

For God and Country: Patriotism and Religious Identity Today

By Thomas Massaro, S.J.



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Patriotism presents something of a dilemma for Christians and requires careful discernment on the part of all religious people. Of course, anyone aspiring to the name Christian will insist that the God of Jesus Christ is alone worthy of our worship. While love of God by no means excludes other loves, for Christians other objects of devotion must ultimately be subordinated to our love of God, who alone is absolute and transcends all creatures of God.

It seems particularly regrettable to me that Christians in recent centuries so easily slip into a version of tribalism that seeks pro forma religious sanction for what usually amounts to ethnic or national self-interest. If our particular political community identifies a goal worth attaining, or even one worth fighting for, then God *must* be on our side in the struggle, as this flawed argument runs.

Following this logic, the horizons of our social concern shrink all too readily into the confines of national borders, ceding the moral high ground of universal love and good will that should be the overriding focus of engaged Christians. Maybe this is due to the ways Medieval Christianity absorbed feudal ideals such as fealty, in such a way that the practice of loyal service of vassals to the lords who protected them evolved eventually into an unquestioned allegiance to country. The version of patriotism we subsequently inherited thus includes, among other elements, the tradition of *pro patria mori*. This Latin phrase describes a willingness—even eagerness presumed to be noble in nature—to die for one’s country with few questions asked regarding precisely what principles make the offer of one’s life necessary and laudable.

Yet this pattern of behavior fails to honor our supreme allegiance to the God who stands above all nations and judges their ways. It also devalues principles and causes that transcend the projects of particular nations and that rightly stake a weightier claim upon us than mere national interest. If there are things worthy of solemn sacrifices in today’s world, they more likely go by names like “human rights” and “solidarity with the poor” than the

“sovereign nation of X” or the “Republic of Y.” If Christians truly believe that our individual destinies are linked to the fate of all of humanity, then the key questions become the following: How should we enlarge the scope of our concerns for people and causes of justice around the world? How may we practice the most universal form of love in a renewed stance of solidarity, one that is compatible with our particular loyalties in this complex world? It is about time that we took seriously the claim that has echoed through Roman Catholic as well as World Council of Churches social teaching documents in recent decades: in this age of globalization, the common good is now universal in scope, and the only adequate practice of social responsibility is one that accounts for all our neighbors, without exception, whether they belong to our nation or not.

Above all, if it is to be a constructive force in our national life, patriotism must not exist in a vacuum, for it requires numerous correctives to accompany it. The same people who appeal to love of nation as a motive for action should be mindful of the full range of values and virtues that deserve to be cultivated and enacted: items like respect for other cultures and peoples, attention to the demands of social justice, and openness to changing social mores.

In lonely isolation, patriotism cannot play the constructive role we need to meet the contemporary challenges of a complex and increasingly globalized society. But with proper augmentation by the myriad sets of loyalties felt by people today, including Christians who center their lives on the living God of Jesus Christ, patriotism can be a constructive force that will *bind* our nation together, not *blind* it with arrogance and self-centeredness. At its best, patriotism is fully compatible with the blessed life of the Christian proclamation. Whether the abstract noun of patriotism delivers on this promise is fully in the hands of concrete people like us.

This article was adapted from a Sept. 25 talk given by Thomas Massaro, S.J. as part of the Joan and Ralph Lane Center for Catholic Studies and Social Thought’s “Urbi et Orbi” lecture. [USP](#)