

'What Makes a Saint a Saint, Rather Than Merely a Good Christian? Analyse a Selection of Key Characteristics and Attributes With References to Several Celtic Saints.'

What makes a saint a saint, rather than merely a good Christian? While both strive for holiness, the saint is distinguished by something more: a life that reveals virtue in its fullness, perfected to a heroic degree, and confirmed by the supernatural witness of miracles. The Catholic Church has long recognised this distinction through the canonical process of sainthood, formalised in four stages: Servant of God, Venerable, Blessed, and Saint. Though these titles emerged within the Roman canonisation process,¹ the theological framework underpinning them offers a valuable lens through which to interpret the sanctity of earlier saints, including those of the Celtic tradition, who were often venerated without formal papal procedures. This study, therefore, examines sanctity not strictly through juridical canonisation, but through theological analysis of the essential qualities inherent within those procedures that elevate saints above the broader communion of the faithful.

This essay contends that a saint is marked by three defining features: the exercise of virtue (especially the theological and cardinal virtues), the perfection of such virtue to a heroic degree, and the manifestation of divine grace through miracles. To substantiate this claim, it examines the lives of four Celtic saints—Patrick, Brigid, David, and Wenefride²—whose hagiographies not only extol their moral excellence, but offer compelling evidence of these three dimensions of sanctity.

In order to establish a rigorous interpretative framework, the study begins by defining virtue—drawing on the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*—as this is the principal criterion examined in the cause of a Servant of God. It then turns to heroic virtue, the key criterion for Venerability, drawing especially on Pope Benedict XIV's *De Servorum Dei Beatificatione Et Beatorum Canonizatione*, which articulates with scholastic clarity what it means to embody virtue in a degree that surpasses the ordinary. Finally, it considers the role of miracles not merely as supernatural phenomena, but as attestations of divine favour and the culmination of sanctity, wherein virtue becomes the instrument of grace.

Each saint is considered according to this tripartite structure. The essay

¹ The first papal canonisation was that of St Ulric by Pope John XV in 993 AD. By the 12th century, Pope Alexander III formally reserved canonisation to the papacy. Pope Urban VIII later reinforced this in the 17th century, forbidding public veneration without beatification or canonisation. Since then, the process has involved rigorous investigation, recognition of miracles, and a formal declaration by the Pope. See Thomas F. Macken, *The Canonisation of Saints* (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1909), pp. 11–33.

² These four Celtic saints were selected to maintain a balance of gender (two male, two female) and geography (two Irish, two Welsh), pairing prominent missionaries (Patrick and David) with exemplar virgin-martyrs (Brigid and Wenefride), thus offering a representative cross-section of insular sanctity. They are examined in chronological order, spanning the fifth to seventh centuries, a period during which the Celtic-speaking regions of Ireland, Wales, and parts of Britain underwent the transition from paganism to Christianity.

first turns to St Patrick, whose captivity and subsequent mission to pagan Ireland exemplify the theological virtue of faith and the cardinal virtue of fortitude, expressed both heroically and miraculously. It then considers St Brigid of Kildare, whose sanctity is revealed through her radiant chastity, unwavering charity, and miraculous acts of healing and multiplication. The following section explores St David, whose faith, temperance, and justice is revealed through ascetic discipline, intercessory prayer, and divine intervention. Lastly, the essay examines St Wenefride, whose chastity and fortitude, exemplified in her martyrdom and the miraculous spring at her beheading, reflect a life wholly dedicated to Christ. Her sanctity, marked by virtuous devotion and divine intercession, transcends death, showcasing the enduring power of heroic virtue.

These hagiographies, while often stylised for political, cultural, or spiritual ends, serve not as historical biographies but as didactic instruments—shaping Christian imagination and modelling what it means to be fully conformed to Christ.

This study argues that sanctity, as exemplified by these saints, cannot be reduced to moral goodness alone. What defines a saint is the supernatural flourishing of Christian virtue, such that the saint becomes a living embodiment of divine grace: both a testimony to the power of God and an invitation for fellow believers to imitate the cruciform path of holiness.

Before we can identify heroic virtue in the Celtic saints, we must first understand what distinguishes virtue from its perfected state of habitual constancy in heroic fulfilment. As Archbishop Prosper Bottini, a former Promoter of the Faith (the “Devil’s Advocate”), notes in his examination of Nicholas Factor’s cause for canonisation, not all acts arising from infused virtue are heroic. If they were, then all faithful Christians living in grace and acting worthily would be considered heroes. Instead, Bottini argues that true heroicity is limited to acts which ‘exceed the mode of working which is followed by even estimable [individuals]’.³ Peter Francis de Rubeis, also a former Promoter of the Faith, clarifies this further in his observations on St John of the Cross, asserting that a Christian hero is one who ‘practises Christian virtues in a more exalted way than the generality who practise the same’.⁴ With this crucial distinction in mind, it becomes necessary to establish what constitutes virtue itself, before we can recognise its supreme perfection and transformative culmination in the lives of the Celtic saints.

