**POOR CLARE SISTERS**

**‘OUR FRIEND PATRICK’**

**Day 1 – March 8th 2022**

***Sr. Martina Purdy***

I want to wish you all a happy one hundred and fiftieth anniversary, what an achievement and thank you to Fr. John Murray and to all of you, for welcoming us back to Saint Patrick’s stronghold. The place where Patrick began and ended his earthly mission. I say earthly mission because we know that, Saint Patrick lives on in Jesus Christ and his heavenly mission continues for the people of Ireland, for the people of Downpatrick, for all of us and this beautiful parish.

It has been just over three months since Sr. Elaine and I left Downpatrick to become Poor Clares in County Louth. I have to confess leaving Downpatrick was bittersweet because like Patrick we had come to love this place, to love the people here and we had made many good friends. When saying goodbye, a friend from this parish said something that touched my heart. She said, ‘thank you for reminding us about Saint Patrick, we kind of forgot about him!

Now maybe she was just speaking for herself and maybe all of you have remembered him well over the years but personally I had kind of forgotten about Saint Patrick, often only embracing him on Saint Patrick's Day to get me out of my Lenten fast so I could have a big glass of wine and a box of chocolates. Although in fairness, I do remember dusting Saint Patrick’s statue when I was in the convent on the Falls Road in Belfast and praying for your parish priest and all of you.

Little did I know, I would spend two years in Downpatrick, and it would be a place of resurrection for me; the place where I would be taken down from the cross, brought to new life and my call to religious life would be renewed. I learned a lot here about Saint Patrick, about God and the role each one of us has to proclaim the good news because that's what Patrick did; constantly telling people what God had done for him and radiating Christ Jesus.

When I think of Saint Patrick I think of two words, *‘be amazed’*, those words, *‘be amazed’* came to Sr. Elaine in prayer three years ago on the night we were told that our vocation as Sisters of Adoration on the Falls Road was coming to an end because our congregation had grown too small and too fragile to enable us to complete our nine-year formation. It was the eve of Ash Wednesday when we were informed, that we could only stay until our vows expired that September. I felt like I had six months to live, I knew that I would face trials in religious life but like Saint Peter and the other apostles, I wasn't prepared for this cross, after all, we had left everything to follow Jesus.

Elaine had been a barrister for 23 years and I had been a BBC political correspondent. We had spent five amazing years in the convent and we knew we were called to be the spouse of Jesus, to follow him in the most intimate way and to adore Him. This news didn't make sense and we went into the Chapel to pray before the Blessed Sacrament. Now I confess I was pretty upset and I spent most of that hour glaring at Jesus asking him how can this be! Elaine in her humility had a much holier approach.

Elaine was more open to God's Will for her life; in her prayer, Elaine received two words spoken in her heart. *‘Be amazed’.* Words she later shared with me; ‘*be amazed,’* I said “What's that supposed to mean?” but secretly I was impressed and, in my heart, I hoped it meant a miracle. A few days later at Mass on the first Saturday of Lent, we both heard very clearly the words of the prophet Isaiah in the Old Testament reading, ‘if you are faithful, I will restore your fortunes and you will rebuild on the old foundations, the old foundations of the church, our prayer, evangelization and service of the poor. Boy did our hearts soar with hope!

Of course, my idea of a miracle was that we would stay on the Falls Road with the Adoration Sisters, rebuilding on the old foundations there. When my plans didn't seem to be working out, I would joke to Elaine, ‘tell Jesus I'm not amazed! Just days before we had to leave the convent, things started to happen, connected with Elaine's message, with Isaiah’s prophecy and with Saint Patrick. Yes, I began to be amazed!

First of all, a friend from this parish who volunteered at our convent, when she heard we had to leave, burst into tears. Frankly, I think she was more upset than I was. She immediately offered us a home in Downpatrick, at the Old Quarry. Elaine and I were jumping for joy and were quite amazed; soon Downpatrick had two new Frankie’s. Now our landing in 2019 wasn't quite as dramatic as Saint Patrick's in 432 AD; Patrick came by boat and we arrived in a Skoda. Do you know we met unusual kindness, our friend and her fellow parishioners had generously stocked our cupboards, installed a brand-new washing machine, put fresh linen on the beds and we even had our little prayer room!

The people of this parish were true sons and daughters of Saint Patrick and were themselves building on the old foundations, living the gospel in the service of the poor. Then more amazement followed; six months after our arrival, I was running out of funds and my life seemed to have no direction. I kept saying to myself, how can I answer my call to follow Jesus now? There was no going back to the BBC besides I didn't want a job; I wanted a mission, one that would pay enough to earn a living while proclaiming Christ. A few weeks before Saint Patrick's Day, I began to pray to Saint Patrick to help me. One Saturday morning at Mass here in Saint Patrick’s, I prayed for a mission.

After Mass, I went to buy some Saint Patrick’s prayer cards from the parish shop. Leaving the shop, with my prayer cards still in my hand, a man approached me, introduced himself and asked me, if I was Martina Purdy? I said I was, and he said, would you be interested in doing some writing for the Saint Patrick’s Centre and some public relations work? Well, I looked at those prayer cards in amazement and said, wow Saint Patrick that was fast. Within a few days, I had a contract, paid employment to write for the Saint Patrick Centre, to talk about Saint Patrick and promote his Christian mission and yes, I was amazed!

