

Last week before my meeting got underway in Washington, DC, a friend of mine took me to Ft. McHenry on Chesapeake Bay. Inside the fort flies a replica of the very flag Francis Scott Key saw there when he wrote “The Star-Spangled Banner.” The flag has 15 stars and 15 stripes, one for each state of the union at the time. Just before the fort closed for the day, the staff exchanged the old flag for the 50-star flag. So my friend and I joined a few other tourists and helped the local staff lower and fold the huge replica and hoist the modern one. Although we were strangers to one another, this action powerfully united us Americans because of all that our flag has come to mean for us since September 11th.

Circuit Judge Alfred T. Goodwin couldn’t have picked a worse time in American history to declare that the Pledge of Allegiance is unconstitutional. The case he oversaw originated two years ago when a parent professing atheism objected that his second-grade daughter was forced to listen to her schoolmates recite the pledge, which includes a reference to God. The 9th US Circuit Court of Appeals said the state should remain separate from the church.

The timing was awful. The American flag is enjoying unparalleled popularity. People put it on our homes and on our cars. We wear it on t-shirts, lapel pins, socks and tattoos. The flag has become such a symbol of America that not to have it at your place of business may raise suspicions of disloyalty. More than any other symbol, the flag represents our country. For a circuit court to say you cannot pledge allegiance to the flag in a public school smacks many Americans of outright treason.

Some of our emblems are so powerful that when you touch one, you touch the very thing it represents. If the sales clerk at a store is very good, you will love the entire company that clerk represents. If you have a bad experience with your car, you will dislike the entire company that made it or sold it. If one priest commits abuse, if one bishop has an affair, if one deacon embezzles the collection – the whole church looks bad. Some of our symbols are so powerful that when you meet one, you feel like you are meeting the whole institution, for good or for ill.

In today’s gospel, Jesus is sending the apostles off to proclaim his message. They will be symbols of him. They will be his flag. “Whoever receives you,” he says, “receives me, and whoever receives me receives the one who sent me.” My brothers and sisters, this holds for all Christians. When we love our neighbor, when we express our faith in God, when we treat people fairly at work or at home, we represent Christ and the one who sent him. Each one of us is like a flag of Christianity. The sin we each commit does not just affect us, it affects the whole Church, and the good we do does not just represent us: It represents Christ.