

14th Sunday in Ordinary time

Good morning, Church. When I first told
Today my brothers and sisters is a day of double
celebration.

We have come first to celebrate the Holy
Eucharist, the source and summit of our
Christian life. At the same time, our nation
marks an extraordinary milestone: the 250th
anniversary of the Declaration of
Independence.

For two and a half centuries, America has
aspired to be a land of liberty—a place where
people could live in freedom, worship according
to conscience, and build lives of hope for
themselves and their families. We also know
that our history has not always lived up to those
ideals. Every generation has had to renew the

work of justice, heal old wounds, and broaden the promise of liberty to all.

Today's Scriptures invite us to look even deeper. They remind us that while political freedom is a precious gift, there is an even greater freedom—the freedom that comes from belonging to Jesus Christ.

The readings offer us three invitations.

The first comes from the prophet Zechariah:

"Behold, your king shall come to you."

Notice what kind of king God sends.

Not a conqueror riding a warhorse.

Not a ruler surrounded by armies.

Not a king who inspires fear.

Instead, He comes humble, riding on a donkey.

His power is not measured by force but by mercy. His victory is not won through violence

but through self-giving love. And because of that, Zechariah says, He will proclaim peace to the nations.

This is the King we follow.

His kingdom stretches "from sea to sea," not because borders have expanded, but because hearts have been transformed.

The second invitation comes from Jesus Himself.

"Come to me, all you who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest."

Who receives this invitation?

Not only the successful.

Not only the powerful.

Not only those who seem to have everything together.

Jesus calls the weary.

The discouraged.

The grieving.

Those carrying burdens no one else can see.

Those wondering whether anyone notices their struggles.

He invites every person who longs for peace.

Those words echo another invitation that has become part of America's story. On the Statue of Liberty are Emma Lazarus' famous words:

"Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free...
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to
me."

For generations, those words have symbolized the hope that America could be a refuge for those seeking a better life.

Yet they also remind us of an even older invitation.

Long before ships entered New York Harbor, Jesus stood before ordinary people and said, "*Come to me.*"

The Statue of Liberty welcomes people to a nation.

Jesus welcomes people into the Kingdom of God.

America can offer opportunity.

Christ offers salvation.

America can safeguard important freedoms.

Christ alone can free the human heart from sin, fear, and death.

That brings us to the third invitation, found in St. Paul's Letter to the Romans.

Paul tells us that if the Spirit of God dwells within us, then we belong to Christ. The same Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead is alive within us, giving us strength to live not according to selfish desires but according to God's will. That is authentic freedom.

You see, Authentic freedom is not simply the ability to do whatever we want.

It is the ability to become who God created us to be.

It is the Freedom to choose what is good. To choose Truth over convenience.

Authentic Freedom is choosing forgiveness instead of revenge. Mercy instead of hatred.

Generosity instead of selfishness. Love instead of fear.

Only the Holy Spirit can form that kind of freedom within us.

And when He does, He changes not only individuals but families, communities, and nations.

This week our bishops here in Atlanta offered a beautiful witness to that truth. In expressing their support for the Dominican Sisters of Hawthorne, they reminded us that they speak "not as a matter of political partisanship, but as shepherds of the Church bearing witness to the enduring truth of the sacred dignity of every human person as created by God."

That sentence captures the heart of today's Gospel.

Every human person possesses a dignity that no government gives and no government can take

away, because every human person is created by God.

For nearly 125 years, the Dominican Sisters of Hawthorne have lived that conviction by caring for the dying poor, asking nothing in return.

Here in our own archdiocese, through Our Lady of Perpetual Help Home, they have served the sick with remarkable tenderness for generations. They do not ask first whether someone is wealthy or poor, popular or forgotten. They see in every patient the face of Christ.

The bishops remind us that religious liberty is not merely about protecting the Church's rights. It is about protecting the Church's freedom to carry out Christ's mission of mercy. As they wrote, "the freedom to live and to serve in accordance with the teaching of the

Church is not a privilege to be granted by the State, but a right that belongs to every person and every religious community."

That is an important reminder on Independence Day.

Religious freedom is not simply the freedom to worship for one hour on Sunday.

It is the freedom to live our faith every day.

To serve the poor.

To welcome the stranger.

To care for the sick.

To defend the dignity of every human life.

To proclaim the truth with both courage and charity.

That is the kind of freedom that strengthens a nation.

As we celebrate America's 250th birthday, perhaps the greatest gift Catholics can offer our country is not simply patriotism, important as that is. Our greatest gift is holiness.

A nation becomes stronger when its people become more honest.

More compassionate.

More forgiving.

More prayerful.

More committed to seeing every human being as a son or daughter of God.

Two hundred fifty years ago, our founders wrote that all people "are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights."

As Christians, we understand why those words endure.

Our rights come from our Creator because our dignity comes from our Creator.

And if our dignity comes from God, then no one is disposable.

Not the unborn.

Not the immigrant seeking hope.

Not the elderly.

Not the poor.

Not the prisoner.

Not the sick.

Not the dying.

Not the lonely neighbor.

Not even the person with whom we deeply disagree.

Every one of them is loved by God.

Every one of them is someone to whom Christ says, "Come to me."

Every one of them is someone in whom we are called to recognize the face of Christ.

Tonight, as fireworks light the sky, we will rightly thank God for the blessings of this nation and pray for all who have sacrificed to preserve its freedoms. We will pray for our leaders, for peace in our world, and for wisdom as our country begins its next chapter.

But here, at this altar, we remember something even greater.

Our deepest citizenship is not in any earthly nation.

Our deepest citizenship is in the Kingdom of God.

The humble King still comes to us.

The Holy Spirit still gives us life.

The invitation of Jesus remains open.

"Come to me, all you who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest."

May we come to Him today.

May we be renewed by His Spirit.

And may we leave this church as faithful citizens of heaven, helping our nation become ever more worthy of the God who has so richly blessed it.

Amen.