

Calendar of Customs and Festivals.

February 1.

ST. BRIDGET.—Next to St. Patrick the most important of the Irish saints, the patroness of arts and culture. She, with seven virgin companions, the first nuns in Ireland, founded a church which stood under an ancient oak on what is now the site of the city of Kildare. The popularity of the saint, as indicated by the frequent use of Bridget as a Christian name, together with the survival of many pagan elements in relation to her, point to the pre-existence of a widely diffused and important cult. Her shrines are frequently associated with oak or ash groves, and she herself is connected with fire. This is shown by the story told by Giraldus Cambrensis of an ashless undying fire sacred to her, which was tended by twenty virgins in an enclosure taboo to men, as well by other of her attributes.

Popular custom points to a connexion of St. Bridget with fertility. On Jan. 31, the eve of her feast, it was the custom in the Isle of Man to cut green rushes and, standing at the door, to invite the saint to enter as the rushes were strewn on the floor to make a bed or carpet. The meaning of this practice is made clearer in the Western Isles of Scotland, where on the night of Feb. 1 a sheaf of oats was dressed in woman's clothes by the mistress and her maids, and placed in a basket with a stick beside it while saying, "Bri'id is come, Bri'id is welcome." In the morning, if the mark of the stick was found in the ashes, it portended a prosperous year. The custom of making rush crosses in honour of St. Bridget in association with a more or less solemn feast, widespread in Ireland, has suggested a connexion with sun-worship.

Like St. Agnes, St. Bridget, a virgin saint, has come to be associated with fertility by a process of synthesis. Her cult has absorbed that of the pagan goddess Brigid, goddess of fertility, of fire and of the arts of civilisation, who is identified with the goddess *Dann* (Welsh *Dón*) of the *Tuatha de Danaan*. She was the most important of the Celtic goddesses and belongs to that stage of Celtic religion when goddesses were more important than gods. In Gaul, *Cæsar* equates her with *Minerva*. In Britain she was the eponymous goddess of the *Brigantes*. One of her shrines was situated at Bath.

February 2.

CANDLEMAS.—"The Purification of the Virgin Mary," also called "Christ's Presentation" and the "Holiday of St. Simeon." It is also known in the north of England as the "Wives' Feast."

The ceremony of purification after childbirth, perpetuated in the modern 'churching of women,' now, of course, a service of thanksgiving, is a necessary accompaniment of the idea of taboo involved in the great crises of life, such as birth and death, in primitive thought. Among most primitive peoples, women after childbirth are regarded as unclean and dangerous, and as such are subject to certain prohibitions. In Korea, for example, they must veil themselves from the sun for a period of varying length according to their rank. The uncleanness may be removed by various means; in the New Hebrides by washing in new coconut milk or by stroking the limbs with branches which remove the pollution. In the Malay Peninsula mother and child are laid on a platform under which a brisk fire is lit, sometimes with fatal results.

The Church celebrated the feast by a solemn procession, in which candles were borne in procession.

According to some authorities, all candles for use during the year should have been blessed on that day. The observance was continued in England up to the Reformation and was forbidden by statute in the reign of Edward VI.

The custom and name have been derived from Simeon's naming of Christ as "the Light of the World"; but ecclesiastical tradition is probably nearer the truth when it states that the ceremony was instituted because the pagans on that day carried lighted candles in honour of Pluto and Proserpine or, according to another account, Mars and his mother Februa—a function of Juno as presiding over the purification of women. In order to divert the Christian from these pagan practices, it was enjoined on all to carry candles in honour of the Virgin and Christ. The feast therefore perpetuated the cult of male and female chthonic or fertility deities and was connected with the purification of women. It is significant that in Britain St. Bridget has come to be associated with Candlemas.

In popular lore "on Candlemas Day throw candle and candle-stick away," said to mean that the use of tapers at Vespers and Litanies which had continued through winter, now ceased until All Hallow Mass. It certainly marks a period in a tradition older than the ecclesiastical. On Candlemas Eve the Yule brand was kindled and allowed to burn until sunset, when it was quenched and set aside to light the Yule log in the next season. The distinctively Christmas decorative foliage, the rosemary, bay, ivy, holly, and mistletoe were taken down and replaced by the box. In the Scottish Highlands St. Bridget's Day (Feb. 1, O.S.) was the first day of spring. It was the custom in Scotland for school children to make a present to the schoolmaster on Candlemas Day, the boy and girl giving the most becoming king and queen with certain privileges, such as asking for a weekly half-holiday and the remission of punishments over a certain period. It was also customary in some towns for a football match to be played. Both customs are significant in this connexion.

February 3.

ST. BLAISE.—Bishop and Martyr, born at Sebaste, Armenia, martyred by Agricola, A.D. 316. His legend records his fondness for and control over animals. At his command a wolf gave up a pig stolen from a poor woman. The woman brought the head and feet and a candle made of the pig's fat to the saint when he was in prison. Hence the custom of burning a candle to him for the animals of the household. He healed a youth dying through having swallowed a bone. Anyone in a similar state invoking the saint and commanding the bone to pass down or up in his name would be healed. Several Christian women were martyred with St. Blaise. When ordered to sacrifice to the heathen gods, they asked to be allowed to wash the idols that their offering might be the purer; but they threw them into the lake. This suggests a customary ritual, otherwise consent would scarcely have been given so readily.

St. Blaise was tortured with a sharp comb like that of the wool-comber, and is credited with having invented wool-combing. He was, therefore, the principal figure in the procession of the wool-combers of Bradford, which took place on this day, Jason with the Golden Fleece being the next in importance. By folk etymology he is associated with a custom whereby country women making a holiday on his festival burnt the flax and distaff of any woman found working, and also with the hill-top fires it was customary to light in some parts of the country on this date.