

INDEPENDENCE DAY AND FOURTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME, 2025

A.

It is striking how quickly America's mostly relatively young revolutionary leaders, having fought for liberty, moved to enshrine national liberty within the frame of a constitution. Our national liberty is to be an ordered liberty.

At the spiritual level, the New Testament assures us that Jesus Christ has won liberty for us, but it also warns us not to use that liberty to unleash all of the desires of our flesh. The New Testament teaches us to enshrine our Christian liberty within the frame of the Beatitudes of Matthew's Gospel, read at Mass on Independence Day. Our Christian liberty is also to be an ordered liberty, ordered by the holy love we call "Charity".

There are people who give the good thing we call "freedom" a bad name. They live in a way that degrades the freedom that others have won for them, and that mocks their sacrifice. Morally, they actually throw their freedom away, since, as the Lord Jesus warns us in St. John's Gospel, whoever commits sins becomes a slave of sin. Such people discover eventually that they can no longer control their desires and passions, as they become enslaved to various addictions, habits, and impulses.

It might truly be said that such people lose both their freedom and their minds. Isn't it a kind of insanity to be controlled by an addiction? Isn't it a kind of insanity to be unable to resist impulses, or to be forced to obey strong habits? Such a life is both slavery and insanity.

Such people used their freedom, but they used it in a way that lost it. Freedom, to be kept, must be used in the right way. Political freedom must be framed by a constitution that is honored and obeyed. Moral freedom must be framed by Charity, the lifestyle described by the Lord Jesus in the Beatitudes.

You, and only you, can make your daily moral choices. No pastor can make them for you. On the other hand, never listening to the Church's pastors, and, yes, never following their directions, leaves you unready to make moral choices under the pressures that life applies. Once upon a time, I remember grappling from a bad position, as the coach yelled at me to do a particular move. I could feel the guy, and didn't think the recommended move would work in this case. I did something else. "That worked too", laughed the coach. Usually, however, when I didn't do as he said things went badly for me, sometimes quite badly. Only I could wrestle the match, that was my freedom. Yet, if I used my freedom never to listen to the coach or follow his directions, I would have been a complete failure, knowing nothing and doomed to constant defeat. You have to make your own moral choices under pressure, and the Church's pastors can't make them for you. Nevertheless, never listening to those pastors or following their directions leaves you without the moral knowledge and habits to make right choices under pressure.

"Love is the fulfilling of the law", writes St. Paul in his letter to the Romans. The freedom that Jesus Christ purchased for you by His Precious Blood is the freedom to love, and therefore the freedom to act with true Charity. Just make sure that whatever love you feel is the real thing and not a selfish counterfeit, something that truly comes from God and leads back to God. As St. John of the Cross observed, in the evening of

our lives, we will be judged on our love. That is to say, we will be judged on how we have used our liberty and freedom. Has our liberty been an ordered liberty? Has our freedom been a freedom used for authentic, holy love?

B.

The right use of our freedom requires the holy love we call "Charity". Charity is always directed towards particular people and things. It can never exist in the abstract, only as an idea. Charity flows from the God Who is Love, and leads back to Him, but on its journey Charity necessarily embraces and serves particular people and things. One of these things is our homeland, and some of those people are our fellow citizens.

To have a beloved land and to love the people of the land is a holy thing, the holy thing we call "Patriotism". The Prophet Isaiah expresses patriotism in this Sunday's first reading. The Jerusalem he speaks of is ultimately the heavenly Jerusalem of the life of the saints in God, but it is first the earthly Jerusalem, the capital of the land and people that Isaiah loves, a land and a people that the later Maccabees would defend with remarkable courage.

I have never faced a situation that called for any remarkable amount of courage, but I have always admired courage, a virtue certainly not confined to patriotism but often associated with it. Some people casually assume that ministers of the Gospel are not courageous people. I remember reading of the coastal citadel of Jaffa, besieged by Saladin, needing to get an urgent message to Richard Lionheart. A young priest volunteered to swim to Richard with the message, "with a courage rare in his cloth", remarked the historian gratuitously. Grr. Other people casually assume that ministers of the Gospel are somehow above patriotism. That would require being above being human. When the collapsing government in Italy didn't have an official capable of negotiating with the fearsome Attila the Hun, and Pope Leo I volunteered to do it, patriotism was part of his motivation, surely (Leo, not called "The Great" for nothing, handled the negotiations brilliantly)

Be patriotic, but be Christian in your patriotism. Patriotism, like any virtue, is corrupted when it gets cut off from the other virtues.

Without Faith and Charity, Patriotism becomes a monstrous thing. Experiences of monstrous patriotism have led some to fear and even loath patriotism, but that is a terrible mistake. People must have a homeland and must feel a certain love for the people of their land. Joined to Faith and Charity, Patriotism is a beautiful thing, as we see so clearly with Joan of Arc. She never hated the English. She just resisted their invasion of France. "Don't you think God loves the English?" asked one of her interrogators. "Of course - but He loves them most when they stay in England!" replied St. Joan. I think that if France were invading England, as France occasionally threatened to in other eras, she would have approved of a similar spirit of resistance among the English. Patriotic saints love their homeland and its people, but always within the frame of love of God and justice towards all His children. Their patriotism is allied to Faith and Charity, not divorced from it.

So, be patriotic, but be Christian about it. In particular, don't boast about your country above others. If you must boast, boast "in the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world" (Galatians 6:14)

