

*In the beauty of the lilies Christ was born across the sea,
With a glory in his bosom that transfigures you and me.
As he died to make men holy, let us live to make men free,
While God is marching on. . . .* **Julia Ward Howe, 1862**

4 July 2020

My Dear Friends in Christ,

Even during already momentous times, history truly was made this past Tuesday, June 30. On that day, the governor of the State of Mississippi, following a favorable vote by the legislature, ordered the flag of Mississippi taken down from the capital building and all other state facilities, to be replaced by another flag, the design of which will be determined by voter referendum.

Mississippi's flag was the last flag incorporating the Confederate battle emblem to be removed from a Southern capital. The current flag was adopted in 1894, nearly thirty years after the Civil War, and just four years after Mississippi revised its constitution to include Jim Crow (or Black) laws mandating segregated schools and poll taxes and literary tests as prerequisites for voting. Following Mississippi's lead, other states of the former Confederacy soon adopted measures designed to segregate and disenfranchise their black citizens.

At about the same time and generally corresponding with the codifying by states of similar Black laws statues and commemorative monuments began to appear throughout the South, erected to honor Confederate leaders such as Robert E. Lee, Stonewall Jackson, and Jefferson Davis. (The mammoth equestrian statue of Lee, unveiled to great celebration on Memorial Day in 1890, still stands on Monument Avenue in downtown Richmond, pending the results of a lawsuit filed regarding its removal.)

So, a generation after the end of Reconstruction period that saw recently freed African-Americans assume leadership roles as governors and legislators (and some as members of Congress) a system of subjugation and discrimination based on race was already firmly in place. The statues and other emblems created to honor the Confederate memory thus served a dual purpose: They instilled in white citizens a pride in their racial heritage and supremacy condition they had enjoyed during slavery and now had sufficiently restored and they daily reminded black Southerners of their dramatically reduced, inferior status.

Further emerging from this period was a revised white Southern history of the Civil War itself (or as it was more commonly called the "War between the States" or the "War of Northern Aggression"). According to this narrative, the conflict was not over black chattel slavery so much as it was over states' rights (although principally this meant the right to keep and own slaves!). Moreover, this history claimed that the South had lost the war not due to lack of courage or valor or purity of virtue, and not because its cause wasn't just and God-ordained, but as a result of the merciless industrial might inflicted on it by the North. In fact, the narrative went, the Confederacy had not 'lost' at all, but had only been compelled to surrender or face annihilation. The South had been bowed, not beaten.

Given this view, measures to reassert white supremacy in the decades following the war could be seen as part of the restoration both of sectional pride and an ideal social order. It was this mythic narrative known as The Lost Cause, and promulgated in numerous published stories, memoirs, and textbooks that over time became accepted as the official version of the war and its aftermath by most white Americans, both in the north and the south. (The legendary film *Gone with the Wind*, first released in 1939, is perhaps the most familiar example of Lost Cause

romanticism, its protagonist Scarlett O'Hara serving finally as a symbol of Southern resilience and defiance in the face of Yankee cruelty and aggression. It remains one of the most popular Hollywood movies ever made.)

I relate (all) this historical background only to offer what I hope is important context for our current national discussion over Confederate statuary, names and emblems specifically, and over deeply hurtful and divisive symbolism in general. To this I must confess my own ignorance and naïveté. As a white American I might have thought a Civil War general on a pedestal (Union or Confederate) to be merely a harmless piece of nostalgia, a symbol of a bygone and otherwise forgotten era (I'm certain that's how I did feel growing up). I might not have given it a second thought.

But think of a Black child growing up and having to pass on his or her way to school or the store or the church an image of someone who had fought to keep his or her family's ancestors enslaved. Think of how confused and dispirited that same child would be to constantly see displayed (or flying proudly overhead!) a flag that flew over armies formed to keep other human beings in chains. What message about personal integrity and self-esteem would such images convey, especially knowing that these symbols had been placed there in large part to remind that Black child of his or her *place*?

In his speech "I Have a Dream," Martin Luther King envisioned a day 'when the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slaveowners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood.' That sublime vision of healing and Godly love is still the hope of countless people of good faith across our nation, black and white, north and south. And yet Dr. King knew, as we should know, that the dream cannot begin to be realized if we insist on holding on to symbols and names and memories that historically have betrayed and, by their public prominence even today, continue to betray the message and spirit of that dream.

So, yes, the statues should come down, and the flags lowered, and the names of military bases changed so as to honor those who fought to defend this unfinished, imperfect union of ours, not those who fought to end it. And not those who fought to maintain a system of race-based servitude repugnant to God and destructive to the human soul.

At the same time, however, let us try to imagine new symbols, new faces and figures (from the past and present), new historical emblems that will more genuinely express our ideals and desires as a nation and as people of faith; that will more fully honor the dream for which Martin Luther King and all the prophets and martyrs and saints before him and since have lived and worked and died. There are challenges that come with such an imagining, along with controversy and contention. But there is also joy, joy in the prospect of new life, new resolve, joy in a new and braver spirit emerging out of the old.

On this eve of our nation's birthday, in these at once troubling and promising times and in the hour, it may be, of our country's re-founding? Let us take hold of that imagination and that spirit and know both to be good gifts from a generous God who sheds grace on all lands that seek to do God's will. And so, as one of our prayers urges, may we not rest until all the people of this land share the benefits of true freedom and gladly accept its disciplines. This we ask in the Name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

Many Blessings,
Fr. Gordon +