

[Readings: St. Thomas, July 3<sup>rd</sup>: Eph. 2:19-22, Ps.117; John 20: 24-29]

It has been 246 years since the United States declared its independence from the British Empire and claimed its status as a nation. Our Founding Fathers and Mothers established America with recognition of man's religious nature and an expectation that Christian belief would animate the new country's civic life.

Although that Christian foundation has not kept our nation from the scourges of slavery, nativism and civil war, thanks be to God, U.S. citizens -- through much effort -- overcame them. Today, we find ourselves facing different national challenges, but no less destructive: the COVID-19 pandemic, a fractured economy, a divided nation, segregated races. We pray and sing, "God bless America," and one church marquee sign controversially says, "God will not bless America when we legalize sin."

But, as always, God provides His grace in any age: Thanks to technological advances and the proliferation of pro-life apostolates, secular and religious, the human dignity of a person from conception to natural death is the force behind so many organizations and apostolates. The majority of U.S. citizens now consider abortion morally wrong, and in some states this conviction has helped usher in bold new laws to protect unborn children and their mothers. There are voices in all levels of politics and the Church who are working for authentic immigration reform while protecting national sovereignty. In spite of violent protests and brutality, legislators are working to combat the racism that still pervades our country. Voices of reason, clarity and charity can rise above the shrill noise and turbulence and serve as vehicles for constructive debate.

This Independence Day weekend, let our collective memory be jogged on the ways that Christian faith has been a bedrock of our nation and a force for change.

We are reminded on this Feast of St. Thomas the Apostle that we "are no longer strangers and sojourners, but are fellow citizens with the holy ones, and members of the household of God." We are "being built together into a dwelling place of God in the Spirit." The construction work still goes on!

The birthday of our country is an opportunity to take to heart again Thomas Jefferson's words -- adapted from St. Robert Bellarmine, who wrote 150 years earlier "All men are equal, not in wisdom or grace, but in the essence and nature of mankind" reflected in our own Constitution as: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness."

At a time when religious practice has sunken low, let us also remember St. Robert's words, as we pray for our country: "Political power emanates from God. Government was introduced by divine law, but the divine law has given this power to no particular man... Men must be governed by someone, lest they be willing to perish. It is impossible for men to live together without someone to care for the common good."

The month of July in the Roman Catholic tradition is dedicated to the Precious Blood of Jesus. There is a special Litany for that devotion. The Litany of the Most Precious Blood was approved for public use in 1960 by Pope John XXIII, although devotion to the Precious Blood goes back centuries.

The Litany of the Most Precious Blood pays tribute to the blood our Lord both shed for us in His Passion and offers us in the Eucharist for our salvation. It is important to remember that the host we consume at Mass is indeed the body, blood, soul and divinity of our Lord Jesus Christ! (Although the wine at communion is "my blood of the new covenant" as our Lord put it at the Last Supper (Mark 14:24) the host as the body of Christ contains our Lord's blood as well.) I would like us to pray that now, offering it for our country.

