

## *Faith and Patriotism*

Just last week I attended a Mass said by a Jesuit friend outside Nashville, TN. It was at a Catholic camp and that week they had about 200 girls there, age 6-16. To tell you the truth, I wasn't expecting too much, but what the heck, I had to fulfill my Sunday obligation. One hour of bad liturgy out of my life isn't going to kill me. Boy, was I wrong. The girls were terrific. They were well behaved. They listened to my friend's (very good) homily about secrets with admirable attention. They sang beautifully. If you had told me that I'd like a Praise and Worship song like "We are One Body" I'd have responded that you were off your rocker – but they sang it beautifully – and in harmony. Yes, they were Catholics. All in all it was a wonderful experience of faith and Catholic worship. But I wasn't ready for what came immediately after. While my Jesuit friend was cleaning up and taking off his vestments I waited outside. The girls were all gathered and of course 200 young girls make a decent amount of noise. All of a sudden a total hush fell upon the camp. Honestly, you could have heard a pin drop. I thought maybe they were saying grace before meals, but then I realized that they all had their eyes on the flagpole where the flag was being lowered. They remained stock-still and silent while the flag was folded and then carried solemnly out of the assembly. They had showed as much reverence for our national flag as I had observed at the Eucharist.

Food for thought. In our society faith and patriotism seem to go together so easily, so naturally. But do they really? Listen to what we just heard in the Gospel: *"Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever does not take up his or her cross and follow after me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it."*

Whoa, Jesus, I want to say – time to chill out. Do you really want me to put you ahead of the family? My job? My friends? How about my country? And I think if we dare to ask those questions honestly, we'll have to hear Jesus say: "Yup, you got it."

And if that weren't enough we have St. Paul to top it off: *"Are you not aware that we who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were indeed buried with him through baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too*

*might live in newness of life.*” The challenge is pretty stark, but you have to admit that the promise is pretty good – newness of life.

I guess by now it should be pretty clear that I’m asking these questions because we’re celebrating a July 4<sup>th</sup> weekend. Maybe you don’t think that our country is going through a crazy period, but I certainly do. No matter where you stand politically, if you don’t think everything’s up in the air, you’re not paying attention. In light of all this upset and craziness I think we need to ask ourselves some hard questions about how our Christian faith and our patriotism fit together. I saw a news report about a rally of one of those Alt-Right groups and someone had a sign that said: “You won’t take our country away from us.” The “us” I’m pretty sure refers to white people. I think I’d have to respond: “Sorry, that horse has left the stable.” This is not a white country. One of the students I got to know over the past few weeks, an Episcopal priest, told me he thought that all of this commotion was basically about grief and how we can’t face it: grief at the loss of a certain kind of America. That observation rings true to me.

At the same time, I think we all want to be loyal Americans and good patriots. But how? If I really listen to the gospel and to St. Paul I have to ask myself questions like: is it patriotic not to care about millions of people going without health care? Is it patriotic to want to keep so many immigrants out of the country? Is it really patriotism to think that America should be first and everyone else can go to hell? Is it patriotic to put my comforts and even jobs over the environment and the long-term health of the planet? Now there are political solutions to all of these questions, I know – and decent, Christian patriotic people can differ honestly as to how to respond to the issues I just listed. The pulpit is not a place for partisan politics. But I do think that a true Christian needs to ask those difficult questions. And I don’t think that it’s genuine patriotism to refrain from asking them either.

Let’s face it. The gospel of Jesus Christ is very, very demanding and what we sometimes think is Christian patriotism or loyalty can be blind to those demands. At the end of the day I believe that taking up the radical discipleship that Jesus invites us to will actually lead us to greater love of family and friends, to a deeper and more authentic love of our country – and of the whole of this planet that God has given us. True discipleship, I believe, will lead us to a genuine appreciation of the “life, liberty, and

happiness” enshrined by the founders of our nation in the Declaration of Independence.

And I hope you believe that too.

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