NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (https://www.ncronline.org)

Independence or interdependence?

Richard McBrien | Jun. 29, 2009 Essays in Theology

This Saturday, July 4th, is Independence Day in the United States. It is a day for celebration, to be sure, but all too rarely do those Americans who observe the holiday reflect on its original inspiration. The same, of course, holds true for Memorial Day, Labor Day, Thanksgiving, and even Christmas.

Many countries have their own distinctive celebrations to mark the anniversary of their liberation from foreign rule or autocratic government. There is nothing unique about what occurs in the United States on the Fourth of July. Canada Day, celebrated on July 1, offers a close, but not exact, parallel.

It is an occasion not only to reflect on the courage and sacrifices of those who made the original "declaration of independence," often at serious risk to their own lives, but also to acknowledge that we can take their inspired idea of independence to extremes.

The spirit of independence can degenerate into what was once commonly referred to as "social Darwinism," which applies the Darwinian principle of the survival of the fittest to groupings within society itself. Social Darwinism is partially captured in the saying, "I'm up, pull up the ladder."

There is still a mentality abroad that identifies the well-being of one's own group with the well-being of the whole. If some groups fall by the wayside, so be it.

According to social Darwinism, the poor are poor because they are lazy. People of color and other minorities falsely claim discrimination when their lot is really attributable to their own failings.

What Independence Day should inspire, in whatever country it is observed, are some deeper reflections on the most effective antidote to social Darwinism, namely, the spirit of *inter*dependence, which is an essentially Christian idea (even if not exclusively Christian).

Jesus left us two great commandments: love of God and love of neighbor. The "disciple whom Jesus loved" (John 20:2), John the Apostle and Evangelist, elaborated upon Jesus' teaching in his First Letter, or Epistle.

"Whoever says he [or she] is in the light, yet hates his brother [or sister], is still in the darkness" (1 John 2:9).

"For this is the message you have heard from the beginning: we should love one another. ..." (3:11).

"If someone who has worldly means sees a brother [or sister] in need and refuses him [or her] compassion, how can the love of God remain in [that person]? Children, let us love not in word or speech but in deed and truth" (vv. 17-18).

"Beloved, let us love one another, because love is of God. ... Whoever is without love does not know God, for God is love. ... No one has ever seen God. Yet if we love one another, God remains in us and [God's] love is brought to perfection in us" (4:7,8,12).

And then we come to the classic text, which is rightly quoted so frequently, and which clearly defines what may otherwise seem a complicated theological principle, namely, the principle of sacramentality: "If anyone says, 'I love God,' but hates his brother [or sister], he [or she] is a liar; for whoever does not love a brother [or sister] whom he [or she] has seen cannot love God whom he [or she] has not seen. This is the commandment we have from [Jesus]: whoever loves God must also love his brother [or sister]" (4:20-21).

The principle of sacramentality applies much more broadly than to the grace-bearing rituals commonly known as the seven sacraments. The Church itself is a sacrament, and so is Jesus Christ. They are sacraments insofar as God is present and redemptively at work in them.

The principle is at the heart of Christian faith and practice. Christianity is not only a matter of belief, but also, and more fundamentally, of action. In fact, beliefs that do not issue in action are empty. As St. John put it in his First Letter, it is not a matter of loving "in word or speech but in deed and truth."

Over the past five centuries Catholics have traditionally countered the Reformers's *sola fides* ("faith alone") with an appeal to the Letter of James, with its own classic expression: "Be doers of the word and not hearers only ..." (1:22), and its equally classic: "So also faith of itself, if it does not have works, is dead" (2:17), and "a person is justified by works and not by faith alone" (v. 24). Again, "faith without works is dead" (v. 26).

Every Independence Day, therefore, must also be a celebration of the spirit and demands of *inter*dependence. It is what Christian discipleship is all about.

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Source URL (retrieved on *10/27/2016 - 20:34*): https://www.ncronline.org/blogs/essays-theology/independence-or-interdependence