#### The Litany of the Precious Blood

**Lord, have mercy on us. Lord, have mercy on us.**

**Christ, hear us. *Christ, graciously hear us.***

**God, the Father of Heaven, *have mercy on us.***

**God the Son, Redeemer of the world, *have mercy on us.***

**God, the Holy Spirit, *have mercy on us.***

**Holy Trinity, One God, *have mercy on us.***

**Blood of Christ, only-begotten Son of the Eternal Father, *save us.* (after each line)**

**Blood of Christ, Incarnate Word of God,**

**Blood of Christ, of the New and Eternal Testament,**

**Blood of Christ, falling upon the earth in the Agony,**

**Blood of Christ, shed profusely in the Scourging,**

**Blood of Christ, flowing forth in the Crowning with Thorns,**

**Blood of Christ, poured out on the Cross,**

**Blood of Christ, price of our salvation,**

**Blood of Christ, without which there is no forgiveness,**

**Blood of Christ, Eucharistic drink and refreshment of souls,  
Blood of Christ, stream of mercy,  
Blood of Christ, victor over demons,  
Blood of Christ, courage of martyrs,  
Blood of Christ, strength of confessors,  
Blood of Christ, bringing forth virgins,  
Blood of Christ, help of those in peril,  
Blood of Christ, relief of the burdened,  
Blood of Christ, solace in sorrow,  
Blood of Christ, hope of the penitent,  
Blood of Christ, consolation of the dying,  
Blood of Christ, peace and tenderness of hearts,  
Blood of Christ, pledge of Eternal Life,  
Blood of Christ, freeing souls from Purgatory,  
Blood of Christ, most worthy of all glory and honor,**

**Lamb of God, Who takes away the sins of the world,  
*Spare us, O Lord.***

**Lamb of God, Who takes away the sins of the world,  
*Graciously hear us, O Lord.***

**Lamb of God, Who takes away the sins of the world,  
*Have mercy on us.***

**V. You have redeemed us, O Lord, in Thy Blood.  
R. And made us, for our God, a kingdom.**

**Let us pray:  
Almighty and eternal God, You have appointed Your only-begotten Son the Redeemer of the world and willed to be appeased by His blood. Grant, we beg of You, that we may worthily adore this price of our salvation, and through its power be safeguarded from the evils of the present life, so that we may rejoice in its fruits forever in Heaven. Through Christ our Lord. Amen. GOD BLESS AMERICA!**

[Readings: Zech. 9:9-10; Psalm 145; Rom. 8:9, 11-13; Matt 11:25-30]

You don't have to watch the evening news to find out what people are worried about. Think back on the past year. The bereaved family carried their loss to the church. The man or woman seeking an annulment, the teenagers anxious about their lives, the families in financial crisis, the depressed worker who could hardly function on the job anymore, the man or woman who felt rejected and denied by God and offended by the Church, the one who'd just been diagnosed with cancer. Senior Citizens still wondering if it is truly safe to come back to Sunday Mass without catching COVID-19.

People have all sorts of troubles with their relationships, their health, their careers, and their bank accounts. They worry about moral choices and what God thinks of them, too. They wonder if anything they do has meaning anymore. They suspect sometimes that they have made irredeemable mistakes.

A young, single stockbroker who'd been raised in a Catholic family was in trouble, and he knew it. He made a lot of money and enjoyed a fabulous lifestyle, but none of that mattered anymore. He drank too much, and it was starting to affect his career. It had already cost him many significant relationships. He was lonely. He was full of self-hatred. He didn't know what else to do, so one Saturday night he stumbled into the nearest Catholic church, something he hadn't done in a long time.

He didn't come for anything in particular -- impulse and buried memory had brought him there. He sat in the pew uncomfortably and looked into the face of a small boy in the arms of his father in the pew ahead of him. The child was smiling at him over the father's shoulder. He returned the smile painfully. Mass was in progress, and the stockbroker had arrived in time for the Gospel: "Come to me, all you who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest." Rest! Tears sprang up in the troubled man's eyes. Wouldn't it be astonishing, wonderful, incredible, to find rest somewhere? To find it, so simply and unreservedly, in the embrace of Jesus?

The small boy smiled at him again from the forward pew. The man took it as a sign from God. He wept, rocking and softly repeating those saving words: "Come to me, come to me."

This story is true. The stockbroker later became a priest and is now preaching the same Gospel he once heard so clearly. But it's a true story in more ways than one. These words from Jesus are immensely powerful, and we cannot discount how important they could be to someone, or many someones. Maybe even us!

So then what about us? Can we share in this sweet intimacy, knowing in our very flesh and blood the love of the Father and the Son? Jesus cultivates our desire for this. He hints that we can share in this intimacy. The Son can reveal to us the Father. If He wishes. And He DOES wish it!

