St. Patrick’s Day: Joy during Lent

It sticks out like a sore, green thumb in the middle of a sober liturgical period. As a lifelong Catholic – and a lifelong Irishman – I struggle with squaring my prayer, repentance, almsgiving and self-denial with a holiday (one of my favorites) whose excesses include dying an entire river green. When I’m supposed to be fasting and giving things up and attending penance services, along comes this holiday – this feast day – that contradicts the whole Lenten vibe with its parades and corned beef.

It’s only been over the last few years that I’ve come to appreciate that Lent and St. Patty’s are complementary rather than conflicting. Originally, “Lent” meant “the lengthening of days” or, more literally, “spring.” And what says “spring” in a greener or more hopeful way than the feast of St. Patrick? As long, dark nights give way to warmer, longer, brighter days and the promise of a season of new life, I can’t think of a more fitting acknowledgment than the feast of the man who brought Christianity to Ireland.

We of Irish descent firmly believe that everyone is Irish on March 17. We can be a rowdy tribe, true, but we are not exclusive. It’s this all-are-welcome undercurrent to St. Patrick’s Day that makes me proud. It is reminiscent of the Catholic Church at its best. Jesus reminds us that – through his death and resurrection – we’re all forgiven. We all have a place in heaven. And, in the end, we’re all children of God, no matter our background nor the day of the year.

In the last few years, I’ve embraced the tension that exists between the austerity of Lent and the festivity of St. Patrick’s Day. It is a little like attending a wake for the dead in our Irish tradition. We find community and joy even in

the darkest of times. My family dresses in our green to go to church. We await the oft-given dispensation that allows us to eat meat when the holiday lands on a Lenten Friday. We ask mercy for our sins, and then we celebrate madly when we receive it. (After all, what better occasion for celebration than when one receives the gift of forgiveness?)