martina and I had lost when the Sisters of Adoration released us.

My call to be a religious came on the 9th of March 2014, during Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament. I had been a practising barrister for 23 years with no plans to enter a convent but that night in Adoration of Jesus; I experienced the power and touch of Christ in my heart. I heard seven words; you will be a Sister of Adoration. Well, I just felt this explosion of grace, like I was falling in love, falling in love with God and as soon as I could, I entered the Adoration Sisters on the Falls Road.

It was an amazing five years, I was living the dream; apart from being a child, I couldn't remember a time when I was happier. Like Saint Patrick, I just kept telling everyone what God had done for me; I had my trials like everyone else but what an experience and I thank God for it. When I was told it was over, I heard the words, *be amazed*, in prayer, in the Blessed Sacrament Chapel in our convent. I knew in my heart, that the Lord was going to do something; something mind-blowing even in that strange time, I would receive new life through the cross but I also felt that something inside me was dying by having to leave.

When we arrived in Downpatrick, we met unusual kindness in the people just like Saint Paul and 266 others who were shipwrecked in Malta (Acts, 28:2); the local people generously came to their help and they also came to ours. When I arrived here, I was grey, chalk grey and no matter how much I rubbed my face, I just couldn't get the colour back into my cheeks; my energy was sapped, I was doing my best to be faithful through prayer, Holy Mass and involvement in the parish but I just didn't feel right.

When Martina read out Saint Patrick's confessions to me and the words, *be amazed*, I felt a supernatural connection to those words and to Patrick. I also thought of the scripture passage that Martina has quoted, which we heard very clearly in the days after we had to leave the Adoration Sisters. *If you are faithful, I will restore your fortunes and you will rebuild upon the old foundations*. The more I learned of Patrick; who landed in this parish, the more I felt a connection to him.

I, like the young Patrick some years ago, had stopped practising my faith for a time in my youth; I turned away from the church and like Patrick, I was brought low.

One day I remember very well that, I was driving home from work and it came to me that I was either going to go back to Mass or I was going to end up dead. I heard that driving along the M1 and drove straight from there to my parish of Holy Trinity. I went straight to confession, to Mass and back into parish life; it saved my life and looking back I can see, that it was God's love that saved me, just like he saved Saint Patrick.

Listen to what Patrick himself wrote about his conversion, *I turned with all of my heart to the Lord my God and he looked down on my loneliness and had mercy on my youthful ignorance. He guarded me before I knew him before I came to wisdom and could distinguish between good and evil. He protected me and consoled me as a father does for his son*. Patrick came to know most profoundly the Father’s tender love revealed through Jesus Christ; that is the living gospel message that Patrick preached in the 4th century; *turn back to God and live*. This is a message we all need to hear today because those foundations of the faith that were laid by Christ and built up here in Ireland are crumbling.

People have fallen away from the faith and we know it; we have been rocked by church scandals and challenged by an increasingly secular society. Whilst the pandemic hasn't helped with the closure of churches; there has been an explosion of social media streaming via webcam and Facebook. This is providing a whole new evangelization opportunity which we are using today, and I thank God for this. As we mark 150 years of Saint Patrick’s parish and the building of this church; this Novena is a chance to rebuild and reclaim the true Patrick and his message of a loving God.

This message led to an explosion of grace in Ireland and, as a consequence, Ireland became known as the land of Saints and scholars; the Celtic people in Patrick’s time believed in many gods, but they were enslaved and oppressed by dark forces, brutal oppression and child sacrifice. Patrick came among them in peace, telling them about the one true God of Christ, who died on a cross for them; of His mercy and forgiveness and, because Patrick himself had been a slave and came back to Ireland full of forgiveness and God's grace; he touched their hearts. Patrick was authentic, full of the Holy Spirit and had the mark of a true disciple; encompassing all the elements that the disciples had when the Holy Spirit came down upon them in the Acts of the Apostles. He had healing power, miracles, prophecy and visions; he was truly a man chosen by God. A man of dreams, a man truly living the dream; he inspired the sons and daughters of the Chieftains, including St. Donard who became a holy monk of Slieve Donard, the mountain is named after him; St. Tassach of Raholp a metal craftsman, who accepted faith from Patrick and became a Bishop.

