



**St Brigid**



# The Icon of St. Brigid

**When Sr. Aloysius McVeigh rsm was asked to paint an icon it was at once an honour and a responsibility calling for much research and prayer. By prayerful attention to the presence of Brigid we will experience the stillness, the power, and the prayer, that is the essence of this icon.**

Unlike a painting, an icon seeks to reveal spiritual messages and meaning that lie beneath the surface reality. Allowing for a measure of Celtic imagination in the early biographies of St. Brigid (c.452 – 525), there are truths and teachings enshrined in the legends. St. Brigid emerges from them as a woman of extraordinary faith, hospitality, charity and wisdom, with the strength and gentleness that ensures our enthusiastic acceptance of this ‘Mary of the Gael’ as our beloved Patroness.

In her left hand Brigid holds the symbol of her monastic foundation, under the famous oak that gives ‘Cill Dara’ (*Church of the Oak*) its name. In her right she holds the crosier denoting her dignity as Abbess, conferred by St. Mel of Ardagh, giving her leadership over the church in Kildare and over her dual monastery of men and women.

St. Brigid also founded a school of art and appointed St. Conleth in charge. The achievements in the fields of illumination and metalwork among her disciples elicited the unbounded praise of the 12th century Welsh chronicler, Giraldus Cambrensis,

*“All this is the work of angels and not of human skill.”*

The icon attempts to portray this by the open book and the flame of learning and also the jewelled sword and brooch. As usual in iconography these symbols have layers of deeper significance. The sword reminds us of Brigid giving away her father’s precious sword to a poor person so that he could barter it for food for his family. Brigid’s foot on the sword signifies her renunciation of wealth and her abhorrence of violence.

A perpetual flame burned in Kildare in pre-Christian times and was kept alight by Brigid and her nuns until the 16th century. In the Christian tradition the flame is a symbol of the Holy Spirit.

Brigid had a deep respect for all creation. Animals played a significant role in many of her legends, cows and sheep being particularly associated with her. Perhaps most encouraging for us among all the legends, is the parable of her cloak spreading over the Curragh of Kildare. Surely we are asked to see in it Brigid’s pledge of continuing guidance and protection “Brat Bride Ort” (*The cloak of Brigid upon you*) is a popular blessing used throughout Ireland, invoking the protection of [Brigid’s cloak](#).

Sr. Aloysius McVeigh, R.S.M.

The icon was painted by Sr. Aloysius McVeigh and commissioned by the Parish of Kildare, Ireland. An icon is different from a painting in that it seeks to reveal a story or message that exists below the surface.