According to the Catechism of the Catholic Church, ‘[a] virtue is an habitual and firm disposition to do the good’ (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, para. 1803). It is not merely occasional good behaviour, but a stable pattern of character that consistently orients one towards goodness—which is to say, towards God. The Catechism elaborates that human virtues are ‘firm

³ The original text reads ‘men’; this has been adapted to ‘individuals’ for the sake of inclusivity, without altering the substantive meaning of the passage. See Benedict XIV, *Heroic Virtue: A Portion of the Treatise of Benedict XIV on the Beatification and Canonization of the Servants of God*, Vol. 1 (London: Thomas Richardson and Son, 1850), p. 22.

⁴ Ibid.

attitudes, stable dispositions, habitual perfections of intellect and will that govern our actions, order our passions, and guide our conduct according to reason and faith' (CCC para. 1804). Virtue enables a person to not only perform good acts but to give the best of oneself, pursuing and choosing goodness in concrete actions. These virtuous dispositions 'make possible ease, self-mastery, and joy in leading a morally good life' and ultimately 'dispose all the powers of the human being for communion with divine love' (CCC para. 1804).

Virtues are not innate traits but are 'acquired by education, by deliberate acts[,] and by a perseverance ever-renewed in repeated efforts' and are 'purified and elevated by divine grace' (CCC para. 1810). This interplay of human effort and grace is crucial in striving for divine communion, for, as the Catechism notes, '[i]t is not easy for man, wounded by sin, to maintain moral balance' (CCC para. 1811). The cultivation of virtue therefore requires both persistent human striving and the assistance of divine grace, which provides 'the light and strength' necessary to 'persevere in the pursuit of the virtues' (CCC para. 1811).

With this understanding of virtue's nature and its cultivation in the human soul, we are now better placed to specify the virtues themselves. In the Catholic tradition, the virtues are typically divided into cardinal and theological categories. The cardinal, or moral, virtues—prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance—form the foundation of a well-ordered moral Christian life. They are "cardinal" (from the Latin *cardo*, meaning "hinge"⁵) because all other human virtues pivot around them (CCC para. 1805). Cardinal virtues are acquired through human effort, discipline, and habituation, and they are 'purified and elevated by divine grace' (CCC para. 1810). These virtues perfect the human faculties in accordance with reason.

Yet the human person is not only called to natural virtue but to supernatural union with God. As St Thomas Aquinas teaches, virtue directs us towards happiness—but this happiness is twofold: one proportionate to human nature, the other beyond it, attainable only through God's grace.⁶ This supernatural calling gives rise to the theological virtues—faith, hope, and charity—which are 'infused by God into the souls of the faithful' (CCC para. 1813). These virtues directly concern our relationship with God and dispose us to live in relationship with the Holy Trinity (CCC para. 1812). Charity, the highest of these, is 'superior to all the virtues' (CCC para. 1826), for while faith and hope will no longer be necessary in heaven, charity alone endures eternally. It is 'the form of the virtues... the source and the goal of their Christian practice' (CCC para. 1827).

Having established this framework of virtue—comprising the cardinal virtues cultivated through human effort and the theological virtues infused by divine grace—we may now return to the distinction articulated by Bottini and de Rubeis, to consider what elevates virtue to the heroic level exemplified in the hagiographical lives of the Celtic saints.

⁵ Karl Rahner, ' *Theological Dictionary* (New York, NY: Herder and Herder, 1965), p. 67.

⁶ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* I-II, trans. By Fathers of The English Dominican Province (London: Burns Oates & Washbourne, 1927), q. 62, art. 1, co., p. 148.

The fundamental distinction made by Archbishop Bottini and Peter Francis de Rubeis lies in their shared assertion that heroic virtue is not defined by the type of virtue practiced, but by the extraordinary degree, constancy, and perfection with which it is habitually lived. Heroic virtue, therefore, is not simply the performance of good deeds; it transcends even the virtuous conduct of estimable individuals, becoming ingrained as second nature and often surpassing the natural limits of human capability.

Cardinal Capisucchi explains that heroic virtue is recognised in those actions which—due to their exceptional quality or the arduous conditions under which they are performed—clearly exceed what is ordinarily expected of human conduct.⁷ The Christian who acts heroically does not simply avoid sin or carry out virtuous deeds, but performs them with such excellence and steadfastness that they transcend ordinary human capacity. This degree of virtue is not incidental but a reflection of a life that has become, through grace, habitually attuned to God's will.

F. Martin de Esparza emphasises that what truly distinguishes holy confessors is not occasional virtuous acts but a sustained conformity to God's will—a continuous and unbroken adherence to the Gospel, 'with a firm and intense contempt of all earthly things, and a corresponding adhesion to God'.⁸ This constancy in virtue 'far surpasses the condition of human nature', and in doing so closely resembles 'the essentially changeless holiness of the Divine Nature'.⁹

Heroic virtue signifies a habitual theosis in which the soul clings to God through grace, and the individual's actions become instinctively aligned with God's will. As St John of the Cross notes, 'the purgation of sense is... the gate and entrance of contemplation', directing the soul away from sensory dependence towards spiritual union. This tranquil abiding in the presence of God is the theological definition of "contemplation"¹⁰: a state in which virtue becomes second nature, an effortless pursuit of what is pleasing to God.