This Independence Day weekend, we reflect on where we have been, where we are, and where we are going. Although our original foundation on Christian principles has not kept our nation from the scourges of slavery, nativism and civil war, thanks be to God, U.S. citizens -- through much effort -- overcame them. Today, we find ourselves facing different national challenges, but no less destructive: the COVID-19 pandemic, a fractured economy, a divided nation, segregated races. We pray and sing, "God bless America," and one church marquee sign controversially says, "God will not bless America when we legalize sin."

But, as always, God provides his grace in any age: Thanks to technological advances and the proliferation of pro-life apostolates, secular and religious, the human dignity of a person from conception to natural death is the force behind so many organizations and apostolates. The majority of U.S. citizens now consider abortion morally wrong, and in some states this conviction has helped usher in bold new laws to protect unborn children and their mothers. There are voices in all levels of politics and the Church who are working for authentic immigration reform while protecting national sovereignty. In spite of violent protests and brutality, legislators are working to combat the racism that still pervades our country. Voices of reason, clarity and charity can rise above the shrill and serve as vehicles for constructive debate.

Let us pray that this nation will return to the foundation of our country: One nation, under God. And to put into practice the words, "In God We Trust."

I found three prayers appropriate for this holiday weekend. One is for us, one is for us individually, and one is for our country. And so, we pray:

Lord Jesus, we do wish to know the Father. How often in our sorrow have we longed to see the countenance of God? How much we have desired to taste God's own communion of love. And now, Jesus, You invite us into this communion. You tell us, dear Jesus, to rest in You.

So many of us understand the burdens of the human condition. We know heartbreak, death, suffering, the brevity of our days. We distract ourselves, work as hard as we can, to forget who we are. And Whose we are.

You want us to rest in You. We are to take up Your easy yoke and plow the fields of our heart with Your merciful love.

It is harder to rest in You, dear Lord, than you might think.

Your yoke may be easy, Your burden may be light.

But our burden has been heavy. It is the burden of sin and death. As St. Paul says, the burden of living according to the flesh, instead of according to the Spirit.

What joys and blessings You have revealed to us, Your little ones.

Make us Your little ones once again.

#### A PRAYER OF HOPE

Lord Jesus, I pray this day for strength, because there are times when things get tough and I feel like quitting. Lord Jesus, I ask this day for the comforting reassurance of Your love, because there are times when people fail me, and I am tempted to lose hope. Lord Jesus, I seek this day for Your light to guide my steps, because there are times when life is confusing and difficult, and I lose my way. Help me, O Lord, to pick up the pieces, wipe my tears, face the sun, and start over again, for all is possible when I place my faith and trust in You, my Saving God.

#### A PRAYER FOR THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

God our Father, Giver of life, we entrust the United States of America to Your loving care. You are the Rock on which this nation was founded. You alone are the true source of our cherished rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Reclaim this land for Your glory and dwell among Your people. Send Your Spirit to touch the hearts of our nation's leaders. Open their minds to the great worth of human life and the responsibilities that accompany human freedom. Remind Your people that true happiness is rooted in seeking and doing Your Holy Will. Through the intercession of Mary Immaculate, Patroness of our land, grant us the courage to reject the "culture of death" and to embrace and proclaim the Gospel of Life. We ask this through Christ Our Lord. God, truly bless America! AMEN!

[Readings: Isaiah 55:10-11; Psalm 65; Romans 8:18-23; Matt 13:1-23]

At a literal level, Jesus is talking about a sower. We know the parable.

If Jesus explains the parable so clearly, why do we need to keep hearing it?

Understanding the hidden nature of the parable is only the first stage in listening fruitfully to the word of God. The task ahead of each of us is a closer examination of ourselves. What kind of disciple are we?

