

# Fortnight for Freedom

Homily by Deacon Ralph McAtee / July 4, 2016 – Monday / 6:30 p.m. Mass

Happy Birthday America! Today marks the two hundred fortieth (240) anniversary of the birth of this great nation we call “America the Beautiful.” Today ‘Independence Day’ we acknowledge the inspired work and dedication of our Founding Fathers who on this day, July 4, 1776, affixed their signatures to a historic document, the Declaration of Independence. This document set the stage to dissolve all political allegiances to the British Throne. The British, aware of the document, sent out a warning that signing this document would be considered a treasonous act, punishable by hanging. These brave men, knowing the consequences of their action, were willing to risk their lives in order that America would become free and independent. The struggle for independence was more involved than just a disagreement over a little old tea party.

Many critics like to point out that God is not mentioned in the Constitution. And, they are right. But in the Declaration of Independence, our Founding Father’s (in an expression of gratitude for God’s spiritual guidance) insisted that significant references to God be included in the document. For these men of faith were well aware of the Psalmists warning: *“If God does not build the house, in vain does its builders labor.”* (Psalm 127) Benjamin Franklin, when referring to these words of the Psalmist, stated: “I firmly believe this, and I also believe that without God’s concurring aid, we shall succeed in this political building no better than the builders of Babel.”

In his first version of the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson (the prime drafter of the document) placed a single but very important reference to God. He stressed that a person’s basic rights are founded in “the laws of nature,” or more precisely, “Nature’s God,” (meaning a law far above Man’s law). Later Jefferson emended his draft to include the famous sentence emphasizing the self evident truth, “...that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights...” These words have inspired freedom loving people the world over.

In endorsing the final version of the document, members of Congress added two more references to the Deity. They are:

★ “We therefore, the Representatives of the United States of America, in General Congress, Assembled, appealing to the **Supreme Judge** of the world for the rectitude of our intentions...”

★ “...And for the support of this Declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of **Divine providence**, we mutually pledge to each other our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor.”

In today's quest for life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, every citizen needs to recall (perhaps even relearn) the important lessons of American history. In watching T.V. or reading the newspaper, I'm sure we have all become conscious of the declining knowledge of American history, past or present. How can we so quickly forget the sacrifices of the men and women who have fought so bravely throughout the years for our freedom? What we must realize, is that our lives have been directly affected by their unselfish sacrifice. For no other country on earth has the freedom Americans enjoy today.

Now having said that, there are those temporary distractions in our lives that can cause us considerable heart burn. Some are of our own making, while others come from unexpected sources. Like the recent intrusion into our religious beliefs and practices. Insisting that the Church and its institutions must follow recent mandates that go against long held religious principles. The church has condemned these illegal demands in the strongest terms, reminding those involved that the Bill of Rights makes absolutely clear the importance of freedom of conscience. Where as no government has the right to tell the Church what they are to believe, teach, and practice.

There are other threats as well. Many voices are presently calling for the removal of any mention of God from the public square. These voices believe that God is no longer relevant in today's modern world. The question then becomes - "Can man survive without God? And the answer is: Neither you, nor I, not society, not the state, not this democracy can survive without God. For God is the author of life; without God there is no life.

What we are seeing today is what philosopher Martin Buber called, "the eclipse of God; removing God from everything, even demanding the removal of the words "under God" from the Pledge of Allegiance and the words "In God we Trust" from our currency," and the list goes on. These voices are becoming increasingly more brazen, encouraged by what can best be described as America's "frozen silence." America, founded upon Christian principles, can no longer afford these periods of chilled silence, for if people of faith fail to speak up, religious freedom dies.

How many of us today know that the words "under God" in the Pledge, was added 62 years ago, thanks in large part to the efforts of the Knights of Columbus, who played a pivotal role in its inclusion? Taking no chances, the Knights have pledged to remain vigilant for any attempt to remove them in the future. And they warn – don't even think about it!

The history of the phrase 'under God' goes much deeper. President Abraham Lincoln used it in his famous Gettysburg Address, reflecting a philosophy of limited government and the primacy of God.

In the second paragraph of his inaugural address, President Kennedy, a Fourth Degree Knight, reminded the nation that “the right of man comes not from the generosity of the state, but from the hand of God.” Underscoring the idea of a nation ‘under God,’ **not** under government.

On Flag Day, June 14, 1954, President Eisenhower signed into law a resolution passed by Congress that amended the Pledge of Allegiance to include the words “under God.” Later that same year, he wrote a letter to the Knights of Columbus thanking them for their efforts in helping to bring about the change. Every Council, every knight should be extremely proud of this achievement. Knights, you are true patriots.

Now before anyone takes a bow, we need to remind ourselves that there is still much work to be done. America, more than ever, needs freedom loving people to stand with her during these troubled times. As Americans, as Catholics, we have a right, a responsibility to share our beliefs on every social, economic, and political problem facing our nation. It’s not just a right, it’s a demand of the Gospel. Actively witnessing to our convictions and what we believe about moral issues in public life, are acts of truth telling. It’s our duty, not only of our religious faith, but also of our citizenship. The late Pope John Paul II reminded us that “Freedom consists not in doing what we like, but in having the right to do what we ought.”

In closing I have shared this story before, but it needs retelling. It tells the secret of what makes America, and the world, great. The late Charles Shultz, creator of the famous cartoon strip ‘Peanuts,’ lays it all out for us:

It begins with Charlie Brown concerned about the condition of the world his little sister Sally was entering into. Charlie expressed these concerns out loud to his very close and dear friend Linus. But Linus interrupted Charlie’s litany of the world’s evils by contradicting him. “I think,” he said, “the world today is better than it was six years ago.” That didn’t sit well with Charlie. “How can you say that Linus? Don’t you read the papers, don’t you watch T.V.? Don’t you understand what is happening in the world today? How can you say the world is a better place today than six years ago?” Linus answered very simply, “I’m in it now!”

That’s the secret! America is a better place today because **you** are in it now, to engage in and defend the principles of religious freedom granted us by God and protected by our Constitution and the Declaration of Independence.

Today we should all be proud of our country, proud of who we are, proud of our history, our heritage and our faith.

God bless you and God bless America!