In the spiritually advanced soul, heroic virtue marks a crucial step towards the unitive way—a state in which heroic virtue becomes the habitual expression of a deepening union with the divine will. Just as heroic virtue involves the steadfast pursuit of the good, so deeply ingrained in the soul that it aligns naturally with God's will, the unitive way signifies a stage of spiritual maturation in which holiness has become so internalised that it is no longer a conscious decision but an effortless and constant expression of the soul's will. This mirrors the hypostatic union of the human and divine wills in Christ. As Réginald Garrigou-Lagrange observes, '[t]he perfect unitive life brings with it the infused contemplation of the mysteries of faith and a passive union which

⁷ Cardinal Capisucchi, as cited by Benedict XIV in *Heroic Virtue*, pp. 22–23.

⁸ F. Martin de Esparza, *Ibid.*, pp. 23–24.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

¹⁰ Rahner, *Theological Dictionary*, p. 99.

is almost continuous'.¹¹

Ultimately, heroic virtue manifests when the disposition for the good is unwavering—when nothing can intervene between one's heart and its desire for the good, and when the habits through which this good is steadfastly pursued have become second nature. This participation in the divine will reflects what St John of the Cross describes as a state in which 'all the desires and energies of the soul are thus recollected in this burning of love'.¹² This seamless participation in the divine will marks a continuous habitation in the unitive stage, where the mastery of virtues has led to the constant and habitual union between human and divine will—the steadfast abiding in nothing but the spousal love of Christ.

Having established the nature of virtue and its heroic manifestation, we now turn to our third criterion: miracles. In the Church's examination of a candidate for sainthood, once their possession of theological virtues has been established, it is then discerned 'whether God illustrated [their] faith by any miracle or special favour'.¹³ Notably, the Church recognises that 'if only one miracle has been worked, this one may be examined'¹⁴—indicating that the quality and authenticity of miraculous events holds greater importance than their quantity. Miracles are not simply extraordinary events; they are divine signs confirming the holiness and alignment of the candidate with God's will.

To properly understand miracles in the context of sanctity, we must first define what constitutes a miracle. The Latin word *miraculum* originally referred to something extraordinary, though not necessarily beyond the powers of nature—for instance, the "Seven Wonders" (of the Ancient World) were known as the *Septem Miracula*.¹⁵ However, in Catholic theology, the definition is more precise. The Catechism defines a miracle as '[a] sign or wonder, such as a healing or the control of nature, which can only be attributed to divine power'.¹⁶ According to St Thomas, miracles are those events in which God acts outside the usual order of creation: 'those things must properly be called miraculous which are done by divine power apart from the order generally followed in things'.¹⁷

¹¹ Réginald Garrigou-Lagrange, *The Three Ways of the Spiritual Life* (Westminster, Maryland: The Newman Press, 1950), p. 74.

¹² St. John of the Cross, *The Dark Night of the Soul*, trans. by David Lewis (London: Thomas Baker, 1908), Book II, ch. xi, p. 115.

¹³ The original text reads 'his'; this has been adapted to 'their' for the sake of inclusivity, without altering the substantive meaning of the passage. See Macken, *The Canonisation of Saints*, p. 144.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 178.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 181.

¹⁶ 'Glossary', in *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, second ed. (Washington, DC: USCCB Publishing, 2019), p. 888.

¹⁷ Thomas Aquinas, *On the Truth of the Catholic Faith: Summa Contra Gentiles*, Book Three: Providence, Part 2, trans. by Vernon J. Bourke (Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1967), ch. 101, p. 82.

St Thomas categorises miracles into three degrees, emphasising the extraordinary nature of each. The highest degree of miracles is those in which God does what nature could *never* do, such as 'that the sun reverse its course', or 'that the sea open up and offer a way through which people may pass'.¹⁸ A second degree involves miracles where God accomplishes what nature *can* do, but in a way that nature cannot on its own—such as for an animal 'to live after death, to see after becoming blind, [and] to walk after paralysis of the limbs'.¹⁹ The third degree involves events that are *usually* governed by natural law, but which occur 'without the operation of the principles of nature',²⁰ such as a fever being healed miraculously. These categories highlight the divine nature of miracles, beyond the realm of natural possibility.

Miracles involve an 'intervention of God', which 'releases nature... into the higher realm' of God's salvific action.²¹ A miracle is 'a testimony which God gives within history to his salvific will', summoning man to 'a historical dialogue with God'.²² This is only possible when man retains 'a humble sense of wonder' and 'a permanent proximity to God'—dispositions that make him receptive to the divine and capable of recognising when a miracle is not simply unexplained, but 'inexplicable in natural terms'.²³ This explanation underscores the importance of miracles as more than anomalies—they are spiritual signs that connect the natural world to God's will and plan.