Jesus teaches in parables because He wants us to look beyond the visible to that which is not visible. Are we not capable of misunderstanding the Word of God? Do we not confuse consolation in prayer for fidelity to Our Lord? Are we not also anxious, afraid to give up everything, to follow Christ unto the ends of the earth? Parables are about conversion. Do we want to be the kind of people who see beyond the visible to the invisible? Do we want to hear, understand, and bear fruit, or are we satisfied with what is on the surface?

St. Paul in the Letter to the Romans invites us to see creation in this way. There is a glory that awaits the created order. God will be all-in-all. But right now, creation is groaning. It is awaiting the fullness of redemption. We are awaiting the fullness of redemption. The groaning of creation is an invitation to deeper conversion, to a commitment to the Gospel. Life isn't going to come easy to us. Life ISN'T easy for us. But when God's Word becomes effective in our lives, it is worth the pain and suffering.

Dear friends, over the last months, we have seen this groaning. Men and women dying in hospitals, racism, violence on city streets, a politics defined by demonization. Creation is groaning, and it is hard to believe that this world, this history, this age may be transformed through the word of God.

But look harder, pierce beyond the visible to the invisible. See the glory that God intends even now for all those who bear fruit in Christ.

Listen to Isaiah in today's First Reading: "My Word shall not return to Me void, but shall do My will, achieving the end for which I sent It." God's Word IS effective. In creation, we read, "Then God said, 'Let there be... And so it was.'" "And the Word became flesh and found His dwelling place among us."

When God speaks, all creation obeys.

Today's Gospel parable reminds us that much of life does not turn out all right. Much of what we do, in fact, may look like failure. But God makes fruitful and abundant the hope and the grace that His sons and daughters are willing and able to accept. We wonder: will you and I ever make any real progress?

Perhaps we get down on ourselves because we have elements of all four kinds of soil within us: hard ground, rocky ground, thorny ground and fertile ground. We are not simply black and white. We are shades of gray and black and brown dirt. Throw in a few shades of red and orange clay, too.

Jesus never denied the power of evil or the reality of failure in life, or our own personal failures. Jesus encourages us to have confident hope in spite of it. The parables of Jesus are meant to be understood and to provide knowledge. Jesus appeals to His audience's experience and know-how. His parables are based on His observation of nature and of human activities. But above all, the parables of Jesus invite us to discover the Kingdom of God ALREADY here, through the very best of human experience: today, it's the generosity and patience of the sower. They challenge us to careful listening and to a generous response. God gives us the seeds to plant and to nurture.

We are all sowers of seed, seed of our own choosing and wants and dreams. Christ calls us as His disciples, to be sowers of the things and values of God in order that we -- or others after us -- may reap the harvest of God's final reign. God is not through with us until we have done His Word. Let us go out like the sower, preparing this world for a rich harvest of faith, hope and love. Let us look inward, at ourselves, and clear away the dusty soil of infidelity and water the ground with the obedience of love. Let us learn to see the world as a parable of divine mercy.

AMEN!

[Readings: Wisdom 12:13, 16-19; Psalm 86; Romans 8:26-27; Matt 13:24-43]

Last week we talked about planting seeds. This week we're talking about pulling weeds. The two go together. Every gardener knows that planting seeds is the easy part of having a successful garden. It is much more time consuming to weed that same garden. And it's hard work. As someone has said: "When weeding, the best way to make sure you are removing a weed and not a valuable plant is to pull on it. If it comes out of the ground easily, it is a valuable plant."

Some of you remember Erma Bombeck, America's Catholic homemaker who wrote: I don't do windows because I love birds and don't want one to run into a clean window and get hurt. I don't disturb cobwebs because I want every creature to have a home of their own. I don't Spring Clean because I love all the seasons and don't want the others to get jealous. I don't iron because I choose to believe them when they say "Permanent Press." And finally: I don't pull weeds in the garden because... I don't want to get in God's way!

