

Rev. Paul A. Hottinger

Shared Beliefs Thirteenth Week in Ordinary Time Friday, July 4, 2014 8:15AM
Am 8:4-6,-9-12; Mt 9:9-13 **Independence Day** (People are shoving away the very thing they desire most: a sense of belonging, a sense of community, a sense of identity.)

Today we reflect on **the founding of our country and the writing of the Declaration of Independence.**

Some people wrongly say that this country was founded on Christian principles. That's not exactly true; they are not exactly Christian principles, but they are relatively compatible with Christian principles. Thomas Jefferson was actually a deist, as was James Madison. Quite a few of the so-called Founding Fathers belonged to Masonic lodges. Some Masonic beliefs are compatible; some are not. The point is that various Christian churches, various religions, various lodges and other societies are families of meaning. They are families of meaning, and **what was originally intended was a sort of gentle competition among families of meaning for the loyalty of the citizens.** No one ever questioned the fact that we need to belong to societies of meaning, families of meaning: religions or lodges or something. Why? Because **human beings need identity, and we get identity by sharing beliefs and values.**

If we understand this, we realize **a very great problem today**, a great malaise in our society, **is that people do not share beliefs or values**, that when all these researchers are done asking people what they think, **especially young people say they don't want to belong to anything.** And they don't want to have anyone tell them what to believe, and they don't want to share their beliefs. **They want to be totally independent**, decide all on their own what they believe. This in itself is an extreme point of view, as if individuals can really figure out the meaning of life all by themselves! It's rather bizarre, really.

But it also leads to a very serious social problem, in which people claim that they feel so alienated and so alone. Well, of course **they are alienated and alone if they don't belong to**

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anything. If they don't share beliefs and values with anyone, of course they are going to be alienated and alone. That's a result of their choices, but they don't see this. This is a very common malaise today. As believers and as missionaries from Christ, we need to be aware of this great problem, aware of the fact that **people are shoving away the very thing they desire most: a sense of belonging, a sense of community, a sense of identity.**

Now the pursuit of happiness and liberty can in a certain very abstract sense give a sense of identity, but the problem is that **liberty, which is not balanced with other values, communal values, becomes self-defeating** precisely in this way: that if I am free only from others, I have only part of what liberty is really about. **Liberty is really about freedom to: to do, to seek, to be, something.** But we are not created to seek or to be anything all by ourselves. That's not how we are created. The Creator that created us with inalienable rights also created us as social animals, to use a term of Aristotle. **We are social beings. We need each other.** We need to belong and, therefore, we need to share beliefs and values. And the beliefs have to be richer and more robust than simply **a belief that I can do whatever I want.** That is not enough to share because in itself that's divisive. **That divides me from others.** It puts me apart from others. **It makes me a competitor with everyone else,** and a competition that in the long run isn't so friendly, isn't so kind.

So this is the problem we have being American today. How we got this way, I don't want to go into, but that's where we are. We do a great deal of good when we try to help especially young people see **why it is necessary to share beliefs, and to belong to a community, and to use their liberty and their freedom to and for, something.**