

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

Chippie the parakeet never saw it coming. One second he was peacefully perched in his cage. The next he was sucked in, washed up, and blown over.

The problems began when Chippie's owner decided to clean Chippie's cage with a vacuum cleaner. She removed the attachment from the end of the hose and stuck it in the cage. The phone rang, and she turned to pick it up. She'd barely said "hello" when "ssssopp!" Chippie got sucked in.

The bird's owner gasped, put down the phone, turned off the vacuum cleaner, and opened the bag. There was Chippie - still alive, but stunned.

Since the bird was covered with dust, hair and all the stuff you find in a dust bag, she grabbed him and raced to the bathroom, turned on the tap, and held Chippie under the running water. Then, realizing that Chippie was soaked and shivering, she did what any compassionate bird owner would do . . . she reached for the hair dryer and blasted the pet with hot air.

Poor Chippie never knew what hit him.

A few days after the trauma, a friend who had heard about Chippie's troubles contacted his owner to see how the bird was recovering. "Well," she replied, "Chippie doesn't sing much anymore -- he just sits and stares."

Who can blame him? Sucked in, washed up, and blown over . . . That's enough to steal the song from the stoutest heart.

Things happen in our lives that come along unexpectedly and we end up feeling a bit like Chippie -- sucked in, washed up, and blown over -- the song stolen from the stoutest of hearts.

That's how we feel some days about our beloved country -- the United States of America. Over the centuries of our history, it seems like we, as a nation, have been "sucked in, washed up, and blown over." The song of freedom, the song of justice, the song of peace has been silenced.

Although Independence Day is not a religious holiday, there is a definite religious significance to the occasion. We proudly commemorate the courage of our founding fathers and mothers of our country which allowed them to be faithful

to the inspiration they received from God, and to establish a new and free nation. Our nation's ancestors were people of faith and religion. They sincerely believed that the source of our human dignity and our freedom came from God, the Creator of us all. They had an optimistic energy in the American people and in their new form of government.

It is very disappointing to see the rampant lack of faith resulting in blatantly immoral choices and lifestyles and actions which is causing our country to rot from the inside out. For our nation's founders, faith in God went well beyond a gentle hope that America would receive heavenly blessings. Their Judeo-Christian-based writings show that our early leaders held a stronger belief: God's divine will was manifested in history, and a nation that honestly sought to conform itself to the dictates of the Almighty would enjoy God's blessings.

In times of distress and struggle, they prayed for forgiveness and deliverance. They turned to God in good times and in bad. As the infant nation began, John Adams, who would become the second President of the United States, wrote on July 3, 1776 about the next day: "I believe that this day will be celebrated as the Day of Deliverance by solemn acts of devotion to God Almighty. It ought to be celebrated with shows, games, sports, guns, bells, bonfires and illuminations from one end of this continent to the other."

The Catholic Church in the United States established Religious Freedom Week, which begins every year on June 22, the feast of two English martyrs who fought religious persecution -- Sts. John Fisher and St. Thomas More -- and ends June 29, the feast of two apostles martyred in Rome -- Sts. Peter and Paul.

"Serving Others in God's Love" was the theme of this year's Religious Freedom Week. U.S. Catholics were encouraged to pray and take action act in support of religious liberty at home and abroad.

Archbishop Joseph E. Kurtz of Louisville, Kentucky, the chairman of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Committee for Religious Liberty, said, "Religious freedom allows the space for people of faith to serve others in God's love in ministries like education, adoption and foster care, health care, and migration and refugee services. We encourage people of faith to reflect on the

importance of religious freedom so that we might have the space to carry out our mission of service and mercy." He also invited "everyone to pray for our brothers and sisters who face intense persecution in other parts of the world."

A USCCB news release on the observance quotes Pope Francis from his 2015 visit to the United States. In remarks to President Barack Obama Sept. 23, 2015, the pontiff said that religious freedom "remains one of America's most precious possessions." Pope Francis said, "And, as my brothers, the United States bishops, have reminded us, all are called to be vigilant, precisely as good citizens, to preserve and defend that freedom from everything that would threaten or compromise it."

Separation of Church and State does NOT mean elimination of ethics and morality from our government.

Another effort which Catholics in the United States are invited to observe is the Fortnight for Freedom. The Fortnight for Freedom is a campaign initiated by the Roman Catholic bishops of the United States in 2012. Events over the course of fourteen days from June 21 to July 4 each year, call upon Catholics to participate in a pledge to religious liberty and an appeal for the inclusion of a "conscience clause" in all federal, state and local executive orders, legislation and court decisions for religious institutions and religious faithful to practice according to the moral tenets of one's religious faith. Through these and other prayers and practices, may the songs of freedom, justice and peace ring once again through our blessed land! God bless America! AMEN!