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A July 4th Complaint

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Distinctly Catholic

Yesterday, at Mass, the closing hymn was "America the Beautiful." This always strikes me as a bad choice. Now, I do think America is beautiful. But the third verse is also strikingly Calvinistic. "May God thy gold refine, Till all success be nobleness and every gain divine." These are not words that would have come out of the mouth of, say, Hans Urs von Balthasar. Actually, it was Balthasar who said that "Success is not a name of God and, so, it is not a Gospel category."

The National Anthem, with its un-singable melody and militaristic themes is scarcely better. It should not be the National Anthem.

For patriotic occasions, especially church services, the obvious choice is the "Battle Hymn of the Republic." First of all, it was written during the war that really did forge the nation. It perfectly captures, better than the verse quoted above, the sense of divine providence, acknowledging the possibility that God's judgment upon our nation may not be so benign. And, its otherworldliness is a nice tonic to the Americanism that so dominates contemporary thought on both left and right. The relationship of the Gospel to our culture is a complicated one, but the second we forget that the Gospel stands in critique of all human cultures, we have lost something. In the "Battle Hymn of the Republic" the glory is found in "His bosom", not ours, and it transfigures us. When we are free from the need for transfiguration, we can pat ourselves on the back for our success, but it will not be our success really. It will be His. That is something worth singing about.

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