

Text of Cardinal McElroy's homily: 'The Meaning of Patriotism As We Celebrate Our Nation's Birth'

(The following is the text of a homily given by Cardinal Robert W. McElroy, the archbishop of Washington, during a special Mass of Thanksgiving for the 250th Anniversary of Independence Day that he celebrated at the Cathedral of St. Matthew the Apostle on July 5, 2026.)

This week is a time for prayer, thanksgiving and renewal as we celebrate the 250th anniversary of the founding of our nation. Ours are a rich heritage and culture that have flowed from that moment when the leaders of the 13 colonies put at risk everything that they valued in their lives to embark upon a perilous experiment to create a new nation founded upon democratic principles and human rights. We stand in awe of the vision they emblazoned on this new continent, and of the community and nation that have been built during these past two and a half centuries.

On this great anniversary, we as American Catholics are called to give profound thanks for the blessings God has poured upon us as a people. And we are called to ponder at this moment the searing question: What should patriotism mean for American Catholics?

The Gospel reading today speaks of the Beatitudes lying at the heart of our missions as disciples of Jesus Christ. And one of the problems of how we look upon the Beatitudes is we so often think of them as merely aspirational and not practical, not realistic that we can follow them and attain them. But that is precisely the meaning of the Beatitudes for us, that we are called to deepen and renew in our hearts. The Beatitudes are meant to be directly the pattern that we live as disciples of Jesus Christ. They are not merely a dream of what might be in our lives and our world, but they are the call and the mission of Christ to transform our world into the pattern of the Beatitudes so that God's reign may truly be present.

Thus we are asked to say, what is patriotism, how do we make the Beatitudes the template for which we as Americans, as citizens and believers, exercise our duty and responsibility as patriotic Americans?

In the months leading up to our nation's celebration of our 250th birthday, a broad and vigorous public debate has emerged about the foundation for American patriotism and the very question of what the core identity of America is. For most of our recent history, dedication and love for America have been seen as a commitment to the ideals that the Founders set forth in the Declaration of Independence and the reformatory efforts that have unfolded throughout our national history to correct the massive historical failures in our efforts to live them out as a nation. In this view, America at its core is a set of ideals and aspirations which we are called to work toward and to attain, and patriotism is the effort to attain them. In our diversity we find unity not in ties of blood, like so many other nations, but in the principles that have forged us as a people.

More recently, it has been widely proposed in these past months that patriotism cannot effectively proceed from a set of ideals but must be rooted in love for the concrete society in which we live. It is, this side proposes, a specific national community and culture of which we are a part that affective patriotism must take root.

For us as American Catholics, the proposed contradiction between these two alternative pathways to patriotism is a false dilemma. For in the eyes of faith both of these pathways are essential for understanding the call of the believer to act as citizen and patriot in the turbulent times in which we live.

It is hard for us to recapture the dilemma of our nation's Founders when they declared their independence from Great Britain. They understood at that moment that they were launching an experiment in democracy in a world that had not known a democratic republic for more than twelve hundred years. They were embarking upon a war with the greatest military power in the world. And they had to forge unity among the fractious 13 colonies.

Their Declaration of Independence set forth a series of principles that gripped the world with its beauty and depth. All men are created equal. They are endowed by their Creator with inalienable rights.

These included life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Justice was to be the framework of political life and of law. To these principles, and to the democracy they were launching, the Founders pledged “their lives, their fortunes and their sacred honor.”

For Catholics, these principles and standards stand as a compelling foundation for American patriotism. They are explicitly rooted in God as the ultimate source of human dignity. They point to major elements of contemporary Catholic social teaching on equality, freedom, and justice. Most importantly, these principles have cried out and still cry out continually for reform in our society to eliminate the massive failures we have encountered: slavery, the treatment of indigenous peoples, the rights of women, imperialism, racism and religious persecution.

Patriotism rooted in the founding principles of our nation is a profoundly aspirational patriotism, never content with limitations on fundamental human rights. In this way, it correlates with Catholic social doctrine which continually seeks reform and is never complacent. It is a mission which never diminishes and never ends for us as Catholics and as citizens of the United States.

