

Notes from Fr. Nick

Fly the Flag!

As we approach Independence Day on Thursday, our country is more polarized than at any point in living memory (although the late 60s/early 70s may come close). One group seems to have captured the vocabulary and symbolism traditionally associated with love of country, while others eschew these same words and symbols to emphasize the need for change. I think avoiding these symbols is a mistake.

Referring to oneself as a patriot, or flying the flag, is a right for people across the political spectrum. Claiming that these symbols exclusively belong to one group allows them a “branding” of righteousness while the other side searches for ways to show their fealty. It is easy for those who appropriate these symbols to gloss over negative parts of our country’s past while wearing a mantle of moral rectitude—a garment they may not deserve. On the other hand, without patriotic symbols or vocabulary at their disposal, conscientious people who focus on our present and past wrongs can fall into the trap of cynicism wherein they see only the bad.



A few years back, Arnold Kling argued that Progressives see the world as a struggle between the oppressor and the oppressed, and try to help the oppressed. Conservatives see a conflict between civilization and barbarism, between order and chaos, and they want to protect civilization. From Kling’s perspective, both sides may have a point, but they talk past each other. While both sides may be patriotic in their own ways, they each see the other as a threat.

Politics abhors nuance. Very few people change their minds by being bombarded with a laundry list of our country’s accomplishments or faults. But, maybe, at least in some instances, there is a way out. In his 2024 commencement address to the graduates at Brandeis University, the great documentary historian of our times, Ken Burns, stated: “*Arguing never changes anybody’s mind ... but a good story can.*” Burns may have hit on the key to bridging our differences.

Attack ads or caricatures of one another’s positions only hardens people, while hearing the other’s stories may help people open up. Stories lend nuance and context to different perspectives. As an example: if a person realizes that I am a Catholic priest, they may rightfully assume I am against abortion. However, if they can get past the clamor on the subject, they will find that the Church’s teachings are more nuanced than they would expect. There are exceptions when the life of the mother is in danger, as well as in cases of rape or incest. They would also find that I am pastoral and compassionate when people come to me for counseling. None of this can happen by arguing.

In other areas, I tend slightly to the left on the political spectrum, but not always. Nevertheless, I honor our flag and what it represents. I believe the founders of our country—as imperfect human beings—set about making a nation based in freedom and equality. In the light of that I am proud to call myself a patriot. When I pass through Customs and Border Patrol at the San Francisco Airport and see the flag hanging in the entrance hall, I feel welcomed home.