

# We Hold These Truths

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



United States  
Conference of  
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## What Do We Love When We Love America?

by Dr. Terence Sweeney, Villanova University

“Glory be to God for dappled things –  
For skies of couple-colour as a brinded cow;  
For rose-moles all in stipple upon trout that swim.”  
– Gerard Manley Hopkins, SJ

St Augustine’s *Confessions* are his story of falling in love with God. During his narrative, he asks, “what do I love when I love thee, O Lord?” He asks because the question motivates his search for his Beloved and so deepens his love. Augustine asks also to avoid falling in love with something that is *not God*, aiming for the reality of God rather than an idol. We should all ask ourselves this question not only of our love of God but of all of what we love. This applies especially now as we consider the 250 anniversary of our Declaration of Independence. We ought to ask, ‘what do we love when we love America?’ In asking this, we can understand how to rightly love our country *and* grasp what is the unique goodness of these United States.

First, the question pushes us to be intentional about how we rightly order the love that is part of our humanity. Augustine understood well that we humans are lovers. We are right to love the scent of BBQ, a cold beer on a hot day, the sound of jazz or bluegrass, the feel of the brisk Atlantic or Pacific air, the stunning grandeur of Yosemite or the Big Apple. All things we love ought to help lead us back to the original love of God. Our loves

must not become disordered. It would be grotesque to put a love of baseball above my children. Likewise, although power, money, and freedom can be instruments for good, our love is disordered when we seek power before justice, amass money while neglecting the poor, or hold on to individual freedom at the expense of the unborn. When our loves are disordered, we fall into sin. For Catholics, we need always to love God and His Church far more than any earthly city. We live as pilgrims called to love the place of our pilgrimage and to love our pilgrim destination and our fellow pilgrims more. When we try to figure out what we love about the U.S., we need to get that order right and never love the U.S. too much. More than wealth, power, or autonomy, we need to love justice, human dignity, and the poor, whom God’s “preferential choice fell upon” as Augustine puts it.

This means that a real love of country is unafraid to confess and repent for when our loves have become disordered: putting a desire to expand our the United States above the rights of Tribal peoples, embracing white supremacy rather than the equal dignity of all people, loving the wealth generated by an unfettered market while poor and working people suffer. And we should examine our own hearts for fear of new ways of going wrong, like loving autonomy more than the lives of the sick, loving borders more than our migrant brethren,

and loving weapons more than our social infrastructure oriented toward the common good.

## What is so loveable about this land?

What we love about our country is a matter of what Augustine calls “the agreement about the shared objects of our love.” One such object of our love is our nation’s ‘catholicity,’ its way of being a little bit like the Church in being a home to people from all nations.

Augustine wrote that our pilgrim church takes “citizens out of all nations and gathers together a society of pilgrims of all languages, not scrupling about diversities in the manners.” The diversity of the Catholic Church reflects the diversity and beauty of the very Body of Christ. God's plan for his creation includes and celebrates the diversity of cultures, peoples, and experiences. The U.S. has an opportunity to celebrate this pluralism as we welcome people from all nations, languages, and manners, uniting them under our common laws and principles. Catholics celebrate this because of our deep faith in the freedom God gives us a part of our inherent human dignity. As Catholics in the U.S., we have twice the reason to hope our country lives out this reality.

Our nation features a wide variety of regions, different climates, and radically varying terrains. Our shared culture is real, but it varies from old Yankee stock in New England to old Mexican stock in Arizona, from new Hmong immigrants in Minnesota to new Venezuelans in Miami.

While English is our primary tongue, we have always had many languages, spoken here from the Quebecois of New England to the Creole of New Orleans, from the Pennsylvania Dutch of the mid-Atlantic to Spanglish spoken across the country. On my little block in Philadelphia, we are Haitian, Liberian, Jamaican, African, Irish, and Venezuelan Americans. James Joyce famously said of the Catholic Church, “here comes everybody.” You could same the same thing about this country. *And it is a great thing.*

## Out of Many, One

Amidst this diversity, there is still a fundamental unity around certain shared objects of love. Specifically, our country holds certain truths as self-evident; we commit to government of the people, by the people, for the people; we work to make freedom ring from every mountainside; we promise to ask what we can do for our country. We are people with different backgrounds and immigration statuses, with widely different political views and religious traditions. Amidst the manyness, we are a country that stands and pledges to the flag and “to the Republic for which it stands, one Nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.” That is what makes us one.

Augustine said of real friendship, that it makes *e pluribus unum*, out of many one. I pray that a rightly ordered patriotic love may help people and the common good to flourish. I pray that we will commit to better shared objects of our love: justice, dignity, and peace. I pray that we will confess our shared failures and celebrate our shared accomplishments. I pray we will celebrate the dappled beauty of our land and our people. I pray we will commit to the shared idea of a republic and the liberty and justice for which it stands. I pray that Catholics will continue to share with our fellow Americans the rich traditions of rightly ordered love, celebration of God's diversity, and a commitment to human dignity. Committing to those loves is the best patriotism, the kind that knows what it loves when it loves this land.

## About the Author

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