Columns
Horizons
Spirituality



The author at Gaulstown Portal Dolmen, a megalithic portal tomb in County Waterford, Ireland, in April 2021 (Courtesy of Kathryn Press)



by Kathryn Press

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It's almost St. Patrick's Day — a time when everyone can lay claim to being a teeny bit Irish. My St. Patrick's Day will have special significance this year as an American celebrating in the very land to which Patrick came to share the Good News.

It's a national holiday; the mayor will come to Mass at the Cathedral of the Most Holy Trinity in Waterford City with the bishop and everyone will wear fresh shamrocks on their lapels. Monuments and buildings around the country will be illuminated in classic Kelly green. Despite how it's sometimes nicknamed, Ireland is not the 51st state of the United States! But Irish culture and U.S. culture are far from identical. Similar, sure. Spend only a few days here and you're bound to run into differences. We start with the obvious ones: the metric system and driving on the left. Doing things "as usual" can be confusing at the least and dangerous at the most.

Cultural adjustments take time. It's a process. First, words have new meanings. Petrol is for the car and gas is for the heating. The ground floor is street level and the first floor is above that. To "ring" someone means you use the phone to speak with them and to "call" means you actually stop by their house.

Second, living in Ireland causes me to look at life in a whole new way. Must Mother's Day be in May or can it be in March? Do roundabouts really help traffic flow more smoothly? How many more words do I have to write on an A4 sheet of paper instead of on letter sized?

Third, I've started to enjoy new things. Buying and roasting parsnips for dinner no longer sounds intimidating. They're delicious! It also means embracing that green Skittles are (still) lime flavor here (not sour apple) and purple ones are blackcurrant (sorry, grape). An added bonus: Cadbury crème eggs are available year-round!



The author at Giant's Causeway, County Antrim, Northern Ireland, in June 2021 (Courtesy of Kathryn Press)

Fold your hands and interlace your fingers. Then undo them and fold them the opposite way, with the opposite thumb on top. One way just feels "right." But why? To me, living in Ireland as an American is like folding my hands the other way, like walking around at a 45-degree angle; It's pretty much life as usual, but looking at things from a slightly different angle can give you a real crick in your neck.

Living in Ireland has forced me to take a step back and ask *why*. Why do I hold certain cultural norms as more important than others? Am I willing to try something new and different? Here I'm confronted with another way of living that, while it bears fruit in my life, also goes against the grain sometimes. And sometimes the pinch is real.

In my desire to adapt and enculturate I can't help but compare this transformative experience to that of my lifelong journey to live as a follower of Jesus. Adjusting to life in Ireland as an American is like growing in virtue as a Christian. Just as I learn that words mean new things in Ireland (Sport or sports? Math or maths?) the same is true when I live from a Christian worldview. The use of "Amen" when I'm in agreement with someone is different than when I receive the Body of Christ at Mass. In Ireland, there is an exclamatory phrase: "Jaysus!" But even saying the name 'Jesus' as a believer is different than if I were to say it without knowing him personally.

Living in Ireland asks me to change my daily living habits. I must remember to keep reusable shopping bags in the boot of the car before going food shopping or pay an extra fee for bags at checkout. Similarly, living as a Christian asks me to look at life in a whole new way. It challenges my understanding of suffering and death and resurrection. The liturgical year invites me to practice waiting in seasons like Advent and Lent.

In Ireland, rain is a regular part of life yet I rarely bring an umbrella with me. A jacket with a good hood and waterproof shoes are much more important. The mist or mizzle isn't a bother at all. Rather, I welcome it; it brings the best rainbows. And in my own Christian living, I've found I enjoy new things. I've discovered that vows of poverty, chastity and obedience bring me joy I never knew before. It is in taking up my cross and in following Him I've found life and meaning.

I know I'm not yet "there" — either as an American enculturating into Ireland or as a faithful follower of Jesus. But I'm in it and I'm on the journey. Living as an American in Ireland has, I pray, made me a better Christian. At the very least, the experience has given me the space and the reason to evaluate my default positions and grow in self-knowledge, empathy, and cultural awareness. It's taught me humility.

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As when someone's thick brogue requires a clarifying, "What, now?" sometimes I too have to ask the Holy Spirit, "Could you please repeat that?" Living from my baptismal identity feels differently than when I live just for myself. Looking at life through the lens of the Paschal Mystery is a little like living at a 45-degree angle. It changes my worldview ever so slightly and calls me out of myself into something bigger. It also helps me name and claim that following Jesus isn't always easy. Not my will but *yours* be done? Love my enemies … *all* of them? Sometimes the pinch is real.

Irish legend (most likely originating in America!) has it that we wear green on St. Patrick's Day to remain unseen by leprechauns — mischievous, mythical creatures. Should we forget, the leprechauns (or any elementary school child I've ever taught) might be tempted to pinch you!

Far be it from me to give you wardrobe advice, but I don't think getting pinched is the worst thing that could happen to me this St. Patrick's Day. It would just remind me of the pinches that come with everyday life. Pinches that come from living as an American in Ireland. Pinches that come from living as a Christian in today's world. Those pinches are real, but I wouldn't have it any other way.