Culture



U.S. fans react in Portland, Ore., July 6, 2026, after the United States was eliminated from the FIFA World Cup. The United States men's national soccer team ended its run following a 4-1 defeat to Belgium in the teams' round of 16 game. (OSV News/Reuters/Denny Medley)



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I went into our nation's semiquincentennial weekend feeling as I normally do around overtly patriotic events: deeply conflicted. There is much that I love about being American and what our country can represent. When I went to Boston on my recent soccer pilgrimage, I walked a bit of the Freedom Trail and was struck by the ways ordinary people worked together to resist tyranny. At the same time, I am deeply distressed by the way the current administration is demonizing immigrants, minorities and the vulnerable, all while wrapping themselves in the flag.

My own patriotism is probably best expressed by Dorothy Day's 1942 statement in The Catholic Worker newspaper: "We love our country ... We have been the only country in the world where men of all nations have taken refuge from oppression. We recognize that while in the order of intention we have tried to stand for peace, for love of our brother, in the order of execution we have failed as Americans in living up to our principles."

While our national ideals have always outstripped our reality, the very existence of the ideals is still worth celebrating. Celebration becomes harder, though, when the government itself denigrates those ideals.

In a time when patriotism feels complicated, the World Cup has given us a chance to root for something overtly, unapologetically American. During the stateside games, there have been so many fans in the crowd wearing the American flag home jersey that at times it looks like entire sections of the stadium are decked out in waving red, white and blue.

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The team itself reflects the principles of which Dorothy Day spoke: Nearly half the players have dual nationality, they play for club teams all over the world, yet they all have chosen to play here and represent our country. As team captain Tim Ream said , "We've said this as a group with all our different backgrounds, where we all have grown up, it's a true representation of what America is. ... It's a melting pot of people, of personalities, of characters."

Our "melting pot" team has felt like the American ideal brought to life; through their first four games they played inspiring, joyful, free-flowing soccer — and the country turned out to support them.

And then the president had to get involved in overturning the red card given to our star striker on July 1, in contravention of all the standard rules and protocols of the tournament. And just like that, what should have been a pure, joyful experience felt tainted. With this intervention, reeking of corruption and scandal, Donald Trump managed to make rooting for the U.S. men's national team feel like every other aspect of being an American this year: complicated and contaminated.

I wonder if the players felt it, too. Unfortunately, a team that had looked sharp, clinical and fearless in the earlier games played sloppy and scared on July 6. We lost convincingly.



U.S. teammates huddle at Seattle Stadium after they were eliminated from the FIFA World Cup July 6, 2026. (OSV News/Reuters/Agustin Marcarian)

In the aftermath of an embarrassment like this, there's a temptation to question if our patriotic embrace of this team was misguided — to wonder if perhaps it's better to maintain a cynical distance. But this would be a mistake. It is good to care passionately; to join with one's neighbors; to cheer wildly and mourn collectively.

Pope Leo XIV, in his July Fourth Letter to the American People, called on us to strengthen our communities by "respecting … differences and working together" and challenged us to welcome, protect and assist immigrants with "compassion and generosity."

The diaspora communities present throughout the country who are cheering on teams still active in the tournament give us the chance to put the pope's words into action.

There are three rounds of this tournament yet to be played. Although the U.S. team is out, as hosts we still have a chance to live out the best of our American ideals with all of the world watching.

This story appears in the **World Cup 2026** feature series. View the full series.