



*“What’s in a name?” Juliet (Capulet) inquires of Romeo in the Shakespearean play. Her rhetorical gambit suggested that Romeo’s surname, Montague, should not define his destiny.*

As names go, Romeo and Juliet, in their shared context, are universally known. Capulet and Montague – less widely familiar. Back in the day, first names were a thing.

Communication between societies was difficult in ancient times and the world’s population was significantly smaller than today. Estimates peg it between 150 and 300 million at year 100, two and a half millennia ago. The global headcount has since increased by roughly 4,000 percent. These two factors likely contribute to the historical tendency to refer to people by a single name, often the one they were given rather than the one they inherited by birth. This practice continues today, though rarely, and seemingly limited mostly to musicians (Cher, Madonna, Bono, Beyonce, Adele) and Brazilian or Portuguese soccer players (Pele, Neymar, Ronaldo, Marta). But for a long time, almost everyone who was anyone was a one-name wonder, of sorts.

St. Patrick. You don the green. You drink the beer. But do you know his last name? Probably not, because he doesn’t have one that is agreed to by unanimous consent. Few of his own writings have been recovered, and in them he refers to himself as Patricius, a Latin precursor to the Gaelic Padraig or the Anglicized Patrick that we use now to identify him. Why a Latin name? Because he was Romano-British, rather than Irish, a missionary-Bishop from what-is-now England to the Emerald Isle.

Using only one name can be confusing. Even uber-famous first names have been historically modified for clarity – like “Henry the Eighth” or “Erik the Red.” Some people insist on “Jesus of Nazareth” to distinguish the messianic figure from other lesser-known J’s while avoiding tagging him with a surname (which he didn’t really have). Though the community of Catholic saints is a very exclusive club with a membership estimated to slightly exceed 10,000, there is redundancy among the mononymic ranks.

Yes, there’s more than one St. Patrick. There are at least two.

There’s the guy with the snake-charming legacy, despite no fossil evidence that snakes have populated Ireland at any time. The serpents in the story are metaphors for sin and evil, and the saint, through his Christian preaching, nudged the culture towards the light of good.

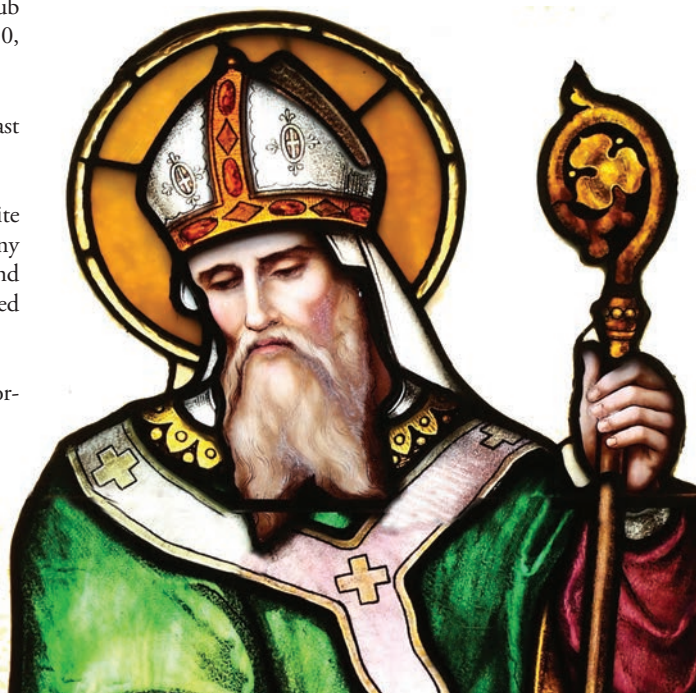
There’s the other St. Patrick, too. Imagine the inferior-

ity complex his spirit suffers when he looks down on the March 17 parades. Adding insult to injury, St. Patrick of Malaga, an early Christian leader in Spain, came before the Irish-Brit, but his fame has been wildly overshadowed by the man who is now synonymous with their shared name. Well, not exactly shared – Patricius versus Patricio, a la Juan, Giovanni, Ivan, Ian, and John. And let’s not get started with Johns – there is something like 600 saints with this oft-used handle in the Christian world.

What’s in a name? Cultural significance, in the name of the latter Patrick. A celebration of all things Irish, which is an amazing phenomenon given the relatively small size of the place and its diaspora, which is less than 1 percent of the world’s current population. Only two other saints have transcended their religious origins in a similar way to preside over a “holiday” celebrated broadly by people of various faiths – Valentine and, to a lesser extent, Nicholas. But, of course, there are several Valentines and Nicholases among the catalog of saints.

If all this is enough to make you want to grab a pint of Guinness, I get it, although I’ll have a 0.0 myself. It’s March 6 as I write this. It’s been a steady stream of green outfits walking the downtown streets this week, and it will get greener by the day. Enjoy the season, and your town’s unique embrace of it. Cheers, or Slainte, as the Irish say.

*Scott A. Lauretti*



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