

St. Patrick Explored the Narrow Borders

How is it that the name of a saint, the bearer of Christianity to Ireland, has become synonymous with open beer taps, wild dancing and parades? Today is a good day for such a question, and a better day to explore the narrow border that puts saint and sinner so close to one another.

Life is filled with narrow borders. Laughter and tears frequently mingle. Pleasure and pain are sometimes hard to distinguish. Love and hatred burn hot with equal passion. Saints and sinners have more in common than most of us can bear to think about. The narrow borders of life are, indeed, worth exploring.

“Patrick” did not begin his life as a saint. He was not even Irish! Born late in the fourth century in Scotland or Wales, the not-yet saint was a confirmed pagan. His early life was spent exploring the mysteries and pleasures of a world where spirit and nature were not too far removed. Rocks, trees and rivers were alive with the spirits of the earth. He reveled in his world, experiencing as much of it as he could.

In his 16th year, “Patrick” was captured and sold into slavery by Irish pirates. For six years the lad was a kept boy. His hardships appear to have softened him toward Christianity, a new religion that focused attentions upon the Creator rather than creation. A narrow border crossed.

Legend reports that “Patrick” escaped his bondage of slavery and fled to Gaul, where he entered a monastery. In the monastery the lad took on the Christian name of Patrick and chose to become a slave of Christ.

Another narrow border crossed. His passion for his new faith in the Creator led him to hope for a day when he might return to Ireland and proclaim the Gospel. He wanted to reach those who persisted in a world of nature without seeing the

evidence of a Creator.

For 30 years Patrick labored in Ireland, risking the narrow border between the religion of the Druids and that of the Christians. Perhaps it was Patrick's memory of life on both sides of the border that fueled his passionate defense of Christianity.

He used all he knew as a pagan to build bridges to Christianity. The lesson of the shamrock, that unique three-leafed plant, is the best example of building a bridge across a narrow border. For the Druids the shamrock was yet another sacred, mystical plant. Patrick took the sacred plant and interpreted it in light of the Christian teaching of the Holy Trinity.

Patrick's story is one of dozens that invite us to explore the narrow border between the sinner and the saint.

One thing must be said about the saints of history: They never seemed to mind the company of the sinners. Indeed, they seemed to find energy and purpose in the company of those who were passionate about their lives. Saints and sinners are not that different. Sharing life's passions, they sometimes work together to find focus and purpose.

Maybe that is how a saint has come to be associated with March's biggest party.

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