

This July 4 weekend when we celebrate(d) the 250th anniversary of the United States takes place amid our hosting the World Cup. I have seen some stories about the reaction of people from all over the globe to life in America. Visitors from Europe have commented on our huge serving sizes in restaurants – and free refills! The wide-open spaces – air conditioning. And the natives seem very friendly. The thrust of the stories is that America is better than expected.

And then there's Fr. Joseph's reaction. We were driving down to Ocean Shores together a couple of weeks ago. And on the way he brought up something he had seen online – some American politicians were rooting for soccer teams other than America. He was incensed. "That's treason!" That led to what I can only call a rant. In his opinion any American who complains about the country is insane. The ingrates!

He's speaking from his experience in Nigeria. We made the trip to the ocean in two and a half hours. He said that would take all day back home, if not two days. The roads are horrible, there are no traffic rules,

it's chaos. And the politics and corruption! When Americans complain about the growing corruption here, he laughs. We don't know what corruption is. On our drive a police car went by with its lights flashing. A little later we passed the police car, pulled over next to a car that had gone off the road. Fr. Joseph just looked and marveled that the police were there trying to help the driver. He said in Nigeria, the police never help people in trouble. They are the trouble - just the muscle of the big shots keeping everyone else scared. And then there is the religious violence. Nigeria is the country with the most Christian martyrs in the world every year.

My point: America has problems, but it's good for us to hear an outside perspective when we get too down on our times and country. Fr. Joseph is a witness – as are our World Cup visitors – that with all her issues, America remains a wonderful place – and we should be grateful. And that is one of my points today on this 4th of July weekend. Gratitude. We are blessed – just listen to people from other countries.

But I also want to preach about America's proper place in our lives from God's perspective. Listen again to our first reading from the Prophet Zechariah; "Rejoice heartily, O daughter Zion, shout for joy, O daughter Jerusalem! See, your king shall come to you, a just savior is he, meek, and riding on an ass, on a colt, the foal of an ass." Centuries later this prophecy was fulfilled when Jesus, the Messiah, enters Jerusalem on a donkey with palm branches beneath his feet.

And how did that go? The Messiah came -- and the powers that be, the Romans and High Priests, crucified Him. That is the true relationship between the Gospel and Caesar -- always. Even in America.

A central theme in the history of Catholic Americans is our struggle with the question, "Can you be both a good Catholic and a good American?" For most of American history most Americans have said, "No." For the earlier Protestant establishment, Catholicism was suspect as a foreign, undemocratic, and subversive force in society.

But American Catholics have always tried to answer the question with a “Yes.” Up until late in the Vietnam War, Catholics had always been very supportive of every America war. We were super-patriots. We felt we had to prove our patriotism in the face of a doubting majority. And then between roughly 1960 -2000, for the first time in our history, Catholics were accepted by, and as, American elites. But this was only because during these years the old Protestant establishment was collapsing, and the new Secularist establishment was not yet strong enough to exert its opposition.

That has now changed. For many secular elites in America today Catholicism is once again viewed as incompatible with their vision of the nation’s values. The Church and her teaching are again seen by some as backward or leading America down the wrong path.

But (and here’s my second point) this cultural and political friction should not surprise Catholics – even American Catholics, who in the last few decades have grown accustomed to being accepted. From the

beginning of Christianity the first Catholics were asked, “Could one be both a good Roman and a good Catholic?” We said, “Yes.” The Romans obviously answered, “No. To the lions!”

This is the way it always has been and always will be. In the words of the New Testament, we are “aliens and sojourners” in this life (1 Pt 2:11). “Here we have no lasting city, but we seek the one that is to come.” (Heb 13:14) “Our citizenship is in heaven.” (Phil 3:20).

The American experiment has been so favorable to Catholics compared to other places and eras that we can be lulled into believing that here at least the World and the Gospel will be in harmony. But ultimately that’s not possible. All earthly citizenship is like a pair of shoes that must be worn, but that doesn’t quite fit.

But to feel the rub is not a bad thing from the spiritual perspective. Catholics must remain in the public square, vote, engage in public debates for the Common Good. It is a moral duty. We also, however, must not whine any about lesser cultural privilege and status.

We were part of the establishment, but that was an unusual and unnatural place for us to be. Things are now returning to normal.

Can one be both a good Catholic and a good American? Yes, for now – but ultimately, only one can be our first priority. America began as a beautiful experiment in human self-government and freedom – including religious freedom. And Fr. Joseph is right, despite our history's dark chapters, 250 years later, our country, on balance, is a greater force for good than evil and worthy of our love and sacrifice. But we are called to be saints first, before we are citizens of America or any earthly kingdom, and that will come with a cost here and now.