God, as we hear in today's First Reading from the Book of Wisdom, is a lenient and patient teacher Who allows time for repentance to take root and to bring about growth in grace. Always merciful and gracious, always slow to anger and abounding in kindness, always good and forgiving, God listens and waits. God responds, lavishing grace and fostering growth on those who groan for it.

St. Paul tells us in our Second Reading that we don't know how to pray as we ought to. He speaks again about "groaning." First, in reference to creation, and then to believers. And here in reference to the Holy Spirit.

Paul says that you and I do not know how to pray correctly. I think of Pope St. John Paul the Great, who when he would be in the midst of hundreds and thousands of people, would bow his head, close his eyes and instantly be transported to the very presence of God. It was said that those standing near him actually could hear him groan, as St. Paul describes.

Other times, it is shock, anger, loss, helplessness or guilt that prevents us from praying properly. We don't know what to say; we don't know how to begin our prayer. Sometimes the silence and the tears are prayer enough.

St. Paul uses a rare word here, *entynkano*, which means to "intercede" or to "plead." It also means "to share responsibility." St. Paul refers to the Holy Spirit in court-room terminology. The Holy Spirit will plead on our behalf, like a defense attorney. The Spirit will later be called by Jesus the *Advocate*, the One who speaks on our behalf. The Holy Spirit shares the task with us.

For Matthew, faith is never stagnant. If there's faith, there's growth: good seed planted in a field, a tiny mustard seed growing into a mighty bush, yeast making the dough rise and turning wheat into wholesome bread. If I'm alive in God, there should be plenty of signs of growth in my life.

Where in your life do you see signs of life growth flowing from your faith?  
How do you handle the "weeds" in your own life? Do you let their presence choke the growth of the good wheat?

Once upon a time, a young couple moved into their first home in early spring, and soon discovered that the woman who owned the house before them had been a wonderful gardener. Each new day of spring seemed to reveal another flower, plant, or shrub coming to life.

Luckily, the neighbors living on either side of the house were patient with them. They began to offer gentle advice and instruction. Olga leaned over the fence and said with a kind smile, "You know, that tall plant you keep watering every day? That one's a weed. And not only that, but you are yanking plants."

We all need spiritual neighbors who have learned a thing or two about the weeds and the wheat and how they crop up in our lives. Listen to the people who know. Cultivate sources of wisdom in your life. Because life isn't just a bed of roses!

Dear friends, there is a virus circulating not only in the world but also in the Church. And I am not speaking about COVID-19. This virus cultivates disunity, fracturing the communion that Christ has called us to. This virus is spread via Face Book, blogs and Twitter feeds, infecting Catholics the world over.

There have always been arguments in the Church. Disagreement is not disunity. Fruitful disagreement is part of a healthy Church life. That's why we have had Councils in our history. But what we are experiencing in the present is

not fruitful argumentation. It is Catholics who believe themselves capable of assuming the role of God in judging the human heart. Jesus warns us that this judgement is not our responsibility. We are not the ones to separate the wheat and the weeds.

Sure, we can see the difference between the two. But we lack the ability to pull out the weeds without destroying the wheat. It is God alone at the end of time who will separate the wheat and the weeds. The weeds will be thrown into the fires to be destroyed. But it is not the harvesters, the workers in the field, who are charged with this mission. It is God.

The holy man or woman can transform a Church. Just a bit of leaven and conversion is possible.

Ignatius Loyola, the soldier becomes Ignatius, the founder of the Jesuits.

Oscar Romero, the staunch bishop becomes Oscar Romero, the martyr.

Dorothy Day, the atheist becomes Dorothy Day, the Servant of God.

The Church is on pilgrimage, moving toward purity, toward total communion with a merciful God. Weeds can become wheat. Wheat can become weeds. God has allowed the Church to exist in history, in time and space, for the sake of conversion. The only person's holiness I can judge is my own. I can discern my own infidelity, my own apathy, the weeds that choke the love in my heart. This, I can and should change. Let us pray that all the weeds -- starting with myself -- may become wheat. And may the leaven of divine love infuse the whole batch of us. Together. AMEN!

