

## 14<sup>th</sup> SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME – C (July 3, 2022)

I wish all of you a very happy Fourth-of-July weekend as we celebrate our nation's 246<sup>th</sup> birthday on Monday and as we see the 'red, white and blue' to remind us of our heritage and history. Back in the late 1800's, Pope Leo XIII spoke well of the virtue of genuine patriotism: 'the natural law enjoins us to love devotedly and to defend the country in which we had birth, and in which we were brought up.' That makes so much sense. It doesn't mean, of course, that we get all puffed up and start boasting as if we were better than everyone else and that everyone else must bow down to us. St. Paul had some strong words about boasting in his letter to the Galatians (today's second reading): "May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ". He had to remind them that their salvation comes through the crucified Christ and no one or nothing else...and certainly not their own efforts.

So how do we express our love for our homeland without sliding down into that boastful attitude that Paul warned against? For one thing, we need to acknowledge the fact that ours really is a rather remarkable nation, and that goes back to its very founding. Our Declaration of Independence reminds us of the basic truth that life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness are among the 'unalienable rights' given to us not by king or president, Congress or judges—but by our Creator. Now, it's perfectly obvious that we as a nation have not always been true to those principles. We dare not forget the sin of slavery that nearly tore this country apart in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. And in our own day we still legally sanction death under the banner of 'freedom of choice' for hundreds of thousands every year of the most helpless and innocent among us: the unborn. The recent Dobbs decision, of course, is a major game-changer regarding abortion, but it did nothing to restrict it on a national basis—it simply allowed individual states to make their own decisions on this most contentious issue. And there is no doubt at all that many states will continue to allow it even to the very moment of birth.

No—we Americans have no room to boast about ourselves as 'better' than anyone else. We are a flawed and sinful nation because we are all flawed and sinful individuals. Original sin and personal sin know no national boundaries; this sad reality afflicts the entire human race and throughout all human history. We are all in this same boat; that's precisely why God sent his Son into this world to make it possible for everyone without exception to share eternal life and joy in heaven. Again—that's why St. Paul insists that our only reason for boasting is Jesus alone and his saving death on the cross.

Having said all that, however, we must also acknowledge that God has blessed this land of ours in some really amazing ways. Yes, we have our faults and sins as a nation. But to hear some of the loudest voices in our nation today, you would think we are hopelessly corrupt and irredeemably evil and unjust, and that there is nothing left to do but tear everything down and start all over again. I refuse to go there in any way, and for many reasons. One of those reasons is as clear as the proverbial nose on your face. If we really were such a hopeless cause as a nation, then why in the world are so many people from all over the world still doing everything they can to come to this country? And often they do so at great risk to themselves and their families; we are aware of the tragedy of those 53 individuals who died in that overheated semi in Texas this past week. These folks are willing to take such risks for many reasons—a desire to escape tyranny and persecution, the desire to provide for their families in ways they can't do in

their homeland, the desire to enjoy the blessings of liberty and freedom in this country that we perhaps ungratefully take for granted. Yes, we can and do misuse and abuse the freedoms that God has given us...but those freedoms remain a special blessing for us and continue to be a beacon of hope throughout the rest of the world.

So: do we boast: “we’re number one; America should rule the world because we are always the best and always right”? No—of course not. Again, St. Paul is right: our boast is not in ourselves, but rather in God—the God of Jesus Christ whose death on the cross redeemed the entire human race. Our nation is at its best when it remembers and acts in accord with those truths of God’s love and providence that are the bases on which our nation was founded. But we can and should be grateful to God for the blessing of living in this beautiful, bountiful land. We love this land, this country because it’s our home—what Pope Leo XIII said about authentic patriotism is true for us as it is true for those in all other nations. It’s like the love we have for our family—not because they are perfect (they are not!), but because they are our family. It’s like the loyalty I have for Iowa State—not because they are nation’s best in football and basketball (believe me, I know they are not!), but because that is where I went to college.

We do love our land and we should love our land—and we do so mainly because of our gratitude to God who filled this land with such beauty and so many blessings. Because of that love, we need to pray for our land as well. That’s why our national hymns are so appropriate. In “America the Beautiful”, for example, we ask God to ‘shed his grace’ on our nation, to ‘crown [its] good with brotherhood’, and to ‘mend [its] every flaw’. In other words, that song is a beautiful prayer—a prayer of thanksgiving, and also a prayer of petition, asking God to help us turn away from boasting and self-centeredness and instead to help us live out more faithfully the ideals and the truths on which our nation was founded. Who could argue with that??