



HOMILY ON INDEPENDENCE DAY 2007

Fr. Ambrose Homily
July 25th, 2007

When I was preparing for today's Mass, I re-read the Declaration of Independence. And in doing so, I saw that, despite the Declaration's name and purpose, its proclamation of independence actually begins with an acknowledgment of profound *dependence*: dependence above all on "nature and Nature's God" as the basis of rights as well as duties. We should also remember that in the Declaration of Independence, the case for political independence is presented out of a decent respect for the opinions of mankind, and in order that the former colonies might take their proper place in the family of nations. Thus there is not only a claim of independence but also a recognition of the *interdependence* of nations, based on the essential unity of mankind.

And so there is more in the Declaration of Independence than meets the eye at first glance.

However, in recognizing this dependence on God and this interdependence of human beings, the Declaration raises some important questions. How, for example, are rights and duties to be balanced and harmonized? To recognize that our Creator has given us the precious gift of freedom does not immediately tell us how to reconcile the claims of freedom with the human need for peace and order and respect for the rights of others. In other words, how is freedom to be rightly ordered?

Without the right ordering of our freedom, the various claims to liberty and the conflicting desires of our hearts can lead us to an impasse. And this has indeed happened in our country's history, more than once. Recall that the founders of our Republic were unable to reconcile their noble principles with their acceptance of slavery; they themselves were deeply troubled in conscience over this glaring contradiction. They could see no immediate way to remedy the situation; and the nature of the federal union proved incapable of harmonizing the conflicting claims made on behalf of political freedom. The same kind of impasse has occurred in our own time, with regard to the life of the unborn child and of other vulnerable persons.

And so the Declaration of Independence raises these questions for us without providing clear answers. Where, then, can we turn to find the way out of the impasse?

For us, the answer is to be found in Christ and in his gospel: Christ is the way out of the impasse that the sinful abuse of freedom has caused. For God was made man in Jesus Christ in order that the ultimate and most important freedom—freedom from sin—might be ours, reconciling us in the Body of Christ through the Blood of the Cross (Eph. 2.16; Col. 1.20). In the end, the assertion of freedom is not sufficient unto itself: our



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freedom must itself be redeemed in Christ in order to be rightly ordered. As St. Peter himself told us, we are to live as free men and women but not using our freedom as a pretext for wrongdoing (1 Peter 2.16), for we have been set free from sin so that we might no longer live only for ourselves but for him who died and rose again for our sake (2 Cor. 5.15).

There is another point that needs to be addressed. In our history—even from the earliest colonial days, the words and images of the Bible have often been applied to our country and to our people, thus likening America to Israel in having a special vocation among the nations of the world. Many committed Christians have found this problematic and difficult to accept and even go so far as to question the value of patriotism and nationalism. They ask if some of our religiously-phrased patriotism is possibly an arrogant or presumptuous way to use the Scriptures. Worse yet, does such religious rhetoric imply that the United States is the Ark of the world's salvation or even the Kingdom of God?

Now these are weighty and serious objections. The objectors are pointing to a real temptation: it is indeed possible for nationalism to become a pseudo-religion. It is indeed possible for the people or the nation to take the place of the living God. This has happened at times, and we should be aware of this ideological temptation.

And yet, the criticism is itself too sweeping. Catholic moral teaching speaks of the “order of charity”, by which we owe charity to all but in a special way to those whom God has entrusted to us in a special way. The proper love of one's own country and people fits into this order of charity; the love of country and the desire for freedom then find their true meaning and proportion in relation to the Kingdom of Christ. Think for a moment of the pattern of Scripture: it was God himself who chose a particular people, Israel, and through this chosen people blessed all the nations of the earth. To foster patriotism within the order of charity is profoundly Christian, since only the grace of Christ can rightly order our love and our freedom.

For this reason, it is indeed fitting and legitimate to apply the words of Scripture to our own country *provided that we also acknowledge that other nations are free to do so as well*. I have no difficulty saying that the United States has a unique role to play in God's Providential purpose and that the Bible can and should illuminate this role. At the same time, other peoples and nations also have their roles to play, their unique gifts and graces that God give to them for the good of all mankind.

For example, God has given a special Marian grace to the people of Mexico through the apparitions of Our Lady to St. Juan Diego, a unique gift and blessing like those that were given to Israel in the Old Testament. In a similar way, when he revealed his Sacred Heart to St. Margaret Mary Alacocque, Christ promised special temporal and spiritual blessings upon the people of France: for France is the “eldest daughter” of the Roman Church and has played a unique role in Christian civilization. That, too, seems



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eminently fitting: for all of us have been blessed through the special graces given to Mexico and to France, just as all humanity was blessed through Israel. To be redeemed by the blood of Christ is not to lose our particular cultural or national identity but to see that identity fulfilled and sanctified, purified of all that is sinful or unworthy of God or of the human nature that Christ assumed in the womb of Mary. This holds true for us Americans as well as for other peoples and nations.

In this broader perspective, our love of country and belief in its special vocation need not entail arrogance or presumption since the Catholic's patriotism is animated by gratitude for God's gifts and by the recognition that with these gifts also come duties and responsibilities—including the duty of repentance and amendment of life. Our country's true vocation will only be fulfilled when the reign of Jesus Christ is acknowledged in both public and private life, so that our freedom may be redeemed and rightly ordered by his grace. In Christ we see the answer to the questions that that Declaration of Independence presents to our minds: only in him can we take our true place within the family of God, which is the Body of Christ that embraces all nations.

Remember for a moment that Our Lady is the patroness of our country, under the title of the Immaculate Conception. This doctrine teaches that, from the first moment of her existence, Mary was free from all stain of original sin, that she was the new Eve of redeemed humanity, and that in her the original design of humanity has been perfectly restored. Mary was perfectly free because she was perfectly redeemed: she expressed her grace-filled freedom when she said, "Behold, the handmade of the Lord. Be it done unto me according to thy word" (Lk 1.38). May that Marian attitude inspire our own freedom as believers and as citizens.

Since July is the month in which the piety of the Catholic people especially honors the Precious Blood of Jesus, I thought I would close with some words from a letter addressed in 1960 by Blessed John XXIII to the bishops of the world. The Pope especially commended the devotion to the Precious Blood of Jesus as the answering to the needs of our time:

Oh, if Christians only reflected more often on the paternal warning of the first pope: "Conduct yourselves with fear in the time of your sojourning. You know that you were redeemed from the vain manner of life handed down from your fathers, not with perishable things, with silver and gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot" (1 Peter 1.17-19).

If only they heeded with more concern the exhortation of the Apostles of the Gentiles: "For you have been bought at a great price. Glorify God and bear Him in your body" (1 Cor. 6.20). How much more worthy, more edifying would their morals be, how much more salutary for the whole of humanity would be the presence of Christ's Church in the world! Were all men to heed the invitations of the grace of God—God, who desires them all to be saved because He wanted



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them all to be redeemed by the blood of His only begotten Son, and calls all to be members of a single Mystical Body of which Christ is the head—how much more brotherly would the relations between individuals, peoples, and nations become; how much more peaceful, more worthy of God and of human nature, created in the image and likeness of the Almighty, would social existence come to be! (Apostolic Letter of Pope John XXIII *On Promoting Devotion to the Most Precious Blood of Our Lord Jesus Christ*, 30 June 1960).

Let us take to heart these words of Blessed John XXIII and allow them to illuminate us on our way, as citizens of our beloved country and above all as followers of Christ our Savior.