Crucially, while saints are often associated with miraculous events, they are not themselves the source: 'it is God alone that performs the wonder, and the creature is merely His instrument'.²⁴ This understanding places miracles as divine confirmation of the saint's closeness to God—manifestations of grace flowing through those whose heroic virtue has aligned them so completely with the divine will that they become conduits for God's power in the world. A miracle is 'a departure by Divine Power from the ordinary course of nature'²⁵—a confirmation of the individual's holiness and virtue, attesting to their alignment with God's will.

Though the miracles attributed to early saints often emerge from hagiographical tradition rather than verifiable historical record, they nonetheless convey profound theological truths. These accounts, shaped by collective memory and devotional imagination, functioned not merely as edifying tales but as powerful indicators of sanctity, becoming focal points of veneration and catalysing the development of cults around saintly figures, particularly at medieval shrines. These holy places offered pilgrims 'funds of

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 83.

²¹ Rahner, *Theological Dictionary*, p. 288.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Macken, *The Canonisation of Saints*, pp. 182–183.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 183.

spiritual comfort'²⁶ and assurance of 'protectors not only in earthly matters but also in that more important, everlasting world to come'.²⁷ Indeed, alongside martyrdom, such wonders were among the principal engines of Christianity's rapid expansion in the early centuries, with miracle serving as 'one of the most expedient of all missionary devices',²⁸ where the power to perform cures often proved more convincing than theological principles, as 'the message could not then be misunderstood'.²⁹

As we now turn to the lives of the early Celtic saints, it is through their miraculous deeds that God's supernatural agency is most conspicuously revealed—wrought and warranted by the heroic virtue that made such wonders fitting.

St Patrick, the fifth-century bishop and apostle of Ireland, was British by birth—son of a deacon who served as town councillor and grandson of a priest.³⁰ Captured by Irish pirates in his youth, he endured six years of enslavement,³¹ during which he underwent profound spiritual transformation. Though he 'did not know the true God' in Britain,³² Patrick discovered faith in captivity after visitations from the angel Victorinus. Following a dream foretelling his escape, he journeyed home, later returning to Ireland around 435 AD as bishop and successor to Palladius.³³ Though not specially learned,³⁴ his Latin writings—the *Confessio* and *Letter to Coroticus*—represent the earliest identified literature from the British Church.³⁵ Tradition places his death in 461 AD, though his burial place remains uncertain. Patrick endures as Ireland's primary patron saint, remembered for his pastoral devotion and willingness to face 'imprisonment or death in the following of Christ'.³⁶

According to Muirchú's seventh-century *Vita Sancti Patricii* ("Life of Saint Patrick"), Patrick's life powerfully exemplifies the heroic virtues of faith and fortitude, which emerge most vividly in his mission to pagan Ireland. His faith, forged in the crucible of captivity, transformed traumatic enslavement into

²⁶ Ibid., p. 13.

²⁷ Ibid., pp. 13–14.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 20.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 21.

³⁰ David Hugh Farmer, *The Oxford Dictionary of Saints* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 412.

³¹ Philip Freedman, 'Muirchú's *Life of Saint Patrick*', in *The World of Saint Patrick*, online ed. (New York: Oxford Academic, 2014), p. 68.

³² Ibid.

³³ Farmer, *The Oxford Dictionary of Saints*, p. 412.

³⁴ James Henthorn Todd, *St. Patrick, Apostle of Ireland: A Memoir of his Life and Mission* (Dublin: Hodges, Smith, & Co., 1864), p. 353.

³⁵ Farmer, *The Oxford Dictionary of Saints*, p. 412.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 413.

spiritual awakening. During this period, 'his spirit began to burn inside him' and 'captivity became a time of unceasing prayer'.³⁷ This faith was the theological virtue that enabled his total self-commitment to God, embodying the scriptural truth that "the righteous shall live by faith" (CCC para. 1814). This transformative faith worked through charity, giving Patrick the extraordinary strength to return to the very land of his captivity—not for vengeance but in obedience to divine calling. His mission represented active trust in providence, affirming that "faith apart from works is dead" (CCC para. 1815). Patrick's unwavering faith drove him to confront hostile druids and endure missionary hardships, always seeking to do God's will despite persecution.

Patrick's fortitude—his moral courage and perseverance—shines especially in his bold confrontation with pagan Ireland. His decision to celebrate Easter in the plain of Brega, 'the mightiest kingdom of all the Irish tribes, the center of their paganism and idolatry',³⁸ demonstrated remarkable courage. When Patrick defied pagan tradition by lighting the Easter fire on the Hill of Slane during King Loíguire's festival, he exhibited not just faith but extraordinary fortitude. Summoned before the king, druids, and warriors, Patrick boldly declared: "Some come in chariots and some on horses, but we will walk in the name of our God."³⁹ This confrontation reveals more than momentary bravery—it manifests the cardinal virtue of fortitude: the strength by which one 'stands firm in hope against the overwhelming pressures and tragedies of the world', resisting even 'the dread of death' in steadfast pursuit of the good.⁴⁰ The constancy with which Patrick habitually opposed evil and remained unwavering in danger testifies to virtue perfected beyond natural human capacity.