I started to get to know my friend Patrick, Patrick was a teenager from a Christian family who didn't believe; Patrick didn't believe what his parents had told him about Jesus Christ, his faith was in his head. When he was captured by pirates from Roman Britain and brought here to somewhere on this island, probably Slemish, he was taken and traumatized. He had seen his father’s servants murdered before his eyes; imagine a teenage experience like that.

Patrick found himself all alone, a slave in a desolate place, in the darkness of impossibility. I don't know about you but I've been in that dark place. I read with amazement all about Patrick, his conversion, about how he called out to God; realizing that God had never left him. God responded with love and mercy; Patrick wrote in his confession that, he was like a stone lying deep in the mud, then he who is powerful came and, in his mercy, pulled me out; lifted me and placed me on the very top of the wall. That is why I must shout aloud in return to the Lord for such great good deeds.

As I read Saint Patrick's confession, I found myself shouting aloud as I read onto the next paragraph, where Saint Patrick, himself, wrote the words that Elaine had heard in prayer in our Adoration Convent; he said, ‘*be amazed all you people great and small who fear God’*. and boy were we amazed! We realized, having been brought low, stripped of our vocation, that God was speaking to us through Patrick; that we too had been stuck in the mud, in the mire and that God had heard our cry and God was lifting us up.

I saw more clearly that God was calling me again in a new way, as a layperson to proclaim his goodness to me; to proclaim the good news that Jesus Christ died and rose again so that we would have life to the full. That we would defeat the misery of sin and death and have a life of joy. A life of joy in this life and the world to come, so we began to build on the old foundations with our friend Patrick. My eyes were open, I even realized the significance of my new address in Downpatrick, the Old Quarry; the Old Quarry where you get stones to rebuild. Even though COVID hit just days later, I still had a mission with the Saint Patrick’s Centre and a contract.

During the lockdown, I wasn't discouraged; Elaine and I began to walk around Downpatrick and saw for ourselves the holy sites linked to this patron Saint. We were inspired, through the Holy Spirit, to create a new Pilgrim walk called, Saint Patrick's Way, helped by Dr Tim Campbell, the Centre's Director; we mapped out an 18-mile route connecting seven holy sites, to include Saul, Slieve Patrick, Struell Wells and this church, with the beautiful mosaics to Saint Patrick in the transept. We even had this little passport printed for Saint Patrick’s Way, with a Pilgrim Prayer to include Saint Patrick Breastplate, with the words; *Christ be with me, Christ within me, Christ before me, Christ behind me.*

Every pilgrim, who walked Saint Patrick’s Way, said that prayer; whether they believed it or not, they didn't mind saying it. I told them it would help with the protection from the cars on some of the roads we were crossing.

Soon Elaine and I were both working for the Saint Patrick’s Centre as Pilgrim Guides. As soon as the lockdown was lifted in June 2020, Saint Patrick's Way was launched and pilgrims from all over Ireland came to walk with us. They would say the Pilgrim prayer and they would learn about our friend Patrick; his deep love for God and the deep love and mercy that God had shown him. The unofficial motto of our walk was, *be amazed* and often by the time pilgrims got to St Patrick’s church from Struell Wells, usually with Sr. Elaine; they had walked at least 10 miles and were exhausted.

Some of them had to drag themselves up the hill, up those steps to come into this church to see the mosaics. Both Elaine and I noticed a change in them, when they came in here, they had new energy, divine energy; not just because they were coming into this beautiful church but because they were coming past the real presence of Jesus, the source of life, in the Tabernacle. Secondly, the beauty of the mosaics spoke to them about the truth of Patrick's mission and the heroic beauty of his life. Sometimes, when Fr. John Murray was around, he would give a personal tour and bless the pilgrims.

Fr. John himself would tell them about Patrick and the gospel message. The pilgrims could see that 2,000 years after Jesus Christ died and rose again and 1,600 years after Patrick had landed here in Downpatrick; there were still men and women willing to give their lives to God, to proclaim the good news and rebuild on the old foundations. Our pilgrimage always ended at Saint Patrick's grave, I often told pilgrims to think about what burdens they were carrying and to leave them with Patrick to present to Jesus.

I didn't think much more about it; one day, I met a woman, who had been on the pilgrimage and she told me she had taken my advice and gone to Saint Patrick's grave after walking Saint Patrick's Way with me. She had a problem that she had decided to leave with Patrick, she had sold her house and couldn't find a new home. She couldn't wait to tell me, what God had done for her through Patrick; that night after the pilgrimage, she found a house and like Saint Patrick, she was amazed! She proclaimed God's love and mercy for what God had done for her. That, my brothers and sisters, is the mark of a disciple, it is what we are all called to do as baptised Christians.

In Saint Patrick’s parish, it's up to all of us spread and keep the faith; it's not just up to Fr. John, Fr. Liam or Fr. Henry. We have a powerful friend in Saint Patrick, who helped me return to religious life; through Patrick, I sought God's Will and stopped thinking about my own will and feeling sorry for myself. Jesus, himself tells us in Matthew 6:33, *Seek you first the Kingdom of God and its righteousness and all these things will be added unto you*. Without me even having to try, everything has been restored to Elaine and me. We are back to religious life as Poor Clare sisters, Elaine will tell you that amazing story. So, my friends, whatever your burden is, leave it here with Patrick who will present it to the most-high God, Jesus Christ, who will be on this altar in a few minutes. Jesus is a humble God; He likes to show his mercy and his glory through his friends like Patrick. As our friend, Saint Patrick would say, *stand firm in the faith, rebuild on the old foundations, be bold and be amazed.* God bless and thank you all