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St. Patrick's feast will come early for some

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St. Patrick's feast will come early for some GRAND RAPIDS, Mich. (RNS) This year more than ever, Catholics should remember St. Patrick was a man of faith, not the patron saint of partying.

So says Bishop Walter Hurley, head of the Grand Rapids Catholic Diocese, when it comes to celebrating St. Patrick's Day on Monday, March 17.

Because the feast day falls during Holy Week for the first time since 1940, Hurley says parishes should observe Masses and festivities in Patrick's honor the preceding Friday.

"The church believes that Holy Week and the sacred events of Holy Week are far more important than the celebration of any saint's day," Hurley said. "If you wish to celebrate the feast of St. Patrick, which you don't have to do, we would ask you to celebrate on the 14th."

The bishop, however, is granting a dispensation that day from the abstinence from meat expected of Catholics during Fridays in Lent, according to the diocese Web site.

Elsewhere around the country, bishops have asked that St. Patrick's Day celebrations be moved from Holy Week. In Savannah, Ga., which attracts more than half a million revelers for St. Patrick's Day, official celebrations have been moved to Friday, March 14. But in Columbus, Ohio, the local Shamrock Club is sticking to March 17, against the local bishop's wishes.

"It's not a sin to celebrate your Irish culture," Mark Dempsey, the Shamrock Club's president, told the Associated Press. "Actually, you're born Irish first, and then you're baptized Catholic."

In New York, Cardinal Edward Egan won't interfere, church spokesman Joseph Zwilling told AP. Egan will celebrate a Mass for St. Patrick on March 14, but will review the traditional March 17 parade from the steps of St. Patrick's Cathedral.

Meanwhile, Hurley, of Grand Rapids, said he'll leave it up to individual Catholics' consciences whether to partake of green beer on St. Patrick's Day.

"Hopefully," he said, "we're dealing with adult people who have a sense of what's important, namely Holy Week and Lent."

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