If patriotism proceeding from our founding principles provides one essential foundation for understanding what Catholic patriotism should be, a love for the concrete society and culture in which we live is the other.

We can see the basis for such a love of our nation in the central graces of American culture that the five most recent popes have highlighted in speaking to the American people.

Saint John Paul II stated during his visit to the United States in 1987: “I greet once again the American people with their history, their achievements, and their great possibilities of serving humanity. I willingly pay honor to the United States for what she has accomplished for her own people, for all those whom she has embraced in a cultural creativity and welcomed into an indivisible national unity, according to its own motto: *E pluribus unum*.”

Saint John Paul also emphasized freedom as a great grace in American life and culture. “From the beginning of America, freedom was directed to forming a well-ordered society and to promoting its peaceful life. Freedom was channeled to the fullness of human life, to the preservation of human dignity and to the safeguarding of all human rights. An experience in ordered freedom is truly a cherished part of the history of this land.”

In his 2008 visit to the United States, Pope Benedict emphasized the great achievement of the United States in bringing a robust religious perspective into the heart of public life, while creating a culture of genuine religious liberty. As a result, he said “from the dawn of the Republic, America’s quest for freedom has been guided by the conviction that the principles governing political and social life are intimately linked to a moral order based on the dominion of God our Creator.”

When he visited the United States in 2015, Pope Francis pointed to the dreams that animate American culture, the adventuresome spirit of the United States, its creativity, productivity and positive drive. “I am happy that America continues to be for many a land of dreams. Dreams that lead to action, to participation, to commitment. Dreams which awaken what is deepest and truest in the life of a people.”

And Pope Francis pointed poignantly to the sacrifices and hard work of so many Americans to build up the society of which they are a part. “They shaped fundamental values which will endure forever in the spirit of the American people. A people with this spirit can live through so many crises, tensions and conflicts, while always finding the resources to move forward, and to do so with dignity.”

Finally, on this very weekend, Pope Leo accepted the Liberty Medal and spoke movingly of his love for his homeland: “As a son of this great country, founded by men and women who dreamed of liberty and a better life for themselves and for their children, I join you in asking God’s blessing upon America’s future....”

Pope Leo also emphasized that “In these past two-hundred and fifty years, for so many peoples throughout the world, it was the firm resolve to achieve the noble vision of the nation’s founders that made America a byword for

freedom, as the country opened its doors to successive waves of immigrants....It was this same love of freedom that inspired the United States, in the darkest hours of the last century, at the time of the two world wars, to look beyond itself and, at great sacrifice, to champion the cause of freedom beyond its own borders.”

Unity, freedom, religious liberty, a land of dreams, a nation of sacrifice and the thirst for justice. These and so many other profound qualities of our culture call us to love our nation for its accomplishments and richness in these past two hundred and fifty years. They are a strong anchor for a genuine affective patriotism and celebration in these days.

The Church’s theology provides a framework for understanding this affective patriotism. It is the Catholic teaching on the principle of solidarity, which points out that we are all blessed by the society in which we live, and we are all debtors of that society. Solidarity is an antidote to the radical individualism that can blind us to the many riches we have received from our society and culture as a whole. It leads us to understand that our participation in social life calls us to build up our civic communities, to provide for the well-being of others, to seek harmony among us all. This solidarity is being eclipsed by the polarization that is tearing our nation apart at this moment. Any genuine patriotism, especially one rooted in Catholic faith, must resist the social tides that estrange us from one another and turn our society inward, transforming it into a warped patriotism that is exclusive and purest.

As we celebrate this great moment that marks our nation’s past and calls us to its future, let us as people of faith embrace a patriotism rooted both in the founding vision of our nation and in our deep love for the specific culture and society in which we live. And let us also as people of faith constantly reform both of these foundations of patriotism in the light of the Gospel and the Beatitudes which are the template for our transformation of the world. For we must always, in patriotism, be moving forward, never complacent, always aspirational and called to the greatness, the true greatness to which our country should move.