

Rev. Joseph Keating
14th Sunday of OT (A)
Homily

Brothers and sisters, this weekend the Church celebrates the fourteenth Sunday of Ordinary Time, and our nation celebrates her birthday. The convergence of these celebrations gives us opportunity to reflect on the principles of power and unity, and on the implications they have for us as Catholic citizens of the United States of America.

We all know the song “America the Beautiful.”

O beautiful, for spacious skies, for amber waves of grain,
For purple mountains’ majesties above the fruited plain,
America, America, God shed his grace on thee
And crown thy good with brotherhood from sea to shining sea.

Most of us learned this song as children, and we still sing it at civic gatherings, especially on the Fourth of July. The song invokes the name of God, and asks that he shed his grace on our nation in a specific way: to crown the goodness of America with brotherhood from sea to shining sea. Why ask God for this specific grace of brotherhood?

We have rarely been in greater need for the grace of brotherhood, for today our nation is rife with division. We may even feel as if there is a war raging within our borders. Even if it is not a physical war, it is most certainly a culture war. Virtual lines are being drawn in the virtual sand, and everyone is being pressured to identify with one group or another.

While the goals of some groups are unclear, what is clear is that each of these various groups desire power. Some are using means of peaceful protest while others resort to acts of violence. Some seek power thru the use of facts, logic and dialogue, while others instead seek to silence divergent opinions and obviate historical monuments and symbols. All seek power, but not for the same ends.

According to St. Thomas Aquinas,¹ man's happiness does not consist in possessing power. This is for two reasons. First, because power is not an end in itself, but is a tool to be used for a higher purpose. I will return to this point in a moment. Second, because power can be used for either good or for evil, so it does not always lead to our happiness. Power is a dangerous tool, because our fallen human nature is inclined towards sin. Concupiscence is what we call this inclination towards sin. Though we all suffer concupiscence in some degree, there are many in our world who lack self-control and are instead controlled by their sins. Power enhances the influence of persons, whether for good or for evil. If a concupiscible person possesses great power, he/she will cause great destruction and turmoil as he pursues his own evil ends.

What is the higher purpose for which men seek power? We disagree on the answer to this question, and this is precisely the source of our division. This is the center of the culture war. If we want to understand the reason for our division, we must understand our own higher purpose and the higher purposes of others. Whether or not we understand each other's aims will determine whether the culture war ends in division or unity.

Naturally, we should want to remain united, for unity is one of the transcendental aspects of being, according to St. Thomas Aquinas. In other words, it is an aspect of perfection, and it is an end in itself, just like truth, goodness, and beauty. We even recognize unity as one of God's perfections, since he is, in fact, a Trinity of persons, united in divinity. Because we humans are made in God's image, we naturally strive to achieve unity. And so it should be on the national level, for the name of our country even begins with the word "United."

- On US dollars and coins we see the slogan, *E pluribus unum*, "out of the many, one."
- Jesus also desired unity for his followers. In John's Gospel, we observe Jesus praying his high priestly prayer, *ut unum sint*, "that they may be one."
- And in the song, "America, the Beautiful," we ask that God would crown America's goodness with brotherhood. In other words, a familial unity.

The song's first verse ends its plea for brotherhood with the familiar phrase "from sea to shining sea." What might this mean? "From sea to sea" means an integral

¹ *Summa Theologiae*, I-II Q.2 a.4

nation with no artificial land borders, only the natural boundaries of the seas. It is a beautiful and poetic thought that evokes feelings of peace. But why? I submit that “from sea to sea” implies a project of total domination.

What is the goal of this domination? Why would this be a good and desirable thing? Because a sea boundary naturally ensures safety from our enemies. Why is this a good thing? Because we want to live in peace. Why peace? Peace allows us to pursue the higher functions of the human race and gives us the opportunity to flourish as persons. Hence, domination is not an end in itself, nor is it pursued in order to destroy a people, but it is a means by which peace is achieved, that the multitude may flourish.

But where else have we heard this phrase, “from sea to sea”? In our first reading today, we hear a prophecy about Jesus from the prophet Zechariah. The Prophet writes these words about Jesus: “His dominion shall be from sea to sea,” and “He shall proclaim peace to the nations.”² In other words, a Jesus’ dominion is a complete dominion, free from the hands of our enemies, where Jesus guides our feet into the way of peace.

The prophet Zechariah further predicts that Zion’s King shall banish the chariot, the horse, and the bow. These are the very tools of war, of which this future King will have no need. In short, when Christ reigns, there will be peace.

In our time and in our culture, we still use the tools of war, and our Constitution even ensures our right to possess them. But even though weapons can be used responsibly, and can even become a source of entertainment, their presence is a reminder that we lack true peace on Earth as it is in Heaven. The reason so many weapons exist is to defend ourselves against those who seek to harm us. This is due to our fallen human nature and our inclination to sin. The weapons of war are a fact of life on earth because Jesus does not yet reign in every human heart. We pray for his reign to come on Earth as it is in Heaven each time we pray the Lord’s Prayer. We wish for Jesus to win, to reign, and to command. When Jesus reigns from sea to sea, the nations will finally “beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks.”³

² Zechariah 9:10

³ Isaiah 2:4

The way Jesus Christ wins is not thru a physical warfare, but thru spiritual warfare. His victory is achieved when the hearts of men are conformed to the truth, when our desires are pure, and when our words and actions are charitable. When Jesus wins, he establishes a reign of peace. This is true on the individual level, when a person conquers his/her sins by the grace of God, and on the national level, when citizens live in brotherhood that flows from our communion with the One True God.

The way back to unity as a nation is thru communion with one another—that is, to agree on our purpose. The Incarnate God, Jesus Christ, shows us humanity’s purpose—**to live eternally, united with God and with each other forever**. In order to achieve this purpose, Jesus Christ must reign in each of us individually. Until Jesus is the source and summit of our lives, we will never achieve peace with our neighbors.

The purpose of power must be to ensure domestic tranquility, that human persons may flourish. When we flourish, we glorify God, who has placed mankind at the pinnacle of his created world. When we flourish, we live in communion with one another and attract others to that communion. This communion of believers is none other than the Kingdom of God.

If we want God to shed upon us the grace of human brotherhood, we must be united under the Fatherhood of God. We must be living stones built upon the cornerstone, Jesus Christ, to be “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people of his own, so that [we] may announce the praises of him who called [us] out of darkness into his wonderful light.”⁴

This Independence Day, we pray for the graces of peace and brotherhood in our nation, *ut unum simus in Christo, Domino Nostro*.

⁴ 1 Peter 2:9