Notes from Fr. Nick

The Writings of Cyril & Patrick

Last week we celebrated the feast days of three major saints: Saint Patrick on Thursday, Saint Cyril of Jerusalem on Friday, and Saint Joseph on Saturday. Leaving Saint Joseph aside for this column, it might be revealing to compare Saints Patrick and Cyril.

Saint Cyril worked in a long-civilized part of the empire, while Saint Patrick ministered just beyond its edge. Although their homelands and ethnicity could hardly have been more different, the two saints shared a connection to the Roman Empire that allows us to understand their personalities and the worlds where they ministered. Both saints were writers, and because Rome studiously preserved written records, we have their chronicles today.

Both bishops toiled tirelessly for the conversion of peoples to the then-new faith. As the Bishop of Jerusalem, Cyril recorded the liturgies of Holy Week in his teaching to the newly baptized at the end of the fourth century. The Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA) and reformed Triduum of the Second Vatican Council largely follow Cyril’s practices. Beyond the description of the rites, Cyril expounded on the symbolism of Holy Week, which gives us a deeper understanding of the rituals, then and now.

Born a few years after Saint Cyril’s death in 386, Saint Patrick lived at the opposite end of the Roman Empire. He converted a society that was practicing forms of Celtic polytheism, and is credited as the founder of Christianity in Ireland. He also became a bishop (of Armagh) and eventually the Primate of Ireland. Patrick’s most famous writings are the Confessio, a moving account of his faith, and the hymn, Lorica (also known as "St. Patrick’s Breastplate"), extolling the virtues of Christ.

In an odd way, the work of Saints Cyril and Patrick was more similar to the Church’s challenges today than of the centuries that followed. Theirs was a world of pluralism where, from the outside, one religion seemed to be as good as another. They had to convince their hearers of Christianity’s central place in the salvation of the world. Their writings reveal their facility for taking a person’s experience and giving it meaning through Christ.

The Church faces a similar challenge today. More than ever, diverse cultures and religions rub shoulders with one another, making us more aware of how we are different, rather than how we are alike. Saints Patrick and Cyril give us an example about how to make a case for Christ in a world that may see Him as one faith-choice among many. Will the record of our efforts have the impact that these saints’ writings have had on the Church today?