



## St Brigid: Fact & Fiction

**John Scally**, teacher of theology at Trinity College, Dublin, and frequent contributor to *The Messenger* reminds us of legends attributed to the life of one of Ireland's patron saints, St Brigid, 'Mary of the Gael'.

As a boy I had two burning ambitions: to play senior football for Roscommon and for my local club St Brigid's. From a young age St Brigid's name has been imprinted on my brain but I have to confess that for most of my life I had never really given her any serious thought. This month tens of thousands of children in schools right across Ireland will be making St Brigid's crosses, but who was Saint Brigid? More importantly why, in our busy lives, should we bother remembering her?

Born in Dundalk in approximately AD450 Brigid was the founder of the first monastery in County Kildare. Her father was a pagan chieftain of Leinster and her mother was a Christian. St Patrick inspired her to become a Christian and spread the word of God. She is one of the Patron Saints of Ireland, along with St Patrick and St Colmcille.

When she was young, St Brigid wanted to join a convent. However, her father took a firm stand and insisted that she marry a rich man he had promised her to. The popular belief is that she asked for God's help to

take away her beauty so that the man would not wish to marry her. Her wish was granted, her father relented and she joined the convent.

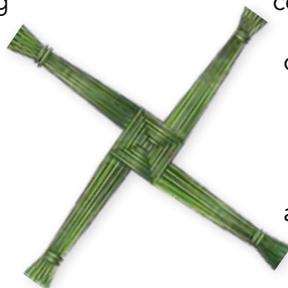
She requested God's help again to convince her father to give her land in Kildare to set up a convent. Her father said that he would only give her as much land as her cloak could

cover. The story is that the cloak grew to cover acres of land.

At one stage St Brigid was by the sick bed of a dying pagan chieftain, soothing him with stories about her faith in God. She began telling the story of Christ on the cross, picking up rushes from

the ground to make a cross. Before his death, the chieftain asked to be baptised. At first people used to make similar crosses to hang over the door of their homes to scare off evil, fire and hunger. Over time, word spread about St Brigid, her kindness, faith and the making of the cross became associated with her and the tradition now bears her name.

St Brigid's monastery in Kildare was known as the 'City of the Poor', because of its reputation for hospital-





ity, compassion and generosity. These were genuinely inclusive communities. Brigid is the perfect example of Irish hospitality: it was said she could (by a miracle) milk her cows three times in one day to provide a meal for visitors. Brigid celebrated the God who dances. She was no killjoy, going so far as to describe heaven as a great lake of beer.

In the Celtic tradition, the guest was always Christ and hospitality was offered to the Christ in the other. One story told about St Brigid illustrates

this. She had an unexpected visit from a neighbouring abbot and a big number of his monks. While they were eating at table, a young novice caused a bit of a stir by saying aloud, 'It seems there will be no vespers said here this evening'. After a short, awkward silence St Brigid responded, 'Sister, in the guest is received Christ; therefore at the coming of Christ we ought to feast and rejoice. But if you had not said that, the angels of God themselves would have prayed on our behalf here this night'. ♡