Miracles attributed to Patrick most powerfully manifest his faith and fortitude, revealing both the divine power at work through him and the virtues that made him a worthy vessel. The hagiographic accounts of his life portray wonders that directly reflect these underlying spiritual qualities. His raising of the dead exemplifies how Patrick's profound faith translated into concrete action. When Macc Cuill, having plotted Patrick's murder, later confessed his sin, Patrick responded not with vengeance but with the miracle of resurrection, demonstrating faith's power to bring new life.⁴¹ Similarly, his restoration of Dáire and his horse to health after their deaths illustrates how Patrick's fortitude in the face of injustice manifested as healing power rather than retribution.⁴²

Patrick's confrontation with the druids at Tara represents the culmination of both virtues. When challenged by the king's magicians, Patrick remained

³⁷ Freedman, *The World of Saint Patrick*, pp. 59–60.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 69.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 72.

⁴⁰ Rahner, *Theological Dictionary*, p. 178.

⁴¹ Freedman, *The World of Saint Patrick*, pp. 82–83.

⁴² Ibid., p. 85.

steadfast, calling upon divine assistance rather than his own power. The subsequent miraculous demonstrations—the druid's levitation and casting down, the sudden darkness, and Patrick's protection from poisoned drink—all flow from this unified expression of faith and fortitude. These miracles were not mere displays of supernatural power but revelations of the spiritual truth that Patrick embodied: that unwavering faith, combined with moral courage, allows divine grace to work powerfully through human instruments.

Thus, Patrick's miracles serve as the outward manifestation of his interior virtues, showing how faith and fortitude, when perfected through grace, become channels for God's transformative power in the world.

St Brigid of Kildare, the late-5th–early-6th-century abbess,⁴³ stands among Ireland's three patron saints, alongside Patrick and Columba.⁴⁴ Though 'historical facts about her are extremely rare',⁴⁵ she is traditionally believed to have received baptism from St Patrick, entered monastic life as a nun at a young age, and later founded the monastery at Kildare, thereby playing a significant role in the establishment and expansion of Christianity in Ireland.⁴⁶ Her enduring legacy is evident in 'the nature and importance of Kildare for many centuries' as 'a major episcopal church under female governance'.⁴⁷ Brigid's foundation represents a significant development in early Christian Ireland, suggesting that women's religious communities played an important role in the early stages of Irish monasticism.⁴⁸ Her cultural influence spread extensively, becoming 'second only to that of Patrick'.⁴⁹

Throughout her life, as portrayed in the 12th-century *Bethu Brigte* ("The Life of Brigit"), Brigid exemplifies heroic virtue, demonstrating constancy in faith, chastity, and charity. From childhood, her faith manifested in extraordinary ways—she was observed praying in a cross-vigil before she could even speak,⁵⁰ and divine presence was evident when a fiery column rose from where she slept,⁵¹ marking her for sanctity. This profound faith empowered her to perform numerous miracles, from transforming water into milk and ale to commanding the elements themselves, calming storms with prayer.⁵² Her

⁴³ Farmer, *The Oxford Dictionary of Saints*, p. 78.

⁴⁴ Liam de Paor, *Saint Patrick's World: The Christian Culture of Ireland's Apostolic Age* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1996), p. 47.

⁴⁵ Farmer, *The Oxford Dictionary of Saints*, p. 78.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ de Paor, *Saint Patrick's World*, p. 47.

⁴⁸ de Paor, *Saint Patrick's World*, p. 49.

⁴⁹ Farmer, *The Oxford Dictionary of Saints*, p. 79.

⁵⁰ *Bethu Brigte*, ed. by Donncha Ó hAodha (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1978), p. 20.

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 23.

⁵² Ibid., pp. 26–27, 33.

intimate connection with God afforded her spiritual perception beyond ordinary senses, enabling her to discern evil spirits and reveal truth when others could not.⁵³

Brigid's unwavering commitment to virginity demonstrated heroic chastity: when faced with a marriage proposal, she politely declared, "I have offered up my virginity to God."⁵⁴ Her dedication reached extraordinary lengths when, mocked by her brother who claimed her beautiful eye would be "betrothed to a man though you like it or not", she immediately 'thrust her finger into her eye', preferring disfigurement to compromising her vow.⁵⁵ This extreme physical sacrifice reveals the supernatural intensity of her commitment to consecrated virginity. While not, perhaps, the most prudent means of safeguarding chastity, it is not the manner of her temperance but the unwavering constancy with which it is maintained that signals virtue of a truly heroic degree.

Perhaps most celebrated was Brigid's extraordinary charity, earning her the title "Apostle of Charity" and comparisons to Mary herself. She gave with reckless generosity—surrendering valuable swords to lepers,⁵⁶ distributing her father's bacon to hungry dogs,⁵⁷ and freely giving away monastery provisions, nearly causing her father to sell her into slavery for 'stealing everything in the house for clients of God'.⁵⁸ When rebuking a nun who refused to share with lepers, she declared: "You act wrongly in prohibiting gifts to the servants of God."⁵⁹ Her healing ministry extended to countless afflicted people—lepers,⁶⁰ the blind,⁶¹ the paralysed,⁶² and the mute⁶³—while her willingness to give her last possession to those in need demonstrated a heart completely conformed to Christ's own charity.