The people of this land caught the faith from Patrick; they kept it alive through the Reformation, the penal years, and the persecutions until the faith could be lived openly again. Towns like Downpatrick flourished in the faith, with four churches built to meet the demand of the growing numbers of the faithful. In 1993, a new transept had to be built here when St. Patrick’s church could no longer hold the numbers of people coming to worship God in this holy place.

Friends hasn't a lot changed, and don't we know it; now we struggle to fill our churches and many people have fallen away from the practice of the Catholic faith. Many of Patrick’s sons and daughters today are slaves themselves, addicted to drugs, alcohol, and gambling; to other worldly distractions that rob them of their dignity as children of God and heirs to His Kingdom. Families are being rent asunder by the challenges of secularism and atheism; in our homes, the rows and the problems that they bring in their wake. We have all been shocked and wounded by the abuse scandals and wrongdoing.

Vocations to religious life and the priesthood are just a trickle; in time, it may be necessary to close churches due to a lack of priests and parishioners. The question is what can we do? I emphasize we, because Martina and I learned very quickly, here in our parish experience, that we can no longer leave it to the priest or the bishops to do all the rebuilding. As baptised Christians, we have been called to proclaim Christ. I am not sure that we do, we have to raise ourselves to participate in the life of our parish community, to fulfil and spread the gospel in our homes and our workplaces.

Faith in Christ, brothers and sisters, is the only way we are going to be fulfilled, for our children and our grandchildren; that has been my personal experience. Ireland needs to be re-evangelized! What is evangelism? Simply, evangelism is one beggar telling another beggar where to get bread; that is the living bread of Jesus Christ, our Saviour, our Redeemer and our Friend.

We have a saviour in Jesus and a friend in Patrick, his apostle to Ireland. This novena is a great start to reboot our faith and rediscover the beauty of the gospel message, that Saint Patrick our apostle to Ireland came to give us in 432 AD. I found out a lot about Patrick when, like Sr. Martina, I became a Pilgrim guide with Patrick’s Way.

Patrick tells us in his writings that he was a sinner and a simple country person; what is clear from his writings is that he knew the Word of God intimately. This church is privileged to have the biggest shrine in Ireland dedicated to Saint Patrick, I would recommend that you all revisit it. It is just there in the transept, with the beautiful mosaics, the stained-glass windows which tell the amazing story of a young boy trafficked from Ireland, at the age of 16; through the grace of God, comes back as Bishop and proclaims the gospel to a people, considered barbarians by the rest of the world.

I had the privilege of taking many pilgrims on Saint Patrick’s Way into this church, to see the shrine and to hear Patrick’s story. The story of a typical youth, who just wanted to have fun and wasn't interested in the faith of his parents; faith was in his head but it wasn't in his heart. Patrick was stolen viciously from his family in Roman Britain and trafficked; a modern story that we hear today, he was put out to pasture sheep on Slemish mountain for six years.

Patrick himself said that he deserved it because he wasn't listening to the priests and he wasn't listening or living the faith. In this desolate place, cold and hungry, Patrick cried out to God from the depths of his wounded heart and God heard him; like St Paul, he prayed constantly on Slemish, sometimes 100 times a day and as much during the night. His escape from Ireland was miraculous; he wrote about his guardian angel, called Victoria, who helped him flee from Ireland and back into the embrace of his family. Sometime after his escape, his angel appeared to him with several letters in his hands; we know that story, Letters from the Irish. The Angel read one of the letters with these words, *Come, holy boy, walk among us once more*. Patrick was cut to the heart; he knew that God was calling him back to convert the Irish.

