

Love of One's Country?

Most people who are (say) at least 30 or 40 years old probably grew up with a love of their country, a sense of patriotism – happy to be Americans, thankful for their country – myself included. Those who take their Catholic faith seriously, however, might look at our country today and wonder: can I, in good faith, love my country, or in loving my country, do I betray the Lord? Moral atrocities abound everywhere: calling evil good, sexual immorality of all varieties, greed, lust for power, deception, the slaughter of innocents, the kingdom of me – all surround us more and more. The evils of dishonesty and self-interest are all too often held up as supreme goods. This the “culture” of the U.S. today, infiltrating almost every public forum there is: the news and entertainment industries, government/politics, business, educational systems, “social media,” and so on. A person of faith, one who knows reality as revealed by the Creator and desires to be in union with the good God cannot perhaps help but to stop and ask: is it an offense against God (a sin) to love my country today? I really *want* to love my country but can I do so without betraying our Lord? It is a good and serious question.

This is a good question and, thankfully, it is actually rather easily resolved. There are a number of different things that our Lord has revealed that can answer this question but perhaps the most straightforward way is to consider our Lord's great summary of the commandments: 1) love God above all else and 2) love your neighbor as yourself. Notice two things: a) both command love and b) they are ordered – one is first; it takes precedence, and it also informs us as to how to carry out the second. Suppose a husband or wife wants to use contraception but the other spouse does not, knowing that it's an offense against God. What should the spouse, who doesn't want it, do? Love of God takes precedence – they should say no. But notice that in doing so they are also loving their spouse because they are desiring the highest and greatest good for them as well. Hopefully this makes it clear how to resolve the question of: can I love my country in the face of all the evil being perpetrated. The answer is that I must oppose the evil, I must not approve it in any way. In doing so: 1) I *actively* love my country and 2) I do not wish my country's demise (I don't hate it) but rather desire its conversion. So the answer is: yes, in fact I must love my country, I just have to make sure I know what that entails.

This resolution to the question of: can I love my country without betraying the Lord draws heavily on Aquinas' answer to this question. St Thomas takes up this question when teaching on the virtue of piety. Piety means having an appreciation for, and even a certain deference or reverence for, those who have done us some true good; the greater the *true* good, the greater our piety should be. Aquinas points out that our piety (gratitude and reverence for benefits received) belongs first and foremost to God because He is the one who has given us the most (thus: love of God above all else) but that it also extends to others that have done us true good, in particular our parents and our country (hence, love of neighbor); again the degree of piety depends on the degree of true good. Everyone, Thomas points out, has drawn *some* benefit from their own country – even, for example, those in communist countries where atheism is enforced; the people in those countries have, for example, received at least some material benefit from their country; even communist countries provide a certain kind of structure and infrastructure, one that provides at least some physical security, some way to make a living, a system for obtaining the necessities of physical life, and so on. Furthermore, for many people, their country has provided these things for many generations of ancestors, thus making it possible, at least in part, for me to have even been born. As a matter of justice, then, we owe our country a certain deference, appreciation, and even a sort of reverence for the benefits we have received, that is to say a certain piety, albeit secondary to what is owed to God; i.e., if the two conflict, piety to God takes precedence.

Let us continue to put these 2 things together: love of one's country, non-betrayal of our Lord, by considering St Augustine's “summary” of God's stance towards “sinners” (which we all are, incidentally) and thus the stance we too are to have: love the sinner, hate the sin. From this we can say: love the sinner (your country) hate the sin (whatever evils exist in your country). How does one “love the sinner and hate the sin?” If someone close to you had a life-threatening disease, you would not look at the disease and say: oh I love you disease, I approve you, I thank you for being here – and call that love of the person; that's, well, insane! You love the person by wishing to see the disease, that which is killing them, expunged. The same is true for individual people and

their country. In no way can we “love” the disease of evil, but we can “hate” the evil in our country without hating our country, indeed while actually loving our country.

As mentioned before, there are a number of things from Revelation that resolve the issue of “patriotism,” if you will. The question being posed here could be rephrased as: what should my stance or mindset be towards my own country? The beatitudes could also be used to help answer this question, in particular: Blessed are those who mourn. Yes, we should mourn, truly mourn, the wounds of our country, its evils, just as we would mourn the wounds of someone dear to us. But that mourning is an expression of desire for conversion – an act of love – not an expression of hatred.

We might round out the topic of patriotism by considering the question of “degree” of love or piety – both God’s degree of love, and our own degrees of love or piety. It is not uncommon for people to say something like: God loves everybody the same. That’s not exactly true, or at the very least it’s very misleading. God has some love even for Satan but His love is infinitely greater for our Holy Mother. One of the ways we can think of this is that there’s just more to Mary to love (philosophers would say she has a “greater density of being”). She is more like God than any other creature so she is simply more and thus there’s more to love. The same is true for individuals and even for countries. As we become more like our Lord, His intensity of love for us increases. The same is true for countries, *but* the converse is also true. Our Lord does not force Himself on anyone. And as a country drives out God more and more there is less and less to love – by both God and His followers. Since God is life, driving Him out can bring only, *only*, death. This had been borne out in history over and over again – even within the Church.

Notice that nothing here has suggested hatred towards one’s own country. There is nothing in Scripture or Tradition that commands hatred of any kind, much less towards one own country; hatred means bearing ill-will and wishing the demise of the other. In fact, God went so far as to say through his servants Sts Peter and Paul: be obedient to the legitimate laws of legitimate civil authorities (*legitimate* laws, i.e., not obedient to civil laws which oppose Divine law). The lives of the martyrs, especially those from the early Church, bear this out. These martyrs exemplify well all that has been said here. It was demanded of them that they pay homage to the Roman “gods.” They refused; God comes first, before country or any civil ruler or law. They opposed what was wrong by standing with what is right but in spite of all they suffered they never expressed or had any hatred of their country. God’s love is less as an individual or a country become more and more unlike Him. But that is different than wishing another’s demise. There is no hatred in God.

The relevance of this is that in recent years there seems to be an exaltation of hatred of our own country – hatred of America by Americans seems to now be “in vogue.” I read an article a while ago, for example, saying that someone wants to win an Olympic gold medal so that he can then burn the American flag at the Olympics – and such a mentality seems to now be considered somehow good and “enlightened.” This is not from God.

On this 4th of July weekend, ladies and gentlemen, by all means get together with friends and family for good food and good visiting. But also take time to put first things first. Mourn the evils befalling our country and then take time to pray, to really plead with our Lord, to enthrone Himself in the minds and hearts of all Americans. This is the way and the only way towards true peace and real freedom. Our Lord will respond. If the people as a whole turn more and more to God, to becoming like our Lord, He Himself will come to our aid, He Himself will defend us. Take all the nuclear bombs in the world and they do not have even a drop of power compared to the power of our Lord.

God bless you,

Fr Kuhn.