

# We Hold These Truths

An article series exploring Catholic contributions over 250 years of American history.



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## An American Catholic Patriotism

by **M.T. Lu**, University of St. Thomas (MN)

“Our country, right or wrong.”

So Commodore Steven Decatur famously declared his loyalty to the United States in celebration of his victory over the Barbary Pirates in 1815. This notoriously American sentiment has long been regarded as an expression of unthinking nationalism. Reflecting on it many years later G. K. Chesterton would acidly remark that it was “a thing that no patriot would think of saying. It is like saying, ‘My mother, drunk or sober.’”

How should American Catholics think about patriotism today? Is Chesterton right, and Decatur’s boast just a slightly more eloquent version of the “USA! USA! USA!” chants that so offend the sensibilities of the sophisticated? Or, is Decatur’s heart in the right place, even if open to misinterpretation?

As is so often the case, we can find clarity by turning to St. Thomas Aquinas. In fact, he is unambiguous in holding that patriotism is a virtue—it is a part of piety and, therefore, of justice. He explains that we owe honor to our parents and country (patria) because they are “principles of our being and government.” With this he grounds our duties of piety and patriotism in the fact that who we are, and our

understanding of the good, substantially derives from our parents and country.

Obviously, each of us owes a great debt to our parents. Not only did they beget us, but the vast majority of us were also raised and formed by them. Just as a good ruler governs the state for the sake of the common good, good parents “govern” their children by shaping them to desire and pursue what is authentically good. Our obligations to our parents, expressed through the virtue of piety, involve acknowledging their rightful authority, which exists for the sake of that same good. Even as adults, when we have passed out of their direct authority, we still owe them honor and respect, which is perhaps why the Fourth Commandment is actually the first concerned with human morality.

Thomas notes that the nature of our duty to parents is directly parallel to our natural moral obligation to God. This is likely to occasion some confusion since we Catholics normally think of our relationship to God in supernatural terms. When we receive the sacraments we are receiving supernatural gifts. While these gifts are ultimately higher and better than what we are able to do by human means alone, the Church

has long taught that we can also know God by natural reason. Accordingly, all humans have obligations to God in natural justice, apart from what the baptized may also owe to God on account of his revealed Law. Thomas calls this the natural virtue of religion.

Like our parents, God is a “principle of being and government” for each of us. Of course, God is the primary principle, and so our obligations to Him outweigh any other, including even our duties to our parents. Nonetheless, it’s very important to see that the duties in both cases have the same normative structure and arise for the same reasons, precisely because we are the kind of thing that has principles of being and government.

We are now ready to see how patriotism fits into this. As already noted, we actually have two secondary principles of being and government: our parents and also our country. We owe our existence as the kinds of people we are not only to our parents but also to our civil community. Our nation, through its laws and institutions, educates and shapes us in much the same way that our parents form us. Therefore, just as we have natural duties to God and our parents, we have analogous duties of patriotism to our civil communities.

Of course, it is one thing to see that we have duties of patriotism in general, and quite another to know exactly what they require. But the same is true with our parents; I know it would be wrong to let my aged parents be put out onto the street, but does honoring them require that I give them a veto over my choice of spouse? Similarly, I know it would be wrong to abandon my country in her hour of need, but does honoring the flag require me to accept any given policy the government might choose to advance? In both cases, practical wisdom (prudence) is required, and we cannot articulate

ahead of time simple rules that will easily resolve the many difficult questions that arise. But just as my duty to honor and respect my parents remains even if they are flawed or imprudent or even occasionally maddening, the honor and respect owed to my country does not depend on who is in charge or whether I happen to like or dislike that administration’s policies.

So where does that leave us? From the perspective of natural reason, we can unambiguously say that patriotism is a virtue and a requirement of natural justice. In our day and age, it is difficult to see anything other than the Constitutional Republic in which we live as the proper object of that patriotic duty. At the same time, we also know that many of our country’s laws and policies are contrary to that same natural justice, from legalized abortion to euthanasia and much more. And yet, for all her flaws, America remains a principle of our being and government. So, in one very important sense, Commodore Decatur was correct: as Americans, she is our country, right or wrong, and we are called to honor her much as we are called to honor our parents. However, Chesterton’s concern was not unfounded; we cannot let a legitimate love of country blind us to injustice. As Catholics, then, we are called to the hard work of making her more right than wrong, even while knowing that task will never be complete.

## About the Author

M.T. Lu is an Assistant Professor of Philosophy at the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul, Minnesota, with expertise in normative ethics, Aristotelian philosophy, and bioethics. He holds a Ph.D. from Cornell University and frequently writes on the intersection of faith, ethics, and contemporary issues.