Some months later he left for Gaul, which is modern-day France; he became a monk, then a priest and when the time was right, he was made a Bishop. He was commissioned by Pope Celestine, as Apostle to the Irish. Patrick's influence goes far beyond Ireland, men and women following in the footsteps of Patrick, brought the gospel to Britain to Iceland and then onto Europe; filling the dangerous vacuum which was left by the demise of the Roman Empire. All this, through the Spirit of God working in one man, Patrick; as Fr. John said, the power of one man, the power of God working through one man, should inspire us all! Today there are more than 800 churches in the world, named after Patrick.

I have had the privilege, as a St. Patrick’s Way Pilgrim Guide, for over two years, to walk with hundreds of people along Saint Patrick's Way to Saul, Slieve Patrick, Struell Wells, this church and far beyond. It helped to restore me; you will remember me talking about my grey face, learning and talking about Patrick and how Christ touched his life, helped to restore me; finally, over time, the colour did come back into my face. I can see that walking Saint Patrick's Way with pilgrims; the message of the gospel and the wonder of the beautiful countryside all around here was also restoring others, who like me, became inspired by Patrick’s heroic story; hearing anew about Patrick’s faith, his conversion and what God had done for him.

During our pilgrimages, there were tears, laughter and healing moments; I watched pilgrims arrive a little tired and leave refreshed and inspired. This too was rebuilding on the old foundations of the faith, that Patrick brought to these shores. I can see that God has blessed Saint Patrick’s Pilgrim Way in a special way. This church is also on the Passport of Saint Patrick's Way. Saint Patrick was written about and talked about in a new and fresh way, as was the gospel message that he brought 1600 years ago; the living, breathing, message of Christ’s love and forgiveness.

I thought God's plan was that Martina and I would stay in Downpatrick with our new parish community, to build on the old foundations, by helping to build up this parish in Saint Patrick's Way. However, God had another plan and like Patrick, I was called away from this holy place. In June last year, Martina and I were invited to reconsider entering religious life as Poor Clares, who lived the original rule of Clare given to her by Saint Francis; no enclosure but a life of poverty, adoration, prayer and to serve God's people. We would be sisters right away, taking into account our time as Adoration Sisters, although not in vows for the first year. We would enter the monastery at the place where Saint Bridget was born, Faughart; then move to St. James parish, the Grange, just outside Carlingford, a place called Monksland, a monastery of Cistercians once thrived there.

We will join three more Poor Claire Sisters and a laywoman, who are living a Celtic monastic life of poverty, prayer and contemplation; living in our little Hermitage, pray in solitude for at least three hours in the morning. In the afternoon, we would work with the other sisters, preparing liturgical opportunities for the people. Martina and I felt great peace and joy that God was calling us to help rebuild the Irish church further afield.

During the Vigil Mass of Christ the King, on the 20th of November last year, we each walked back into religious life as Poor Clares in Faughart, County Louth. Bridget became the foundress of religious life for women in Ireland; adopting the Celtic monastic way of life, in the footsteps of Patrick.

As Franciscans, we also follow this form of Celtic monasticism, which comes directly from Saint Patrick, who learnt it from his uncle St. Martin of Tours, in Gaul. It is not in accordance with the monastic life of St Francis of Assisi, who inspired our Foundress Saint Clare. Through prayer, Saint Bridget led the Poor Clares to this holy place in Faughart; through several amazing miracles, they were given land and the money they needed to build on the old foundations.

In summary, our fortunes have been restored as God promised, because God is always faithful; no matter what it looks like or what it seems like. Last Friday, our new hermitages were blessed by Fr Malachy Conlon, the parish priest; mine was given the name *living the dream!* So, friends, let us keep the faith and rebuild on the old foundations; let us call on Saint Patrick to help us come alive, to live committed lives of faith in our parishes, in our families and our communities. Thank you and may God and Saint Patrick bless you.