

14th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Independence is a value we Americans prize. We have freedoms. We have rights. We don't give them up lightly. Independence Day celebrates our declaration of freedom from English rule in 1776. It clarifies our communal national identity. Independence Day united our country because our forefathers gave up their time, wisdom, possessions and lives to achieve a greater good. They didn't have to get involved, but they sacrificed their personal independence in order to achieve a greater independence for our nation.

Fireworks display these values every year. In the nighttime, when people may feel afraid, light appears in the sky to remove our fears. Not just any light: beautiful light that lives so briefly it concentrates all beauty within it; light so visible it makes noise, channeling the echoes of battles fought for freedom won.

Fireworks are illegal in many places. Homeowners are not supposed to light them because in addition to being loud and beautiful, fireworks are dangerous; indeed, deadly in maladroit hands. Nevertheless, some people celebrate Independence Day by declaring their independence from local laws.

Independence has focused the debate over masks. On one side, people won't wear them because they infringe on personal freedoms. On the other side, people do wear them because they keep others safe in the pandemic. Our diocese requires the wearing of masks to enter a church for mass because of this latter position, that they protect others. I want to thank you for cooperating. Masks are uncomfortable. They make it hard to breathe. They limit communication from our faces. Yet you wear them when you come here and go other places. You sacrifice your personal independence to achieve a greater independence for our nation. You imitate our forefathers who engaged great battle.

In his Letter to the Romans, Saint Paul describes a different battle, a contest between flesh and spirit. Paul knows our bodies yearn for certain things, not all of them good. But if you have the Spirit of God dwelling within you, you will overcome the yearnings of the flesh and delight in yearnings of the Spirit. Because of baptism the Romans are no longer "in the flesh; on the contrary [they] are in the spirit." They have spiritual weapons to overcome wayward yearnings. When they make this shift from flesh to Spirit, they've relearned how to live. They rejoice in the things of the Spirit, more than the things of the flesh.

You may have used such spiritual weapons to overcome addictions to food and drink because you learned a healthier diet brings a happier life. Or you may be struggling with habits of pornography or lies, knowing in your heart you are not happy with the person you have become. Saint Paul says, "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."

Personal independence can be a life of the flesh. Sacrificing for others can be a life of the Spirit. The Spirit of God does not call us to do what we want; the Spirit calls us to do what God wants. God does not force us to live by the Spirit; we can only do that freely. The freedom to make that choice helps us overcome the temptations of the flesh and to live in the Spirit. When we live for others, even fireworks look dim before our light.

Sunday, July 5, 2020