Beloved saint is caught up in conflict

Imagine Dearborn Street flushed with beer to the sound of the Sons of St. Patrick and the Ancient Order of Hibernians playing loud march music on pavement painted with shamrocks and green lines. Rows of armored cars line surrounding streets, and in the dark, young people make Molotov cocktails to the tune of "Wearing O' the Green." The face of a local Mayor Daley in a fedora, and reports about green beer, the evening news flashes shooting protesters and riot squads and injuries. It's the morning, plastic bullet casings outnumber the beer cans littering the streets.

Parades and marches have become symbolic of the troubles in Northern Ireland, and in a divided country, symbols either pull people together or drive them apart. A revered patron of both the Catholic and Protestant communities, St. Patrick may have had an easier time persuading the snakes to leave than convincing either side that as a symbol and a saint, he wished to remain nonpolitical.

When the Belfast City Council recently announced plans for the first city-sponsored community St. Patrick's Day celebration, the rumblings that followed may have been the kind that sparked the good saint turning on his grave, as one councilor suggested. Nor was it the politics of positioning for position next to the mayor, as is the case in Chicago. The response from the mostly Catholic nationalist community reached something near a faint hope that it might be a sign of greater tolerance.

"St. Patrick should be a figurehead that belongs to all of us," said Tom Hartley, a Sinn Fein councillor and one of the parade's sponsors. "It's a shame we can't get together as one city to do something as simple as St. Patrick's Day, instead of turning on the TV to watch a parade in New York or Dublin."

- Tom Hartley, a Sinn Fein councillor and a parade sponsor

The symbolic gesture of a city-funded celebration of a perceived Irish nature under a nationalist lord mayor has drawn both nationalist and unionist criticism. However, both communities have refused to recognize the legitimacy of the commission, claiming appointments to it were biased. With no support from either community, the commission is in danger of becoming ineffective. St. Patrick, it appears to be caught in the middle.

While the commission has no jurisdiction over the St. Patrick's Day parade because it is a city-sponsored event, the commission will decide which parades will be permitted. "The idea was for an all-inclusive St. Patrick's Day, with all communities involved in the planning of it," said Sean Mcglinchey, a member of the newly established Parades Commission. "That hasn't happened, but that doesn't mean it's a bad thing...we should use this year's parade to build upon next year as an experiment and a testing ground for future cross-community events. Eventually, we hope Belfast can hold an event equal to New York's or Dublin's every year."

As a symbol, St. Patrick is fundamental for Irish Protestants and Catholics, and in all likelihood the Belfast parade will pass without riot police and plastic bullets. The outraged voice of nationalism has diminished to grumbles of discontent. Old habits die hard, yet perhaps there lies a faint hope that one day, both communities can indeed move in a common symbol void of politics. But the march toward a peaceful settlement depends, largely upon the negotiated give and take of such symbols, and it may be some time before the Molotov cocktail surrender to the celebratory pint, green or otherwise.

Hannah Hayes from the South Side of Chicago, lives in Belfast and is a staff reporter for the Christian Science Monitor.