

■ Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland both claim St. Patrick as their own. But, reports Hannah Hayes from Belfast, this does not mean they will parade easily together today.

Beloved saint is caught up in conflict

Imagine Dearborn Street flanked with riot police while the Sons of St. Patrick and the Ancient Order of Hibernians play bagpipes and march on pavement painted with shamrocks and green lines. Rows of armored cars line surrounding streets, and in the alleys, young people make Molotov cocktails to the tune of "Wearing O' the Green." Instead of a jovial Mayor Daley in a fedora, and reports about green beer, the evening news flashes shouting protesters and lists arrests and injuries. In 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 citywide, cross-community St. Patrick's Day celebration, the rumblings that followed may not have been the good saint turning in his grave, as one city councilor suggested. Nor was it politicians jostling for position next to

the mayor, as is the case in Chicago. The response from the mostly Catholic nationalist community reached something near euphoria, but the plan drew something between suspicion and open hostility from Protestant unionists who fear that such symbolism could undermine their fiercely protected Britishness.

"St. Patrick should be a figurehead that belongs to all of us," said Tom Hartley, a Sinn Fein councilor 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."

As with everything else in Northern Ireland, embattled mind-sets could allow this historic first to degenerate into yet another

sectarian squabble. Protestant groups complain they have been frozen out of the planning of the parade, and nationalists accuse the unionist politicians of trying to quash anything with an Irish overtone.

"It's good and right that we celebrate in honor of that good Protestant chap, but this parade will never be a success," said unionist councilor Hugh Smyth. "We're not going to let them take our St. Paddy away!"

Because both communities hold St. Patrick as a symbol of their tradition, everyone agrees a city-sponsored parade is a good thing. But the suggestion of an officially sanctioned citywide celebration comes at a time when talks toward a peace settlement have everyone on their guard.

For nationalists who have fought for nearly a century to reunite Northern Ireland with the Irish Republic, the lack of a parade for so many years appears, on the surface, of little significance. In most cities in Ireland, north or south, people treat the day as any other and marvel at the American propensity to wallow in green beer once a year. But opposition from unionists who cling tightly to their position in the United Kingdom has brought charges of bigotry from a city council led for the first time by a nationalist lord mayor, a Catholic.

—Tom Hartley, a Sinn Fein councilor and a parade sponsor

The symbolic gesture of a city-funded celebration of a perceived Irish nature under a nationalist lord mayor has done more to inject hope in the nationalist community than months of reported progress in the peace talks.

Protestants view parades and marches as part of their culture. Two weeks after St. Patrick's Day, the Protestant "marching season" officially begins. From April until September, more than 3,000 marches will take place around the province of Ulster. Most of these will pass peacefully, but negotiations for a dozen or more "contentious" marches already are deadlocked.

To an Ulster Protestant, "marching down the queen's highway" is a tradition, even if it means parading through nationalist districts overtly commemorating a Protestant king's victory over Catholics in 1690.



A young St. Patrick leads a past community parade in the predominantly Catholic Falls Road area of Belfast. Protestants and Catholics are to parade together this year.

A newly established Parades Commission will decide which parades will be permitted. 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. Like 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 familiar bickering could sour the celebrations.

To be a success, the parade must pass off as completely nonpolitical and nonsectarian, void of any symbols that could be perceived as nationalist or unionist. This could prove to be difficult since who owns what symbols, such as St. Patrick, can be blurred. One unionist leader blasted the promotional literature of the parade as "provocative, offensive and extremely partisan" because it flaunted a Celtic logo and a Gaelic greeting.

Parade organizers acknowledge that efforts to make it cross-community and less "Irish" were too little, too late. Nationalist communities have sponsored small festivals over the years, and the originally planned parade was to pass through only Catholic areas. But the parade idea gathered momentum. When city funding became available, there was a belated attempt to

reach out to Protestant groups to avoid the battle that is now reaching its climax.

"The idea was for an all-inclusive St. Patrick's Day, with all communities involved in the planning of it," said Sean McKnight, a member of the largely Nationalist West Belfast Festival Committee. "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 unionism already has diminished to grumbles of discontent. Old habits die hard, but perhaps there lies a faint hope that one day, both communities can indeed rejoice 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 surrenders to the celebratory pint, green or otherwise.

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