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Putting patriotism in its proper place

Tony Magliano | Jul. 7, 2014 Making a Difference

Patriotism can be good, or it can be bad. Pride in one's country can be healthy, or it can be unhealthy.

An unhealthy pride is often considered the original sin. In his pride, Lucifer thought he knew better than God. The first humans in their pride thought they knew better than God. And we in our pride sometimes think and act as though we know better than God.

An unhealthy patriotism does not seek God's will for the nation in all matters. Instead, it conveniently chooses what issues it will consult the Almighty on.

Catholics adhering to this type of patriotism will often cite God's approval on those issues where they feel -- through sacred tradition, sacred Scripture, and the magisterium -- that God is in agreement with their position.

However, when that is not the case, instead of doing the hard work and prayer of spiritual discernment, they choose to ignore God and rely on purely secular arguments.

This way of thinking leads to an unhealthy pride in one's country, where waving the flag and proclaiming, "My country right or wrong, love it or leave it," becomes the narrow-minded standard for judging whether a person is a patriotic citizen or not.

This unhealthy patriotism often leads many people to believe their nation is better than all other countries. It proclaims, "We are No. 1!"

Numerous people in various nations seem addicted to this kind of unhealthy pride of country. In the United States, this sense of haughty superiority, promoted by some neoconservative writers, is known as "American exceptionalism."

In this sense, it is believed that America is that city on a hilltop -- taken from Matthew's Gospel -- that shines a totally righteous light for all other nations to admire and emulate.

While America can generally claim in some areas to be a very good example for others to follow -- such as the U.S. Bill of Rights, which guarantees freedom of religion, speech, assembly and the press -- there are on the other hand many areas where the United States is walking in darkness.

Legalized abortion; being the world's leading arms merchant; possessing the world's most dangerous nuclear arsenal; more than 15 million children living in poverty; rampant pornography; the military-industrial complex; only giving less than 1 percent of its annual income to the poor of the world: The United States is demonstrating that it has a moral illness and is in need of healing and spiritual conversion.

Instead of ignoring these and other ills, Americans who possess a healthy patriotism honestly acknowledge these sicknesses and work to heal the nation.

As people of faith, we have the indispensable wisdom, power and love of God, the great physician, to aid us. But we must invite him to lead the way. In order to be healthy and holy, God must be at the center of our lives and our nation.

A few years ago, I had the privilege of interviewing the courageous countercultural peace activist Jesuit Fr. Dan Berrigan. He raised a question of crucial importance for every American Catholic to ponder: "Am I a Catholic American? Or am I an American Catholic?"

What comes first, our country or our God?

Do we blindly follow the culture, government and economic system of our nation, or do we faithfully follow the lord Jesus, who alone is the way, the truth and the life?

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