

COMMENTARY

American Idolatry

It cannot be denied, but by those who would dispute against the sun, that with America, and in America, a new era commences in human affairs.

Daniel Webster

Honor the Flag. America is freedom.

from a bumper sticker

Can a Catholic be a patriotic American? The very question seems absurd - no doubt the rantings of some nineteenth-century Know-Nothing or one of his contemporary ideological descendants, such as Jimmy Swaggart. But I am afraid that in their haste to assure the American public that the Know-Nothing charges against Catholics were preposterous, our forefathers in the Faith may have been guilty of a failure to examine sufficiently what patriotism in America is all about. Or, to go deeper still, what it exactly is we are called to be patriotic toward here in the United States. Or, if we were to put the matter in theological terms, is there any necessary relation between the heresy of Americanism and the common patriotic idea of America?

Before one gets too excited by my raising the question of a possible conflict between one's duties as a Catholic and one's patriotism,

let me state the thesis that I will attempt to prove, and then see what sort of evidence I can bring forward in support. My thesis is simply this: That though there is never any real conflict between one's duties to the Church of God and one's duties as a citizen or subject of some temporal state, we here in America are in a strange position. This is because what is almost universally held to be patriotism in the U.S. is not loyalty to a nation but loyalty to an ideology, incarnated in this nation, to be sure, but essentially and primarily an idea, an idea which is regarded as important for the whole human race. Moreover, the history of America is viewed not merely as the history of a country, one among many, but as a sacred history with universal significance for all men, again, because it is the history of the establishment of the regime that embodies that idea or ideology.

There is ample evidence for this quasi-official belief. One of my favorites, and undoubtedly the most striking, is a quotation attributed to the late Senator Hubert Humphrey. "America is not a piece of geography between two oceans and two borders. America is an idea. . . ." This statement captures perfectly the reigning notion of patriotism in America, but one can also find the same or similar ideas in the speeches of those considered eminent among us, from John Adams and Thomas Jefferson to James K. Polk to Woodrow

Wilson to Calvin Coolidge to George Bush.

Now according to each, America is something essentially new in human history, not simply another nation, or a rearrangement of previous systems, but something new introduced for the first time into mankind's annals. Second, that America is important because she is the bearer of liberty, and this liberty is actually meant for all, for America "invites all the nations of the earth to imitate our example." Third, that since America fundamentally is an incarnation of freedom, the principles of America are not peculiar or narrow or somehow have to do with only one particular people or nation. No, they are "the principles of a liberated mankind." Americanism is thus universal, or should be, for "America stands at the center of a widening circle of freedom," though some "less favored peoples" have perhaps not yet realized their birthright. In other words, to be fully a human being is to be an American!

Yet, paradoxically (so our ideology says), in carrying out our "obligation to bestow justice and liberty upon less favored peoples" we are not imposing something alien on them, as if (say) one attempted to impose German culture on the Poles or English on the Irish. For our principles and way of life are those of all "liberated mankind." We hold in trust, as it were, values and ideas which it was our good fortune to be the first to exemplify, but which it is also our good fortune to be able to extend around the earth.

Now, according to this doctrine of America, we hold in trust ideas and a way of life which are meant for all. The chief idea, as I have said, is that of freedom, freedom to have abortions and engage in homosexual conduct, to be sure, but also freedom to destroy culture and disrupt communities for the

sake of profit. I think it is extremely interesting that Michael Novak's foray against Liberation Theology was based on the thesis that in fact democratic capitalism is the true liberation theology. Indeed, he is right. Democratic capitalism destroys traditional cultures and communities and liberates man from the customs of his ancestors much more readily than does the Marxist state. In one sense, then, the U.S. standard is the New Order of the Ages, as the Great Seal of the United States says. It is in revolt against the entire fabric of our civilization and its customs and traditions. Perhaps, then, one translates *Novus Ordo Seclorum* better as the New Order of Secularism!

