

An American flag is draped across the top of the image. In the bottom left corner, the head and torch of the Statue of Liberty are visible. In the bottom right, a hand in a white clerical sleeve is shown in a gesture of blessing or prayer.

Pastoral Letter

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250th Independence Day Celebration

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Faith, Freedom, and a National Identity

On the occasion of the celebration of the Birth of this Nation, we are invited to be gratefully mindful of the civil freedoms we enjoy. In consideration of the freedom we possess from God, we are reminded to pray for all aspects of, and all persons who call this nation their home.

Pope Leo, in his letter to the American people, wrote; ***This anniversary stands as an invitation not only to celebrate the nation's remarkable journey, but also to reflect upon the responsibilities that the sons and daughters of this country bear to one another, and to the generations who will inherit the nation that is being shaped today.***

It brings to mind the words of President John F. Kennedy Sixty-Five years ago, ***“man holds in his mortal hands the power to abolish all forms of human poverty and all forms of human life. And yet the same revolutionary beliefs for which our forebears fought are still at issue around the globe--the belief that the rights of man come not from the generosity of the state but from the hand of God.”***

JFK learned this truth from the Church, and it was the underlying truth which moved him to challenge both American citizens and citizens of the world; ***“My fellow Americans: ask not what your country can do for you — ask what you can do for your country.”*** / ***“My fellow citizens of the world: ask not what America will do for you, but what together we can do for the freedom of man.”***

At no time in human history has it not been periodically necessary to remind the people of the nature of that freedom of which he speaks. Thankfully in our moment we have the teachings of the Church to remind and affirm for us that equipped with the intellect to know the truth and the will to choose the good, our true and fundamental freedom is the capacity to

choose what is good and authentic; as freedom for excellence, rather than a simple freedom of indifference.

Additionally, because deliberate actions are within our control, human freedom makes us accountable and responsible for our own lives and choices. It is a freedom that seeks excellence and frees me to love. As St. Paul said to the Corinthians, ***“He indeed died for all, so that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised.”***

America, along with many other democracies, is governed by the will of the people. But we have seen what happens when the so called ‘will of the people’ evolves to become atheistic or immoral. We the people are inclined to sin, and therefore we are not an infallible guide for governance. However, this democracy can serve as an excellent system when the will of the people is transformed by the Holy Spirit and manifested in lives lived and actions taken in accord with the way, truth and life of Christ.

When that collective will is united with the will of God. As both citizens of this nation and of the Kingdom of God, we must persistently and unabashedly strive to unite our will with God's, allowing our faith to shape our will, and then engage in civil discourse to shape our nation to better reflect the Kingdom of God in heaven.

In the Encyclical *Sapientiae Christianae*, Pope Leo XIII wrote that ***“no better citizen is there... than the Christian who is mindful of his duty”*** (no. 7). Pope Leo XIV adds that ***“In fact, faith — far from standing in opposition to the responsibilities of citizenship — lends new vigor to the pursuit of justice, peace and the common good, bringing to perfection every natural gift bestowed by the Creator.”***

We have been endowed by our Creator with the right and duty to live and practice our faith openly in all aspects of our lives and we must be allowed to practice our faith anywhere and everywhere. If not, our God-given rights and even our Constitution risk being undermined. Faith is not something to be expressed solely at church and practiced privately; it is an infused virtue that must permeate who we are and influence everything we do. Faith enables us to see, judge, and act in accord with God, our highest good. Faith leads us to understand freedom, the freedom for which Christ has set us free. Faith enables us to affirm and protect the goods of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. As Catholic citizens of this and the diverse nations of the world, it is our duty to ensure that our faith shapes who we are and then to engage in every form of civil discourse available to us and into which God calls us. Pope Leo XIII continued in that same document, ***"but such a one should be ready to suffer all things, even death itself, rather than abandon the cause of God or of the Church."***

The will of God as taught by Christ was necessarily woven into the fabric of the founding principles and aspirations of this nation. ***One nation, under God.*** In his recent letter Pope Leo XIV noted that ***"among the principles that have guided the development of this country is the God-given dignity of every human life, each person being endowed with an inherent worth that calls for reverence, protection and care. In this spirit, a full understanding of this dignity leads to recognizing the importance of safeguarding human life from its beginning at conception until natural death, and of building a society in which the vulnerable, the suffering and the forgotten are always met with compassion, solidarity and love."***

We find an important expression of this on the pedestal of the Statue of Liberty, where you'll find a plaque upon which is written a poem entitled 'The New Colossus'. They are words

known well by you and many others in the world; ***"Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!" cries she with silent lips. "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, the wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me, I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"***

These words ought to recall to mind those we hear Jesus speak in the Gospel of Matthew; ***"Come to me, all you who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am meek and humble of heart; and you will find rest for yourselves. For my yoke is easy, and my burden light."***

