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## God and the Patriot

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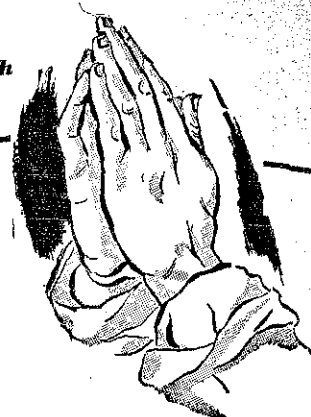
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## God and the Patriot

by **KILIAN McDONNELL, O.S.B.**



**T**HERE was a time when "patriot" was a glorious title. Today one who is known as a patriot is suspect. Immediately we want to know what he has to sell or what office he is seeking.

Our suspicions are not entirely without a basis. Patriotism is frequently used as a front. It is a mask for petty politicians and well-dressed scoundrels. Under the guise of patriotism walks a multitude of private vices and national sins. Then there is that strange phenomenon, the professional patriot. He may or may not be wealthy, but his claim to fame is his patriotism. He is an incurable speech-maker and an inveterate flag-waver. If anyone but lightly nods at him, he is off with bunting and banners and an expanded version of the Gettysburg Address. Never is a statue unveiled, a tape cut, or a building dedicated without his presence. But his patriotism is shallow. In fact, his patriotism is just as deep as it serves his own personal ambition.

All of this is unfortunate because it makes a virtue, a true virtue, appear as a pose, a posture assumed for vanity's sake. It is always sad when a virtue is thrown into disrepute by its counterfeit. There is the difficulty of trying to convince people that it is quite possible to be truly patriotic. They have seen so much of the shadow that they have persistent doubts about the substance.

The Church has taught from the beginning that patriotism is a virtue. Now if patriotism is a virtue, it should, like all virtues, be rewarded in heaven. God will do just that. He will reward in heaven those who were truly patriotic on earth. True patriotism is pleasing to God.

Patriotism is not something we can choose to cultivate or choose to do without. It is not the same as choosing between going golfing or not going golfing. We have a duty to be patriotic, a duty for which God will hold us responsible, a duty whose unfulfillment God will punish. For instance, the

soldier who, because he fears for his life, flees from his post contrary to the orders of his commanding officer, sins against the virtue of patriotism. He sins against God as well as against his country. We are bound by civil laws to defend our country. The law of God also binds us to defend our country. The authority invested in our government comes from God. We must be subject to it not merely because we fear the punishment the state might inflict. As St. Paul says, not to be subject to the lawful authority of the state is to make oneself guilty in the eyes of God.

**T**HE reverence and respect we owe our country is comparable to that we owe our parents. We are rightly called sons and daughters of our country, for it is the fatherland and we are its children. That would seem to indicate the duty of being solicitous for the welfare of the country, either on the national or the local level, as we are solicitous for the welfare of our parents. Seen in this light, voting is something more than a right—a right for which we are willing to pay with our blood, but, paradoxically, a right we will not take the trouble to exercise because it means the effort of walking three blocks to the polls. For the true patriot, voting is a duty. It is a matter of principle, even further, a matter of virtue, for him to inform himself and go to the polls each time an election is held, whether the issue is the election of the village mayor or the president of the country.

But there is patriotism and there is patriotism. Patriotism is a true virtue and a great virtue, but it is not the greatest virtue, as we are sometimes led to believe. We owe reverence and obedience to our country. However, we never forget that our country is not a great god, not even a little god. It is made up of human beings who sometimes act in ways that do not quite attain the human. The true patriot does not think it degrading to his homeland to believe,

repeat, and insist upon the words of Lincoln: "It is the duty of nations as well as of men to own their dependence upon the overruling power of God." With Lincoln he recognizes that nations, like individuals, are capable of sin. He knows that at times God permits our nation to be afflicted with war or fear of war because of "our presumptuous (national) sins," that on occasion it is well for us as a nation to "humble ourselves before the offended Power, to confess our national sins, and to pray for clemency and forgiveness." These are the words of Lincoln. He was a true patriot because he loved the greatness of America and did not permit that love to blind him to her very real faults. He was a true patriot because he knew that, glorious as is our country, it does not stand above God, nor equal with God, but beneath God and subject to Him.

Therefore I think neither patriotically nor rationally, nor in accord with virtue, if I hold that what my country does is right and just simply because my country does it, that the state is bound by no laws except those of its own making, that the protests of other nations against our national policies are necessarily uncalled for or prejudiced. Nor do I think rationally when I forget that for the Egyptian and the Indian and the Chinaman, patriotism is also a virtue pleasing to God. The patriot is always and everywhere a son of his country, but that makes him no less a member of the whole human race.

**T**HIS is important for our growth in holiness. Love is not divisible. We love our country, we serve it, we will die for it. But this love is neither divorced nor distinct from our love of God. From the love of God all other loves flow, and in the love of God all other loves find their ultimate strength. We love America with more passion and with more courage because we love God above all things and because this God gave us America, and He loves it too.