Brigid's miracles are inseparable from the heroic virtues that shaped her life. Her supernatural faith, radical chastity, and boundless charity were not only interior dispositions but the wellspring of her miraculous acts—calming

⁵³ Ibid., p. 28.

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 23.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 22.

⁵⁷ Ibid., pp. 21–22.

⁵⁸ Ibid., pp. 22–23.

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 29.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 26.

⁶² Ibid., p. 30.

⁶³ Ibid., p. 27.

storms,⁶⁴ healing the sick,⁶⁵ multiplying provisions,⁶⁶ and discerning spiritual truth. Brigid's legacy thus embodies the essential connection between heroic virtue and miraculous works—her unwavering faith, radical chastity, and boundless charity revealing the divine presence working through a soul completely surrendered to God.

St David, the sixth-century monk and patron saint of Wales, is recognised as 'the only Welsh saint to be canonised (equipollently) and culted in the Western Church'.⁶⁷ Though historical details remain uncertain, evidence suggests that he was based in Pembrokeshire (Dyfed), from where his influence spread throughout South Wales before the 12th century.⁶⁸ The earliest references to David are found in Irish sources: the eighth-century *Catalogue of the Saints* identifies him as having established Mass liturgies⁶⁹; the ninth-century *Martyrology of Tallaght* refers to 'David of Menevia' ("David of Mynyw", now St Davids)⁷⁰; the 11th-century *Annals of Tigernach* mentions 'Dabid Cille muni' ("David of the monastery of Mynyw")⁷¹; and the *Annals of Inisfallen*, also from the 11th century, records the 'Repose of David of Cell Muine' in 589 AD.⁷² Accorded the epithet "Aquaticus" for advocating water-only abstinence, David established a monastic rule centred on manual labour, asceticism, and scriptural study.⁷³ Bishop Bernard of St Davids actively supported his cult, and Pope Callixtus II equated two pilgrimages to St Davids with one to Rome,⁷⁴ solidifying David's status in Welsh religious and cultural identity.

Rhygyfarch's eleventh-century *Vita Sancti Davidis* ("Life of St David") portrays David as marked by heroic virtue from birth: his arrival foretold by angels, his life enriched with mystical gifts,⁷⁵ and his infancy graced by a

⁶⁴ Ibid., pp. 32–33.

⁶⁵ Ibid., pp. 25–27, 30–31.

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 25.

⁶⁷ Farmer, *The Oxford Dictionary of Saints*, p. 138.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ *The Martyrology of Tallaght: From the Book of Leinster and MS. 5100-4 in the Royal Library, Brussels*, ed. by Richard I. Best and Hugh J. Lawlor (London: Harrison and Sons, 1931), p. 113.

⁷¹ *The Annals of Tigernach* [being Annals of Ireland, 807 B.C. to A.D. 1178] (Paris: Librairie Émile Bouillon, Edituer, 1895) p. 158.

⁷² *Annals of Inisfallen* (Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS. Rawlinson B. 503), AI589.2. Available at: <https://celt.ucc.ie//published/T100004/>

⁷³ Farmer, *The Oxford Dictionary of Saints*, p. 138.

⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 139.

⁷⁵ Richard Sharpe and John Reuben Davies, 'Rhygyfarch's Life of St David', in J. Wyn Evans and Jonathan M Wooding, *St David of Wales: Cult, Church and Nation* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2007), pp. 107–155 (p. 109).

golden-beaked dove teaching him.⁷⁶ His faith matured into powerful intercessory prayer, miraculously healing his teacher Paulinus' blindness by touch,⁷⁷ and raising a widow's son from the dead.⁷⁸ His trust in providence persisted despite opposition to his monastic foundations, and his gift of tongues in Jerusalem affirmed his apostolic calling, enabling him to 'confirm the faith of others by the word of truth'.⁷⁹

David's temperance was radical. Living on bread and water,⁸⁰ immersing himself daily in cold water to 'tame every passion of the flesh',⁸¹ and practicing such extreme modesty that for ten years studying under Paulinus, he never once looked at his teacher's face.⁸² His mastery of temperance encompassed not only personal restraint but also moral leadership: when Baia's wife attempted to corrupt his disciples through seduction, David exhorted them to stand firm, invoking the Israelites' perseverance and leading communal fasting to reinforce spiritual resolve.⁸³ Thus, David not only exemplified temperance in himself, but also nurtured it in others—demonstrating restraint, chastity, modesty, and spiritual perseverance to a heroic degree.

As abbot, David governed with just mercy. His monks worked manually, for 'carefree leisure was the kindling and mother of vices',⁸⁴ yet he shared their burdens equally. His justice is illustrated when, protecting Modomnóc, he caused an attacker's hand to wither with the sign of the cross.⁸⁵ Beyond communal work and prayer, he spent additional hours 'teaching, praying, genuflecting, and caring for the brethren; also in feeding a multitude of orphans, wards, widows, needy, feeble, sick, and pilgrims'.⁸⁶ His justice extended to ensuring equal treatment, with possessions held in common where 'nothing was "mine" or "yours"',⁸⁷ while still accommodating individual needs, providing 'meals according to the varying condition of their bodies or their age'.⁸⁸ His sovereignty as 'head and leader and prince of all the Welsh'

⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 117.

⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 119.

⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 145.

⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 141.

⁸⁰ Ibid., pp. 109, 111.

⁸¹ Ibid., p. 129.

⁸² Ibid., p. 119.

⁸³ Ibid., pp. 123, 125.

⁸⁴ Ibid., pp. 125, 127.

⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 137.

⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 129.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 127.

demonstrates the recognition of his just governance,⁸⁹ attracting even 'kings and princes' who 'abandoned their kingdoms' to serve under his rule.⁹⁰

David's miracles arise as a natural outgrowth of virtues lived to heroic perfection, revealing how a soul whose inclinations to earthly pleasures have been reordered and made second nature to the good becomes a vessel for divine power. His faith healed blindness and restored life; his disciplined temperance granted spiritual insight and authority; and his justice underpinned every act of mercy. These miraculous works were not isolated phenomena but the natural outpouring of a life steeped in heroic virtue. When he caused the ground to rise beneath him at Brefi so all could hear his teaching,⁹¹ when he communicated across language barriers during his Jerusalem pilgrimage,⁹² or when he protected Modomnóc through divine intervention,⁹³ David demonstrated how complete surrender to God's will transforms human limitations into opportunities for divine manifestation. In each miracle, the outward marvel confirms an inward holiness—demonstrating why David stands as Wales's pre-eminent saint.

St Wenefride, the seventh-century Welsh virgin and abbess, represents a case where cult endurance and geographical spread vastly outweighs historical certainty about her life.⁹⁴ The earliest Life attributed to pseudo-Elerius presents numerous improbabilities, though her connection to Holywell (Treffynnon) in Flintshire and relationship to her uncle St Beuno remain credible.⁹⁵ According to 12th-century Latin accounts, Wenefride was a maiden who rejected marriage proposals from Caradog, son of a neighbouring prince.⁹⁶ Enraged, he pursued and beheaded her as she fled towards the monastery,⁹⁷ and a fountain miraculously sprang forth where her head touched the ground.⁹⁸ Having been 'miraculously resurrected by St Beuno',⁹⁹ she reportedly served as abbess at

⁸⁹ Ibid., pp. 147, 149.

⁹⁰ Ibid., pp. 129, 131.

⁹¹ Ibid., pp. 145, 147.

⁹² Ibid., p. 141.

⁹³ Ibid., p. 137.

⁹⁴ Farmer, *The Oxford Dictionary of Saints*, p. 544.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ See Prior Robert of Shrewsbury, *Vita et translatio S. Wenefredae* (Oxford, Bodleian Library, Laud. Misc. 114), ed. by David Callander (Aberystwyth, Wales: Vitae Sanctorum Cambriae, 2023), p. 63. Available at: <https://saints.wales/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Wenefreda-Laud.pdf>; and *Vita Sancte Wenefrede*, London, British Library, Cotton MS Claudius A.v, ed. and trans. by A. W. Wade-Evans in *Vitae Sanctorum Britanniae et Genealogiae* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1944), pp. 288–309 (p. 291).

⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 64; and Ibid., p. 293.

⁹⁸ Ibid., p. 67; and Ibid.

⁹⁹ Glanmor Williams, *The Welsh Church from Conquest to Reformation* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1976), p. 495.

Holywell, though alternative traditions suggest she traveled to Bodfari, Henllan, and finally Gwytherin, where she became a nun under St Eleri.¹⁰⁰ Her early medieval cult was primarily confined to the Marches of North Wales and to Ewias and Erging in the south, with evidence dating from the 12th century likely reflecting much earlier veneration.¹⁰¹ The translation of her relics to Shrewsbury Abbey in 1138 further expanded her influence,¹⁰² signalling 'a fresh outburst of religious ardour'.¹⁰³ Devotion intensified when Henry V made pilgrimage from Shrewsbury to Holywell in 1416, and Lady Margaret Beaufort constructed the still-standing chapel after the Battle of Bosworth Field in 1485.¹⁰⁴ Remarkably, her cult survived the Reformation; in 1629, reportedly 14,000 pilgrims visited on her feast day.¹⁰⁵ Wenefride's curative spring 'was, and is, one of the most widely sought sources of healing in England and Wales', where inside the chapel built over the well, 'the walls were hung with crutches and other mementoes of sufferers who had been healed'.¹⁰⁶

Wenefride exemplifies heroic virtue through her extraordinary faith, chastity, and fortitude. According to the 12th-century *Vita Sancte Wenefrede* ("Life of St Winifred"), she renounced earthly marriage from an early age in order to dedicate herself wholly to Christ.¹⁰⁷ Her faith was expressed in exceptional piety: she sought religious mentorship under Beuno,¹⁰⁸ and later travelled to Rome to visit the sites of the holy apostles, 'that there in the presence of the relics... she might reverently offer herself entirely to God'.¹⁰⁹

Her most profound display of chastity came when confronted by Caradog's lustful advances. Declaring herself betrothed to Christ, she refused to surrender her virtue. Employing 'a sort of holy cunning',¹¹⁰ she requested

¹⁰⁰ Farmer, *The Oxford Dictionary of Saints*, p. 544.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Julia M. H. Smith, 'Oral and Written: Saints, Miracles, and Relics in Brittany, c. 850-1250', *Speculum*, 65.2 (1990), 309-343 (p. 341).