From a Catholic perspective, the desire to receive the refugee / stranger, protect human dignity, and practice solidarity is indeed morally good, but it can only ever be partially realized in history. Pope Leo also noted this truth, saying, ***"in my recent Encyclical Letter, Magnifica Humanitas, I wrote about working together for the common good. "Building a world in which everyone can flourish requires shared responsibility and courage. No one can single-handedly bear the weight of the challenges the world is facing" (no. 13). We need one another, and we need to work together in unity to confront the challenges that the world is facing today.***

It is in fact Christ alone who provides what the huddled masses most deeply seek and need. Christ desires that all would come to this saving knowledge of God and find their true rest in the yoke of his sacred heart through the Spirit's transforming power, in the kingdom HE inaugurated. In the Gospel we hear Jesus speak of this knowing. A knowing not meant as mere information or acquaintance. It points to a real, personal, revelatory knowledge, a communion based knowing of the Son and of the Father—that God alone can grant, that the Son makes possible through revelation, and that the Holy

Spirit guides us to understand and embrace.

The Gospel's promise, unlike the national aspirations expressed in the New Colossus, is ultimately not about a civic ethic, but God's kingdom and God's life. St. John Chrysostom stresses that Christ invites those who labor and are heavy laden not to be accused, but so that he may do away with our sins, and thus ***“He will shelter you with his pinions, and under his wings you may take refuge; his faithfulness is a protecting shield.”***

Christ inaugurates the kingdom of heaven on earth, and the Father's will is to raise up all men and women to share in the divine life, gathering them around the Son—this gathering is the Church as “the seed and beginning” of that kingdom which is definitively established through Christ's Paschal victory. When Jesus says, ***“Come to me... and I will give you rest... my yoke is easy, and my burden light,”*** the rest referred to is not merely the removal of external pressures and material need, but the salvation and security that Christ gave his life.

Though there is rarely an honest public conversation about the true cause of the underlying tension in our national identity and fulfilling our ethically positive aspirations; that is the truth of the human condition and our need for a savior. Not any savior. We don't need a false messiah of the moment. We need to recognize the truth within us that St. Paul articulates in the second reading as he speaks to the Romans. The tension of ‘spirit and flesh’, ‘the purely secular and the religious’. In Romans Chapter 8, St. Paul begins to focus on the experience of someone who is living that life of faith that makes a person capable of radical love of neighbor by which the national aspirations might be realized.

By faith we receive God's grace, and God sends us his Holy Spirit, which makes us children of God, new creatures in Jesus Christ - in other words, missionary disciples, living stones, members of the Mystical Body of Christ the

Church who participate in building the Kingdom of God. Having been drawn into the loving arms of the savior through the Church we feel within us the power of that grace, the attraction of living a Christ-like life, full of courage, wisdom, kindness, joy, and self-sacrifice. This impulse to follow Christ and to reflect his goodness in our own lives is the action of God's Holy Spirit within us and moved by this we can authentically love our neighbor – whoever they might be and from wherever they might come. We are a Church as the Body of Christ, whose arms are open wide to receive all who labor and are burdened, the huddled masses – who sing of the amazing grace that saved a wretch like me.

Still, there are those who will vehemently argue that we need neither a common understanding of love, or mercy, or of human dignity. Arguing that we need only common agreement that these national aspirations are good. But in truth, no human endeavor of such a nature can be sustained over time and will always be understood relative to that moment in history.

This is why we must know God as God desires to be known. St. Thomas Aquinas stresses that this knowing is not ordinary merely human cognition. He explains that the Father's and Son's divine substance is above our comprehension. Even as regards the saints, who may ‘know’ God in by touch, or by faith but not in the way Jesus and the Father ‘know’ one another in divine comprehension. So, to ‘know’ means to be in living contact with God in such a way that God is truly known, not just recognized. The International Theological Commission explains that this revelation is eschatological—the “love of God” is revealed in Jesus—and that Jesus' invitation to learn comes through discipleship in his company, because he alone unlocks the Scriptures and reveals God's truth and wisdom.

To know God in this way is to be oriented toward entering the life of discipleship and rest that Jesus gives; the knowledge is received and lived, not merely possessed as information.

Therefore, Jesus' knowledge is relational and participatory: it flows into the invitation to come to him, take his yoke, and learn in lived communion, resulting in "rest for your souls."

"Come to me, all you who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest." What then can be said of this 'rest' into which we are invited. What is this 'rest' if it's not what we already experience in human relationships and the welfare offered by the state and her citizens. As we come to know each other; to recognize and comprehend the 'other' and especially in the few individual relationships of a much more intimate nature, we do have an experience of finding 'rest'. We also find 'rest' in the care of state social welfare programs to a degree and for a time. Yet these are inconsistent, come and go according to whim or circumstance, economics, and elections. They may even be offered or withdrawn according to the shifting sands of opinion and bias relative to race or creed.

The 'rest' we find in Christ is true rest indeed. St. John Chrysostom emphasizes that Jesus invites those who are "in anxiety, in sorrows, in sins," not to accuse them but to do away with their sins and give them rest. Chrysostom stresses that when Jesus says: "learn from me; for I am meek and lowly in heart," he means the yoke is not just external; it is a life shaped by Christ's meekness and humility, received by imitation and trust. Chrysostom repeatedly connects the "lightness" of Christ's yoke to the interior disposition of the disciple. He concludes: "Be not afraid... since if you are prepared, and in earnest, all will be easy to you and light." He also explains that the soul finds this lightness because virtue and righteousness raise it, whereas sin presses it down.