If this is so, however, it also has a curious result for those of us already enjoying or suffering the American way of life. It is this: since our nation stands for something universal, to be patriotic is basically to adhere to certain universal principles, primarily that of freedom. It is not loyalty to a nation or a people, but to certain universal ideas. These ideas are embodied in a regime, it is true, but that regime is important because with it the "new era" of freedom for mankind has begun. In other words, to love America, it is necessarily to love what it is presumed to stand for. It is thus impossible to be a patriotic American and to reject or question the regime of 1776 and 1787, or to fail to revere the sacred set of historical events that led to the founding of that regime, together with its savior, George Washington.

Now I regard this notion of America, namely that America is the embodiment of an idea, the idea of freedom, a kind of freedom and a way of life essentially new in human history, meant as a model for all men; I regard this, I say, as a kind of idolatry. It is the political and social expression of the Americanist heresy. It affirms that mere

political arrangements can essentially alter the human condition. It rejects the need for grace. It subordinates Christ's Church to the regime of 1776 and 1787, making Washington and the other Founding Fathers the savior, not Jesus Christ. And although the Great Seal of the United States proclaims officially, *Novus Ordo Seclorum*, the New Order of the Ages, only the one Church of God can claim that title, for only the Incarnation of Jesus Christ and the introduction of saving grace into human history have essentially changed anything. It is not America that produces the new man or the new way of life but Jesus Christ and His Church.

Our way of looking at the United States Constitution is another facet of this kind of patriotic loyalty to an ideology. Americans practically worship the Constitution. Yet the document itself is a workable but hardly sacred arrangement for governing, embodying few if any statements of ultimate value and not mentioning Almighty God at all. At one time it was perfectly compatible with human slavery and is now judged to allow the unborn to be freely slaughtered. Though this last is undoubtedly not correct, nevertheless the Constitution is largely a procedural document, and cannot be depended upon for upholding the fundamental moral principles that ought to characterize a political community.

In addition to appropriating for America honor that rightly belongs only to the Church, this reigning notion of patriotism in America is not the traditional Catholic conception of patriotism. Patriotism is loyalty to a nation, not to an idea, especially an erroneous and idolatrous one.

True patriotism, which is largely lacking in the United States, is love of one's country, the people and the land, based on af-

fection. Now affection is a kind of love among those who just happen to be together. It is the kind of love we have for children, parents and other relatives, one's neighbors, fellow townsmen, etc. The love of charity should extend to everyone; in friendship and romantic love we obviously choose based on our likings and tastes, but affection is the love we bear simply because someone is near to us and we have grown accustomed to him. With affection we love people because they are ours and we are comfortable with them. We do not necessarily claim anything special about them, simply that they are ours and their ways are familiar to us. But this love of one's own extends beyond family and neighborhood to one's region and nation, to the people and the entire way of life of the nation, and especially the land, the very soil. Not because it is beautiful or fertile, but because it is *this* land, *this* mountain. As Leo XIII wrote, "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 . . ." This is patriotism in the Catholic sense, the patriotism Chesterton speaks so much of, something that is a duty and for most of us a natural pleasure as well. But note that it has nothing to do with any political philosophy or type of government. It is directed to what is permanent in the nation, not to the ideology of any particular regime. Does a Frenchman have to accept their Revolution to love France? Or a Russian accept theirs? Yet here in America enthusiasm for the regime and what it stands for is equated with love of country. Patriotic oratory in America typically includes a recital of our sacred history of the establishment of freedom incarnate in the events of the Revolution and the Constitutional Convention, usually ending with a peroration lauding us as the greatest nation on the earth precisely because of this freedom and the prosperity allegedly resulting from it, and as a

model for other nations. The uncritical acceptance of the patriotism that regards us as bearers of freedom for the whole world has, I think, actually tended to diminish the other kind of patriotism, the traditional and healthy sort. There is no contradiction between the traditional kind of patriotism and the Faith, and America could well use much more of it.

Former Secretary of Education

William Bennett in an article "Horatius at the Bridge" in *Journal of Family and Culture* exemplifies the fallacy rampant in America from the confusion of these two types of patriotism. Bennett introduces the Roman hero Horatius, who held an army at bay on a narrow bridge to give his fellow Romans time to cut the bridge behind him. He thus faced nearly certain death to save Rome. Bennett quotes from Macaulay's poem:

Then out spake brave Horatius,

The Captain of the gate:

"To every man upon this earth

Death cometh soon or late.

