

Where we come from: A common heritage

by [Stephanie Paulsell](#) in the [November 13, 2007](#) issue

Several summers ago, I visited the early medieval monastic site of Glendalough with students and faculty from a seminary in Dublin. The site dates back to the sixth century, when St. Kevin (led by an angel, according to tradition) founded a monastery there. Nestled in a valley between two lakes, Glendalough still boasts the remains of a beehive hermitage and a round stone tower more than a hundred feet high that people come from all over the world to admire. Our group arrived at Glendalough on what Dubliners call a “soft day.” With a gentle, misty rain falling, Glendalough looked exactly how I had imagined Ireland would look: wet stones, lush green grass, quiet ancient ruins.

When the soft day turned aggressive and the mist changed to driving rain, our group reluctantly headed indoors to look at the exhibits. I fell to talking with a Nigerian student who had come to Ireland to prepare to become a priest. We walked through the little museum, looking at gravestones and bits of masonry that had once been part of the monastery. One artifact in particular made us stop and stare in admiration—an intricately carved stone cross, with a circle sweeping gracefully around the point where the arms of the cross intersected. It might once have stood along the pilgrim road, we learned, where travelers would have paused to pray on their way to ground made holy by St. Kevin’s labor and his prayers. As we stood there admiring it, the seminarian turned to me and said, “Isn’t it wonderful to see where we came from?”

Where we came from? We were both a long way from home, especially him; he was half a world away from where he came from. I murmured piously, “Oh yes, it is,” but inside I was startled. If there’s one thing I learned in school and now pass on to my own students, it’s that where we come from matters. Our race, our gender, our class, the families and geographies that shaped us as we grew matter crucially in how we receive and respond to the world. To claim another’s homeland as our own, we know, is treacherous—leading at the least to romanticizing worlds we do not

know, exoticizing unfamiliar lives and disregarding history, or at worst to colonialism.

So it was startling to hear this young man make such a bold claim to our common ancestry, startling to note the freedom with which he swept across national boundaries and ethnic differences to claim Ireland as our home. Startling, but also thrilling, because so much of our faith depends on radical claims to a common ancestry, to where we come from. We Christians trace our origins to an ancient covenant God made with Israel. We find our beginnings in Adam and Eve, in Moses, in Abraham and Sarah. We come from the garden of Eden, from Mount Sinai, from Jerusalem, from the countryside of Galilee. Why not Ireland as well? Why not claim those monks building their monastery stone by stone more than a thousand years ago as our ancestors? Why not trace our family tree back to St. Kevin and claim his stories as our own—the one about the otter that brought him a salmon with which to feed his hungry monks during a drought, or the story about the bird that laid an egg in Kevin’s outstretched hand while he was at prayer?

Any student of religion can tell you that we can’t just go around appropriating the stories of others, collecting them like souvenirs. But souvenirs were not what this young man had in mind. As we stood together before the cross, I realized that he had simply recognized what the stonemason who created it and perhaps planted it along the pilgrim road was trying to say when he threaded a perfect stone circle through the arms of the cross: that the place where the arms of the cross meet, the place where Jesus’ body met the hard wood, is the place where God meets the world. This young man, who had been led by his vocation to a new country, reminded me that we are all gathered up in the circle that sweeps eternally through the arms of the cross. We are swept up with Jesus, with St. Kevin, with pilgrims kneeling by the side of the road centuries ago, and with each other.

Trappist monk Matthew Kelty has written that the good news of Pentecost is that “all of us have heard in our own tongue, in the landscape of our own history, in the light and shadow of our own character and temperament, the magnificent *mirabilia dei*, the marvelous word of God. Reason enough to be glad.” Reason enough, but not the only reason. The Spirit that reaches us in the particularities of our own history also promises that even our history is not the last thing to be said about us. We are more than can be defined once and for all. We are more than our jobs, more even than our vocations. We are more than our anxieties and fears, more than the narratives—personal and national—that rule our lives for good or ill. We are more

than our parents, our children, our siblings and spouses; more than our successes and our failures, our virtues and our sins. We are more than others think of us and more than what we know of ourselves.

My seminarian acquaintance and I had been formed by our experiences, our race, our culture, our nationality, our gender, to be sure. We were Nigerian and American, but we were also more than that. We were also Irish, also children of St. Kevin. The circle sweeping through the cross before which we stood swept through our distinctive histories and identities and through what is still hidden and waiting inside us, and set them turning together.