[Readings: 1 Kgs. 3:5, 7-12; Psalm 119; Romans 8:28-30; Matt 13:44-52]

In this Sunday's Gospel reading, Jesus tells us that the Kingdom of God is like a buried treasure, a pearl purchased at all cost, and a net from which the bad catch of fish will be tossed away and the good catch will be valued. In other words, our Christian lives are a huge cache of valuables.

If our treasure chest has any worthless trash, the garbage needs to be tossed away to make room for more valuables. Some of our treasures have only temporary, earthly value, and ultimately they will be worthless unless they're used for the Kingdom of God. When I moved from New Baltimore to Warren six years ago, I donated or got rid of 1/3 of everything I had accumulated over the years. Now, six years later, in retrospect, I should have left behind 3/4 of my "treasures!" I could easily get by with 1/4 of what I have now!

The Reading from Romans tells us that all things work together for the good of those who love God. As we purge our lives of false pearls and dead fish, we become more like our Lord. We become more useful to the Kingdom of God.

Even the bad things that happen to us, under the creative hand of our all-powerful, mercifully loving God, get put to good use as polishing cloths that brighten our pearls and bring out from us a better shine.

In the First Reading, Solomon could have asked God for great wealth and he would have received it, but he asked for an understanding heart so that he'd have wisdom to rule the nation well. Even though he ruled imperfectly, his reputation as the wisest king on earth spread throughout the known world and he accumulated great wealth.

This is meant to teach us that when we seek first the treasures of God's Kingdom, then we can safely use the treasures of the earth, because God's wisdom guides us in using them for the benefit of his kingdom.

The more we love Christ and follow His ways, the easier it is to identify what's really valuable, separate out the junk that does not belong to God, and use everything else for his purposes. What treasures are buried within you? What pearls of wisdom have you gained, and what did it cost you to learn these? Choose one treasure, gift, or pearl that God has given to you -- something that reveals the Kingdom of God. How did you discover it or gain it? What effect does it have on others?

The Kingdom of Heaven is God's reign, the kingdom of peace and justice, of love and hope that transcends anything that the human being could establish. To inherit this Kingdom means leaving behind our own will, our own desire to conquer, to control and to possess power.

It is up to us to make Solomon's prayer our own. We must long for the wisdom to know the truth, to do that which is true, and to love the truth.

Everything else must be left behind. Everything. Our grudges, our prejudices, our agendas, some of our wealth, some of our ideas. Everything that keeps us from enjoying the beauty of the Kingdom. Jesus invites us to go on a quest for buried treasure in pursuit of a Kingdom hidden from our eyes. We'll find it buried under the surface of things, lost in the marketplace, waiting to be found at the bottom of the sea of human experience. It will take some doing to discover this Kingdom and will cost everything in our possession to acquire it.

If God made the same offer to you that He makes to Solomon, to "ask for something, anything, and it will be given to you," what would it be? What matters so much to us that we would be willing to pay a great price for it? Would wisdom and understanding make the list? Every morning when I pray, after my Prayer of Abandonment, praying for an understanding heart and for wisdom in decisions great and small are top on my list. For what in your own life have you paid a great price?

We need to pray for wisdom and understanding as we begin the process of discussion and discernment in our Archdiocese of Detroit called, "Families of Parishes." We pray that any confusion or anxiety will be replaced with certainty and courage. We are just beginning to take baby steps in this journey into the unknown. We hope and pray that the results will lead us closer to the Kingdom.

By virtue of our Baptism, we have been given the gift of the Kingdom of God in our faith. Let us journey in faith together towards that Kingdom. Even if that faith may not be perfect, and even if it is a little nicked or scratched, it is still valuable beyond measure. The appraiser is Jesus. And He is telling us that our faith is a priceless gift. That should bring us all great joy and comfort in these times of unrest. AMEN!