

[Readings: Is. 57:15-19; Ps. 85; Phil. 4:6-9; John 14:23-29]

Patriotism is considered a virtue in the Christian and the Catholic tradition. But it is a virtue that is hard to get "just right." The goal is to find that elusive balance between the exclusive love of one's country and the inclusive, global perspective of the Gospel. The prophet Amos ran into that when God told him to preach at the royal sanctuary. Prophecy and unthinking patriotism often conflict.

What might make America cease to "be good?" In reflecting on the downfall of another great country, an empire, in fact, Edward Gibbon wrote this about the Roman Empire. See if any of it sounds familiar:

"There were five causes for the fall of the Great Roman Empire:

- 1) The rapid increase of divorce, the undermining of the dignity and sanctity of the home, which is the basis of human society;
- 2) Higher and higher taxes and the spending of the public monies for free bread and circuses for the populace;
- 3) The mad craze for pleasure, sports becoming more exciting and brutal;
- 4) The building up of armies to fight external enemies when the deadliest enemy -- the decadence of the people -- is within;
- 5) The decay of religion -- faith fading into mere form, losing touch with life and becoming impotent to guide it.

So how can we continue to be "good?" Put religion and spirituality back on top. The insane decision of a California court in declaring the Pledge of Allegiance "unconstitutional" because it contains the words, "under God," is a prime example of distorted thinking.

"Separation of Church and State" does NOT mean taking religion and spirituality out of our government. When that happens, our country loses its soul.

Bring back respect and manners. No one "owes us" anything, so let's stop acting like it. And didn't someone once sum up the Law and the Prophets by saying, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you?" "Whoever loves me will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our dwelling with him."

Bring back the dignity of the home, however that is shaped: original or blended, single-parent or both parents, senior citizens and singles. The way we treat one another in society begins with how we treat one another at home.

Second, put our money where our faith-mouth is. If God is first in our lives, that should be reflected in how we use our money. Take a look at the entries in your checkbook, and that will tell you who or what you are living for. And what you love.

Third, bring sanity back to sports, especially on the children's level. Play sports for fun, not just to win. And remember: it's only a game!

Check your own life and your own lifestyle to see if you are part of the decadence or part of the virtue of American society. Do we want or own big, bigger and biggest? Do we want more, more, more? Are decisions made by power over others, back room politics or beneficial loyalties?

Become a political activist. Cast ballots. Join political parties. Contact legislators. Bring the social and moral message of the Gospel and of our Catholic faith tradition to the public debate. You can do that. We who are official Church leaders cannot go where you can go and make a difference.

What are the policy issues of concern to the Church? Religious freedom. Human life. Children and families. Health care. Education. Economic Justice and policies that are shaped by moral principles.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, give time and talent to the Lord. Think of creative ways to pray, to meditate and to show thanks to God for our country, for our freedom, for our very lives and livelihood.

The marriage of Church and State is wrong; but a citizenship faithful to the Gospel is not. Pope Benedict said in this very country: "Any tendency to treat religion as a private matter must be resisted. Only when their faith permeates every aspect of their lives do Christians become truly open to the transforming power of the Gospel." This is still the greatest country in the world. We still can be a healthy and active, positive part of it! God bless America! AMEN!