Opinion
Guest Voices

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As the United States marks 250 years of its founding, many Christians are joining the celebration with a particular conviction that our nation was always, at its heart, a Christian nation. Some think reaffirming that identity has become the urgent task of our moment.

I think that if Christians wish to reaffirm something essential in this country, the answer is not to compel a Christian nation, but to rediscover a Christian heart. The promises on which America was founded can be made great for the next 250 years and beyond with a Christain heart guided by true witness to the Gospel.

No one denies that many of the ideals shaping the American experiment — freedom, justice and human dignity — are inseparable from centuries of Christian thought and culture. Hegel argued that Christianity first proclaimed the freedom of all human beings as such.

The church's contributions to this nation run deep: schools, hospitals and networks of care for the poor, marginalized and migrant. People like Frances Cabrini, Augustus Tolton, Katharine Drexel and Dorothy Day bore witness not through political power but through lives poured out in service.

But 250 years is not only a story of greatness. It is also a story of contradiction.

As Pope Leo XIV writes in *Magnifica Humanitas*, Catholic social doctrine is "not merely a message addressed to society; it is also an examination of conscience for the Church." The Christian story in the USA invites precisely such honesty.

Christian faith helped inspire some of this nation's highest moral aspirations, yet Christians also participated in some of its gravest failures. Indigenous communities encountered missionaries who defended their dignity and others who remained entangled in systems of displacement and cultural destruction. During slavery, Christians appealed to Scripture both to defend human bondage and to condemn it, revealing how easily faith can become either an instrument of moral clarity or a language enlisted in the service of power.

This examination of conscience is not confined to history. Christians continue to wrestle with moral questions touching human dignity: abortion, the death penalty and assisted suicide; the treatment of migrants, prisoners and the poor; racial justice and economic inequality. Faith does not spare the church from these

struggles. Rather, it asks whether Christians are willing to let the Gospel continually examine our fears and assumptions.

The church must also continue to confront wounds inflicted from within. The sexual abuse crisis, and the failures of leadership that enabled it, profoundly damaged the church's moral witness and exposed how institutional self-protection can obscure the very Gospel we proclaim. If this anniversary means anything spiritually, it must include the humility to confess not only the sins of society, but our own.

So when Christians today speak of recovering the United States' Christian identity, what do they mean?

As the nation marks 250 years, renewed appeals to the Christian roots of the United States have accompanied public celebrations and civic conversations. Beneath some of these appeals, one senses a deeper temptation: to believe that Christianity can endure only when secured through institutions, protected by political arrangements, or identified with parties that seem to defend one set of Christian values against another.

The Gospel speaks differently. Christ does not advance the kingdom through political coercion or institutional domination. He speaks of seeds scattered into uncertain ground, of growth hidden from sight, entrusted to freedom. The kingdom arrives quietly, often unnoticed, yet capable of transforming everything around it.

For this reason, the church's mission has never been simply to preserve Christian influence, but to proclaim the good news. Christianity spreads not primarily through argument or cultural power, but through witness: lives changed by grace, communities marked by charity, hope embodied in ordinary faithfulness. As Pope Paul VI observed in *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, "Modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses."

The task is not coercive proselytism, nor merely to defend Christianity as cultural inheritance. It is not about treating conversations as battles to be won. Christians are called to proclaim the good news with confidence that grace arrives before us, that truth can withstand questions, and that God is not absent from the lives of

those who seem furthest away. Institutions may preserve memory, and political arrangements may protect religious freedom, but neither can substitute for conversion of heart.

The Gospel's answer to fear is not certainty, power or control, but love. As St. John writes, "There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear" (1 John 4:18). Fear closes inward and grasps for security. Love remains open. It trusts that grace precedes us, that Christ is already at work, and that faith need not be imposed in order to endure.

The future of Christianity depends less on whether Christians can preserve a civilization and more on whether they still trust Christ's promise: "Do not be afraid… I am with you always, to the end of the age," and therefore live and speak without fear.

This is why the decision of the bishops of the United States to consecrate the nation to the Sacred Heart of Jesus during this 250th anniversary feels spiritually significant. The Sacred Heart is not merely a devotional image; it is the sign of a love pierced yet unafraid, sovereign yet vulnerable, offered freely rather than imposed. In turning toward the heart of Christ, the church is reminded that its deepest strength has never been cultural dominance, but confidence in a love powerful enough to cast out fear.

A consecration to the heart of Christ is not a sanctification of national identity or a claim to religious triumph. It is, or ought to be, an examination of conscience, an act of entrustment and a purification of the heart. To consecrate a nation to the Sacred Heart is not simply to seek divine protection. It is to ask that our fears, resentments and distortions be reordered by the love of Christ, that our hearts may expand to love as he loved us.

In *Dilexit Nos*, Pope Francis wrote that devotion to the Sacred Heart is not retreat from the world but deeper encounter with it, because "we cannot attain our fulfilment as human beings unless we open our hearts to others; only through love do we become fully ourselves."

For the church has always been most convincing not when it stood protected, but when believers walked into uncertainty carrying astonishing news: that love is stronger than fear, mercy stronger than failure and Christ was already there among strangers.

America has often been most compelling not merely in its power, but in the ideals it projected through the everyday decency of its people: liberty ordered to virtue, dignity extended to the vulnerable and hope offered to strangers. Near its shores, the nation imagined itself through words that still challenge the conscience: "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free." We have not always lived faithfully to that aspiration. Yet if the United States at 250 seeks renewal, Christians might remember that the Gospel speaks most clearly not when fear closes the door, but when love widens it.