

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

The “teaser” question I asked at the end of each of the three Masses this past weekend was this: “What is the difference between being patriotic and being a nationalist?” The simple, short answer is this: the patriot says, “For my God and my country.” God is first in the life of a citizen of any nation. Because St. Paul reminds us that all of us are called to become and to identify ourselves as having “our citizenship is in Heaven.”

The nationalist defends and protects his or her own country in all situations. Instead of saying, “For my God and my country,” the nationalist says, “My country, right or wrong.” I have seen this phrase on a bumper sticker, usually on the back bumper of redneck trucks! The patriot can never say this.

Any country allegiance is secondary. I am reminded of the final words spoken by St. Thomas Moore before he was executed as a martyr for the faith.

St. Thomas Moore was the close friend of King Henry VIII in England. King Henry made Moore the Chancellor of England, which was the second in command office in England. King Henry was refused an annulment by Rome from his first marriage, and in retaliation, King Henry proclaimed himself the head of the Church of England and demanded all in authority in the government and in the Church sign an Oath of Allegiance. Sir Thomas Moore refused, and it would cost him his life. As he knelt before his executioner to be beheaded, his last words were these: “I die as the King’s servant, but God’s first.”

That is what each patriotic American Catholic says. I am a citizen of the United States of America, but I am called to be a citizen of Heaven.”

Nationalism is more exclusive, more divisive and not the kind of citizenship we are called to embrace. Patriotism means to pay your taxes, to follow legitimate laws, to vote in our elections and to defend our country in the military. Patriotism also means to speak truth to power when necessary, and to uphold the values and principles of our faith when they are threatened or attacked.

As Pope St. John Paul II noted in his book “Memory and Identity”:
“Patriotism is a love for everything to do with our native land: its history, its traditions, its language, and its natural features. It is a love which extends also to the works of our compatriots and the fruits of their genius.”

Patriotism is bound up with the reality of a particular people in a particular place. It’s a reality that young children, whose horizons are limited, come by naturally (and we know what the Lord said about learning to be like young children). We come to know the wider world, and the people in it, by analogy to the little world in which we live our daily lives. It’s within that daily life that patriotism blossoms. And the life of our community matters more than the community we call the nation, because a nation has life only to the extent that the communities that compose it thrive. And so we seek, and spend our lives as St. Paul reminds us, pursuing and sharing “whatever is lovable, honorable, pure, true and just, having no anxiety.”

As John Paul II knew, there are lessons to be drawn for the life of the Church from our experience of patriotism (and warnings to be drawn from our experience of nationalism).

Please God, bless us to be good patriots, and to dedicate our lives to our God and to our Country. As you promised Isaiah, revive us, heal and lead us. As we sang in the Responsorial Psalm, give peace to your people, that kind of peace that Your Son Jesus Christ speaks of in today’s Gospel. That which will bring us lasting joy, contentment and fulfillment. Help us to keep your words and commandments. Send your advocate to teach, remind and help us in our journey of faith. And at our journey’s end, open up the gates of Heaven to welcome us into your loving and forgiving arms. AMEN!

[Some parts are taken from an article written by Scott P. Richert, publisher for Our Sunday Visitor, July 4, 2021.]