St. Augustine goes further than Chrysostom, making it intimately personal: the yoke becomes light when God changes the heart. He describes how God changes him so that he can truly bear the yoke, describing the

transformation as God "subduing my neck to Your yoke" and then making it "light." In another passage, Augustine describes his conversion as giving his neck to the "easy yoke" and shoulders to the "light burden" of Christ, and he reports the experiential result: "How sweet did it suddenly become to me to be without the delights of trifles!" Thus, Augustine's "lightness" is not denial of effort; it is the claim that God's mercy and grace make obedience inwardly livable.

St. Irenaeus gives us an important historical - theological angle. He says Christ removed the yoke and bondage of the old law, so that people now set free might serve God with "trustful piety which becomes sons." He also explains how the change happens: the Word set free the soul and taught that what matters is willing purification of the body through the soul. So in Irenaeus, Christ's yoke is "light" partly because it is not the bondage imposed by sin or the "external" instruction that binds the soul as by a bond; Christ's yoke belongs to liberty and sonship.

Chrysostom explicitly contrasts Christ's yoke with the burdens created by sin—covetousness, anger, passion, sensuality, pride—describing them as heavy internal torments. So, Christ's easy yoke is easy not only because it is objectively merciful, but also because compared to sin's slavery it proves to be the lighter reality. According to the Church Fathers, Christ's yoke means the life of discipleship and obedience learned from Christ's meekness, given through God's grace so the burden becomes light; the rest of which Christ speaks, means salvation and security—not merely comfort.

As St Paul says, we are "in the spirit," we belong to Christ because we "have the Spirit of Christ," and this Spirit dwells in us. Life in the Spirit - this is one of St Paul's common phrases for summarizing the Christian way of life. This resistance to God's grace in our life, due to our fallen human nature, is what St Paul refers to as

"the flesh." When we give in to this downward pull, we turn away from life in the Spirit and give ourselves over to life in the flesh. This is why our nation will never fully realize the aspirations expressed in the poem, nor even come close, as it's culture and national ethos is increasingly secularized in accord with the desires of the flesh. ***"In this regard, it is in the faithful fulfillment of duty — to God and country — that Catholics are called to continue to serve the nation, as leaven for the growth of a civilization of love,"*** added the Pope.

When Paul writes about our "bodies" and "the flesh," it is his way of referring to this sinful, selfish tendency that we all carry around with us. He is not saying that our bodies are evil, or that the natural pleasures that we experience in our bodies are evil. How could they be evil, when they were created by God? Rather, he is pointing out that because of original sin, we all have within us a tendency to overindulge in those pleasures. We all are inclined towards selfishness that resists the action of God's Spirit within us. When we let ourselves follow that inclination, we "live according to the flesh." And of course, the devil and the sinful patterns of behavior all around us are constantly trying to convince us to do just that, resulting in an increasingly firmly established culture of death except for the children of God seeking the holiness to which they have universally been called and authentically living their faith.

We who are Christians have two possible roads to follow at every moment of our lives: the flesh or the Spirit, the self-centered road or the Christ-centered road, the road of "me first" or the road of "God's will first," the road of self-indulgence and self-glorification, or the road of self-giving generosity to God and neighbor. It is life in the Spirit that will lead us to a deeper communion with God, which is the source of life, liberty, and true, lasting happiness.

St Paul encourages us and all Christians to

prefer life in the Spirit and leave behind life in the flesh: ***"For if you live according to the flesh, you will die, but if by the spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live."*** Our fallen nature pulls us towards the easy, self-centered path. But at the same time God's own Spirit is always at work deep within us, encouraging us to follow the narrow and steep road of our Lord Jesus Christ.

It's up to each one of us to choose which road to follow. When the tug of laziness, egged on by the devil, pulls us away from our duties and responsibilities, we are free to give in or resist. When the tug of arrogance incites us to criticize and wound those around us, we are free to give in or resist. When God's grace and the tug of the Spirit inspire us to forgive and begin again, we are free to give in or resist. When the tug of the Spirit inspires us to take a little bit of time out of our busy schedules to pray, to be with our Lord and Savior, to read his Holy Scriptures, we are free to give in or resist.

On this national day of celebration, it isn't about particular Presidents; it isn't about our failures; it isn't about politics or culture wars. We celebrate freedom from tyranny; the enshrinement of the ideals that ought to define the nation the national identity as ONE and under GOD; and we celebrate that this is a nation that struggles toward the aspirations expressed in the New Colossus. As missionary disciples of Christ, we are well aware of our historical failures and we are certain about in whom our hope of a better future is to be secured.

As President John F. Kennedy said, ***"man holds in his mortal hands the power to abolish all forms of human poverty and all forms of human life."***

May God continue to bless us and call us continually to repent and believe, for the Kingdom of God is at hand!