

Before boarding a plane this week I presented my ID to an agent having a lively conversation with her coworker. She immediately drew me into the debate. She said, "Can you recite the pledge of allegiance? To the flag." I moved my right hand to my heart, turned toward the Independence Day decorations they had on a nearby table, and said, "I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America and to the Republic for which it stands, one nation, under God – " then I paused to make sure I got the next word right. She said to me, "I think it's 'individual'." I said, no, "indivisible." Her coworker nodded. "That's it," she said. So I concluded, "indivisible with liberty and justice for all." That satisfied them; I said, "So, do I win a free year's membership in the airline club?" She pulled a card from the stack in front of her and slapped it on the counter. "No," she said, "but I'll give you a free drink." The nuns who taught me the pledge of allegiance when I was in grade school had no idea how useful it would be one day.

One little word like "indivisible" can trip you up. In today's gospel, there are two little words that can trip up Catholics. One is "brother" and the other is "sisters". In this section Mark's gospel points out that Jesus had opponents. People from his own town and family did not appreciate who he was. This starts to explain how things spun so far out of control that he ended his life on a cross, even though he preached with wisdom, worked miracles, and proclaimed good news. The key question these people ask is the first one: "Where did this man get all this?" The obvious answer is, "Duh. From God," but they don't know this.

Today people get tripped up by the last two questions: "Is he not the brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon? And are not his sisters here with us?" All Christians believe that Mary was a virgin when she conceived Jesus. It says so right in Luke's gospel. But Catholics have also held the tradition that Mary remained a virgin throughout her life. Two texts of the mass call her "ever-Virgin" – one in the Confiteor and another in the First Eucharistic Prayer, which I'll use today so you can hear it; it comes shortly after the Holy, Holy, Holy. There are three points of view about this verse. One is that the men and women mentioned here are relatives of Jesus, but not blood brothers and sisters – and this is the position you find in the Catechism of the Catholic Church. Another tradition is that Joseph had children from a previous marriage. And the third opinion is that it means what it says: Mary and Joseph had at least six other children, and these were Jesus' brothers and sisters.

In any case, that whole issue creates the kind of division today's gospel criticizes; namely, that we sometimes don't appreciate other Christians or other people from our own town or our own family. At times we don't fully appreciate our own country, or the flag that stands for it. We too easily overlook the blessings that surround us, and even find ourselves fighting with the very people we should love, the ones who share our home, beliefs, and nationality. So let's take this Independence Day weekend to be truly grateful for all those people. Let us acknowledge the values, the citizenship and the faith that makes us – whether or not we remember the word - indivisible.