THE TRUTH WILL SET YOU FREE
REFLECTIONS ON GREAT AMERICAN CATHOLICS: PART I
THE GATHERING OF NATIONS AND THE GOODNESS OF EACH LAND

I. The Catholic faith does not eliminate the differences between nation, but rather brings out the unique goodness of every land.

A. St. Pope John Paul II's last book Memory and Identity (2005) was a commentary on the twentieth century. In one chapter, he wrote about the virtue of patriotism.

1. As he said, the Fourth Commandment, which calls for us to honor our fathers and mothers "implies the virtue of patriotism, or love of the fatherland (patria in Latin.) "

2. As he pointed out, Catholic social teachings regard both the family and the country as "natural institutions not the product of mere convention" They are divinely ordained institutions that the government should serve, not dominate. Thus, the great Catholic teachers, building upon the classical traditions of Greece and Rome, have included both love of family and love of country under the virtue of piety. See, e.g., Summa Theologica II-II question 101, article 3.

3. St. John Paul II pointed out that, as love of one's family involves love of the members of the family and its traditions, culture, learning, faith, and the like, "patriotism is a love of everything to do with our native land: its history, its traditions, its language, its natural features." This love extends also "to the works of our compatriots and fruits of their genius."

4. Every nation has a unique culture through which her people grow in their relationship to each other and to God. This culture is not stagnant but rather develops and expands through time in what he called "the theater of history."

5. There are also always threats to that culture, both from within (e.g. decadence or tyranny) or without, such as foreign enemies or dominating and impersonal economic forces. And so each generation must choose whether to defend itself or give in. As St. John Paul II said in a poem he recounts in that book, "Freedom – a continuing conquest. // It cannot be simply possessed! // It comes as a gift, but keeping it is a struggle. // . . . How weak the people that accepts defeat, // that forgets its call to keep vigil."

B. Thus, God formed a specific people, namely the Israelite nation, for Jesus to be born into. He loved His people and ever sought to bring out the best in them.

1. As the Catechism carefully explains in the paragraphs on "Jesus and Israel," Jesus was often seen as contradicting the leaders of His country, but in fact brought out the best of them, including fulfilling the promises of the Law, the Temple, and the Israelites' belief in one God. See Catechism, Part I, Section 2, chapter 2, article 4, paragraph 1. Thus, Jesus said He came not to abolish the Law but to fulfill it. See Matt. 5:17. And when the people of Jerusalem rejected Him, He wept over its upcoming destruction. See Luke 19:41-44.

2. The Letter to the Hebrews likewise demonstrates how Jesus does not destroy but rather fulfills the traditions that His people upheld, including belief in angels, the law, the priesthood, the Temple, and the connection to the great heroes of the past.

C. Likewise, the Bible speaks of the gathering, not only of individuals, but of nations, into the kingdom of God.

1. The 87th Psalm speaks of different nations, even Israel's enemies, coming again before Jerusalem.

2. Isaiah portrays a vision of the gathering of the nations, bringing the wealth of many peoples to the new Jerusalem. Isaiah 60:4-7, 66:18-21.

3. At Pentecost, the Gospel was heard in the languages of the many nations of the known world. See Acts 2:1-13. It could have been proclaimed in Greek, which was the international language, but instead, the Gospel came to each culture and to its language.

4. Some of Jesus' parables speak of God judging not just individual, but also nations. See, e.g. Matthew 25:31-46. The book of Revelation likewise speaks, first of the sins of all the nations, but then of nations untied together and walkin in the light of the greater kingdom in heaven. See Rev. 18:1-3; 21:24-26.

D. C.S. Lewis brings this idea quite far in his fiction writings. Near the end of That Hideous Strength (1945) the last of Lewis' space trilogy, Elwin Ransom speaks of the fact that the history of every nation is a history of the divine ideal of the nation competing with its corruption; in the case of England, it involves the fight between the Arthurian ideal of Logres against the imperial desire for domination. Likewise, at the end of The Last Battle (1956), the last book of The Chronicles of Narnia, the English heroes enter into heaven, where there is a new England, a new London, and even the glorified vision of the very street upon which they lived.

E. Thus, the Gospel does not make every nation the same, but rather brings out the best of every nation in her own unique way. The great saints have ever brought out the best of their nation. Thus, for example, St. Sebastian is a model for Roman soldiers, St. Patrick a model for Irish faith, and St. Joan of Arc a defender of France. Even St. Thomas More, who opposed his king, was a great representative of the English scholar and gentleman.

II. As applied to this nation, there are many unique aspects of the American character, such as a native optimist, a dedication to opportunities for all people, an emphasis on education, and an entrepreneurial spirit. These outlines will try to show how great American Catholics have exemplified all that is best in the gifts given to this land.

A. America has many great things going for her, although ever tempted by corruption.

1. Alexis de Tocqueville described a vision of this country in his classic work Democracy in America; in that book, he described well many defining characteristics of Americans including our respect for the liberty and dignity of each person, our desire that each person have an opportunity for success, and our willingness to move to where the opportunities are.