And how can a man die better

Than facing fearful odds,

For the ashes of his fathers

And the temples of his gods?"

This is the quintessence of the correct sort of patriotism. Not allegiance to a political ideology or regime, but simply affection and reverence toward the things that are one's own. But interestingly, Bennett continues by censuring some American high school students who "saw no moral difference between the United States and the Soviet Union." Bennett goes on to say,

I have to wonder what Horatius would say about such moral confusion. I wonder what he would say to the greatest nation on earth; a democracy that has attained gifts of political and individual freedom equaled for centuries only in dreams; a country that raises some of its brightest children to regard the values of a totalitarian police state as morally commensurate with its own.

Now which is it to be? Are we to love the U.S. because she is alleged to be "the greatest nation on earth" or because her soil contains the graves of our ancestors and the shrines of our faith? Macaulay's Horatius did not say he was glad to die for Rome because Rome was the greatest nation on earth. No, simply because she was his own. Moreover, if the reason we are to be patriotic Americans is because America is said to be "the greatest nation on earth," then obviously no other peoples in the world can be patriotic because their poor countries are less than the greatest. They have nothing to be patriotic about.

The Miracle That Stunned the World

Now Only
\$24.95

THE MIRACLE OF OUR LADY OF FATIMA

- The inspiring true story of Our Lady's appearance retold in this reverent and uplifting production by Warner Bros.
- This famous film is now available at less than half the previous price. An ideal video for every family or as a gift.

(Formerly \$59.95
— now \$24.95
Save \$35.00)



ignatius press 15 Oakland Avenue, Harrison, NY 10528

Please send me _____ copies of the full-length, full-color video (102 min. VHS only) of *The Miracle of Fatima* for only \$24.95 plus \$3.00 shipping & handling per video. Enclosed is my check.

Name _____

Address _____

City, State, Zip _____

Please enclose check with order

COMMENTARY

I think I should anticipate two objections. First, I recognize that perhaps many peoples consider that their countries have special missions in the world, perhaps even universal missions. But this is different from considering the nation only as the incarnation of an idea. To love Spain or France or Russia as one's own, and to believe that each is entrusted with a mission for the rest of the world is one thing; to regard love for America as simply love for the ideology of freedom is surely another and very different thing.

The second has to do with the traditional conception of patriotism as affection for one's own, just because it is one's own. Some perhaps, may fear this could lead to a Nazi-like irrational exaltation of one's own country at the expense of its own citizens and of neighboring countries. But this is not so. True patriotism is a *reasonable* affection for one's own nation, and just as reasonable affection for family need not conflict with the demands of justice, so true love of country need not either. As a matter of fact, the patriotism of America as universal ideal is much more apt to lead to aggression and injustice, because we can interpret all our acts as being acts on behalf of mankind, bestowing "justice and liberty upon less favored peoples."

Before I end I must quote from what is perhaps the most unusual example that I know of the patriotism of the ideal, this political expression of the Americanist heresy. This is from "I Am an American" written by a law professor at a mid-western Catholic university in 1938 and inserted in the *Congressional Record* in 1984 (page E 2210). The document consists of ten assertions and appropriately enough begins like the other ten commandments.

I am an American, thou shalt not put strange gods before me. I will not adore them nor serve

them. . . . 1) I am an American. I hold that Americanism is more than a creed; that Americanism is a pattern of life, designed upon these principles: Honor to God, love of neighbor, reliance upon self.

And the author concludes with assertion number 10:

I hold it heaven upon earth to be an American. I pray to the great God in whom I trust to spare me the errors, the mists and the tempests that fill this vale below; in His mercy and goodness to grant to me, in adversity as in

prosperity, to stay what I am, an American.

Can more be said? Pity Jesus Christ, who, when he preached honor to God and love of neighbor, did not realize that he was establishing two pillars of Americanism, or that every just martyr throughout history has, unwittingly, been an Americanist. Then in our trials and sorrows in this vale below, let us remember to invoke St. Joseph, now no longer called "just man" by the Holy Spirit, but simply The American.

Thomas Storck