¹⁰³ G. Hartwell Jones, *Celtic Britain and the Pilgrim Movement* (London: Hon. Society of Cymmrodorion, 1912), p. 407.

¹⁰⁴ Farmer, *The Oxford Dictionary of Saints*, pp. 544-545.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., p. 545.

¹⁰⁶ Williams, *The Welsh Church from Conquest to Reformation*, p. 495.

¹⁰⁷ *Vita Sancte Wenefrede*, A. W. Wade-Evans, p. 289.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., p. 289.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., p. 295.

¹¹⁰ Cited with reference to Erasmus to Justus Jonas, 10 May 1521, reflecting on St Paul's rhetorical strategy adaptation of his message to win converts, in *The Correspondence of Erasmus: Letters 1122-1251, 1520-1521*, trans. by R.A.B. Mynors, annotated by Petre G. Bietenholz, vol. 8 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988), Letter 1202, p. 210. See also Robert D. Sider, 'Historical Imagination and the Representation of Paul in Erasmus' Paraphrases of the Pauline Epistles', in *Holy Scripture Speaks: The Production and Reception of Erasmus' Paraphrases of the New Testament*, ed. by Hilmar M. Pabel and Mark Vessey (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), p. 104.

time to prepare herself, and used the opportunity to flee towards the monastery for sanctuary.¹¹¹ This represents the Church as refuge from worldly corruption; her last steps driven by faith and trust in God. This heroic defence of chastity led to her martyrdom when Caradog 'anticipated her with a sword, cutting off her head'.¹¹²

Wenefride's fortitude appears not only in sacrificing her life for virtue but also in her miraculous resurrection and subsequent holy life. After being restored to life through Beuno's prayers, she bore only a thin scar on the neck as a testament to her sacrifice.¹¹³ She later 'preside[d] over eleven virgins, that they might take from her an example of life and holy conversation',¹¹⁴ becoming known as "White Wenefred",¹¹⁵ a name symbolic of a life lived in accordance with God's will and of the blamelessness of her character. Her life stands as a testament to the transformative power of heroic virtue, which enabled her to triumph over death itself and continue her holy mission of leading others to Christ through her exemplary teaching, miraculous intercessions, and curative spring at Holywell.

The miraculous elements that pervade the hagiographical accounts of Wenefride illuminate the profound relationship between heroic virtue and supernatural efficacy. Her resurrection stands as divine validation of her extraordinary chastity and fortitude. The spring that emerged at the site of her beheading, with its well-documented curative properties, represents her intercessory power grounded in heroic faith. The miraculous phenomena associated with her cult—including the annual transmission of her cloak across water to St Beuno,¹¹⁶ the milky appearance of her well's waters at critical historical junctures,¹¹⁷ and numerous healings spanning centuries—all derive their efficacy from the sanctity she cultivated through the practice of virtue to a heroic degree. These thaumaturgical deeds are not mere adornments to her story but integral expressions of her inner sanctity. The remarkable longevity of her cult, persisting through the Reformation when many native British saints were marginalised,¹¹⁸ attests to the enduring power of her virtuous example made tangible through miraculous intervention.

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that sanctity, as understood within the Catholic tradition, is most fully realised through the interrelation of virtue, its heroic perfection, and the confirmation of divine grace through miracles. The lives of the Celtic saints attest to this synthesis, each embodying virtue not

¹¹¹ *Vita Sancte Wenefrede*, A. W. Wade-Evans, pp. 291–293.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, p. 293.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 295.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 305–307.

¹¹⁸ Farmer, *The Oxford Dictionary of Saints*, p. 545.

merely as a moral habit but as a disposition perfected to the point of becoming a vehicle for supernatural activity.

St Patrick's evangelical fortitude reshaped Ireland; St Brigid's charity and chastity were marked by miraculous provision; St David's ascetic discipline and leadership grounded Welsh monasticism; and St Wenefride's steadfast virtue, culminating in martyrdom, became a source of healing and devotion that endures today. In each case, their sanctity transcends ordinary Christian virtue, manifesting habitual conformity to the divine will and a capacity to mediate divine presence in the world.

The miracles in their hagiographies serve not as embellishments, but as divine attestations of heroic virtue. Sanctity must therefore be understood not as isolated acts of moral excellence, but as a transformative stage of spiritual life: virtue elevated by grace, perfected through constancy, and confirmed through visible signs of divine favour. In this way, the saints stand not only as intercessors within the communion of the faithful, but as theological exemplars of what it means to be fully conformed to Christ.

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