2. Professor Patrick Allitt, a British professor at Emory University in Atlanta, pointed out The American Identity, a series of lectures for The Great Courses company, that "Certain characteristics and attitudes do appear, especially to outsiders, as distinctly American, including a lack of fatalism, an energetic approach to problem-solving, faith in human equality and democracy, belief in the boundless possibilities of economic growth, and a dedication to making education and literacy available to every citizen."

3. Likewise, the English historian Paul Johnson dedicated his book The History of the American People (1998) "to the people of America – strong, outspoken, intense in their convictions, sometimes wrongheaded, but always generous and brave, with a passion for justice that no nation has ever matched." At the said of the book he concluded, "Americans are, above all, al problem solving people. They do not believe anything in this world is beyond human capacity to soar and dominate. Full of goodwill to each other and to all, confident in their inherent decency and democratic skills, they will attack again and again the ills in their society until they are overcome or at least substantially redressed."

B. These talks will try to describe how great American Catholics have represented well the best characteristics of this nation. A few of the aspects that these talks will be emphasizing are:

1. A strong belief in the dignity and rights of each person and a conviction that these rights come from God Himself.

- The Declaration of Independence based the Revolution on "the laws of nature and of nature's God" and the inalienable truths that "all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with inalienable rights, that among these rights are the rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, [and] that to secure these rights governments are established among men." Likewise, Thomas Jefferson said in Notes of the State of Virginia, "Can the liberties of a nation be thought secure when we have removed their only firm basis, a conviction in the minds of people that these liberties are a gift of God? That they are not to be violated without His wrath?"

2. Related to this dedication to the principles that God has given all people human dignity and rights, there is a desire to see the value of each person, and especially a desire to see the underdog succeed. We think of Emma Lazarus' famous poem about the Statue of Liberty,

"Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!" cries she
With silent lips. "Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"

3. Likewise, there is the idea, which Alexis de Tourqueville so much emphasized, that every person has the potential to succeed and should be given the ability to do so. We think of the rags to riches stories that so often inspire Americans, whether factual such as those of Benjamin Franklin or Abraham Lincoln, or the fictitious stories such as those of Horatio Alger. Other cultures have those ideas, but they are more prominent here.

4. Connected to that desire to give everyone the opportunity to succeed is the notion that education should be available to everyone. As Professor Allitt points out, the idea that no one should drop out of high school, that no child should left behind, is a very American one.

5. There is also the value of hard work, the idea that the path to success should be through dedication and labor, and that such things should lead to success, rather than advantages or noble birth. While people may dream of winning the lottery and living in ease, few Americans would boast about the fact that they are landed gentry and able to avoid work.

6. There is also, as Professor Allitt and Paul Johnson note, a supreme confidence that all problems can be overcome. One rarely, if ever, hears a politician, or anyone else, say of a problem, that we cannot solve it.

7. Connected to the idea of labor and the potential to succeed is the entrepreneurial spirit, the idea that people should be able to try new things, whether business or technology, or writing books and speeches, the value of creativity. One can compare our system of education, at all levels, to the more tradition and/or European system. The latter mostly values learning the material and being able to recite it, while in America expressing creativity and one's own thoughts are considered central.

8. There is likewise a certain frontier spirit, a desire to find new lands and try new things. Frederick Jackson Turner so famously gave his frontier speech in 1893, saying that the closing of the physical frontier marked a new time in American history, for the frontier was ever a part of the American spirit. And yet that fascination with trying new things, and finding new lands, still drives America. One thinks of the science fiction stories that have popularized the idea of space travel.

9. Complementing the frontier spirit is the idea of this nation as being a melting pot of many cultures. Once again, we think of the image of the statue of liberty, or the phrase on the nation's seal, "E pluribus unum."

10. There is also the great value we place freedom of religion, and the refusal to establish one religion as official. The different churches thus compete in the marketplace of ideas. And there is a confidence that this competition makes religions stronger, as opposed to dependency on government support. As Alexis de Touqueville noted almost two centuries ago, faith is deeper in America than in the rest of the western world, not despite, but perhaps because, of the fact that there is no state religion.

C. And yet there are tensions.

1. Thus, for example, we value the equality of all people, and yet want those who work hard and innovate to be rewarded and become more exalted.

2. There is the great value we place on education, but also a notion that a populism and a respect for the view of "the common man."

3. We value also place a great value on new things. And yet the nation is based upon the timeless truths expressed in our history, as for example, demonstrated by the references to the founding fathers.

4. We value hard work, and yet we look forward to the Golden Years of retirement, making that time a crowning glory.

5. We value all nations, and yet there is a notion of American exceptionalism, a belief that we have a special place in the world and in history.

6 We value religious diversity, and the debate between religions. And yet there is a confidence that the one God and His laws are knowable and thus should unite all peoples together.

7. Resolving these tensions is a part of the American spirit, and the great American Catholics have worked to do so.

D. These talks will describe 15 great American Catholics, five priests, five religious sisters, and five lay men and women, who have in different walks of life, brought the faith to America and brought America's unique gifts to the Church.