American Catholic History

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The US History of St. Patrick

St. Patrick is acknowledged as one of the great missionary saints, but even so the annual celebration of his feast day gets far more attention than the likes of St. Boniface, St. Francis Xavier, or nearly other saint. Why is that? In part, it's due to the persecution of Irish Catholics in Ireland and America.

Although St. Patrick lived and died in the 5th century, he wasn't added to the liturgical calendar until the 1630s and celebrations of his feast were not the big deal they are today. In the meantime, following the Reformation and British control of Ireland, Catholicism was outlawed in the island and Irish people headed all over the world, voluntarily or not, bringing with them their faith and culture.

So it shouldn't be surprising that the first recorded celebration of St. Patrick in the New World took place in the Spanish colony of St. Augustine, Florida, in 1630, where he was the patron-protector of the crops, perhaps at the instigation of Father Richard Arthur, an Irish priest there.

The oldest continuous celebration of the saint goes to Boston, where in 1737, Irish settlers established the Irish Charitable Society and marked the saint's day with an annual dinner that continues to this day. But of course, the oldest St. Patrick's Day parade belongs to New York City where Irish regiments of the British army began holding them to celebrate St. Patrick in 1762.

And the reaction to that parade is what made it stick as an indelible part of the holy day. Anti-Catholic demonstrators mocked the parades and the Irish who held them. But the Irish immigrants who came to America did so because of the ideals of liberty embodied by the nation and they were not going to let some bigotry cause the nation to abandon those ideals. And so St. Patrick's Day became a statement and a celebration of what the US was founded to be.

Eventually, those distinctly American celebrations filtered back home to Ireland and then around the globe, even to Russian, Japan, and Australia. This American cultural export is really a collaborative effort between America being America, and people of Irish ancestry celebrating the saint who brought Christianity to Ireland.

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