

What We Are is Known to God

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Saint Ciaran is a sixth-century saint of Ireland. His name is sometimes spelled Kieran, and with that spelling the pronunciation (Keer-un) is a more familiar name.

Ciaran's family provided a mix of experiences for the young boy. His maternal grandmother was a poet and lover of history. From her and his mother he learned to enjoy study and reading.

On his father's side he was descended from people who worked with their hands. His own father was probably a carpenter, and Ciaran was given menial jobs, including herding the family's cattle.

Different as his parents were, they were both devout Christians, and they saw to it that he was raised as a believer. He was tutored by a scholarly deacon for many years.

As he grew older, Ciaran wanted to further his education at the school run by Saint Finian and his monks in the town of Clonard, but his family was too poor to send him. He set out on foot for the school anyway, not sure how he would pay to attend. But a cow began following him, perhaps sensing that he was an experienced and kind herder. Boy and cow arrived at the school together, and the monks, startled at first, agreed to accept the milk the cow would provide as payment for the eager boy's expenses.

Ciaran became known as a brilliant and prayerful student. A holy monk named Enda, who headed a monastery in the Aran Isles, had a vision in which he saw Ciaran like a tree spreading its protective branches over Ireland and lands beyond. He told Ciaran, "Go, with God's word, and establish a church by the bank of a stream."

Enda's prophecy that Ciaran would found a monastery by a "stream" was ultimately fulfilled. His monastic school, built on the banks of the river Shannon, drew thousands of students from Europe and became a famous center of learning for centuries. But disaster assailed it often: its wooden buildings burned down several times, it was decimated by plague, and invaders both foreign and domestic plundered it. Finally, after almost ten centuries, the monastery was forced to close.

Ciaran never got to see the increasing greatness of the monastic center he founded. Plague killed him in 544, just a short time after it opened. But it was his character, formed by prayer, fasting and the will to work, that inspired those who followed him.

Saint Paul writes in II Corinthians 5: 11 that "what we are is known to God." The world didn't get to know Saint Ciaran all that well, because he died at the age of 33. But God knew him, and knew that even in a relatively brief life he could establish a place of prayer and learning that would serve His people for a long time.

Our own time on earth may not be lengthy, but that doesn't keep us from doing great things for God, if we are ready to try.