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HEAVENLY CITIZENSHIP

Homily for Lent 2C-Philippians 3:17-4:1

LPC, 2/24/13

Before I begin today's message, I must publish an erratum. Last week I spoke of the rights of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness as derived from the US Constitution. "Life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness," as you know, and as I know when I am not being stupid, is from the Declaration of Independence. Of course. I apologize for the error.

But I again find myself talking about the rights and responsibilities of citizenship this week. Citizenship is defined in terms of rights and responsibilities, and also in terms of allegiance. I daresay most of us take our citizenship for granted, except when we have to go through customs, or when our civil rights are compromised, or our civic responsibilities called upon, or we are called upon to declare or demonstrate our allegiance.

Our allegiance is rarely a dire issue in times of peace. However, our allegiance becomes critical when our country is in conflict with another. If a point is reached at which sides must be chosen, our allegiance lies with our own country.

St. Paul, in his letter to the Philippians, says that Christians are citizens of heaven. I suppose that means that Christians, no matter where they live, hold dual citizenship: in their earthly country and also in heaven.

Heavenly citizenship, it would seem, has similarities with earthly citizenship. As heavenly citizens, we have certain rights and responsibilities. We also owe allegiance to heaven.

I wonder how often we baptized Christians, we citizens of heaven, truly claim our rights as heavenly citizens? Furthermore, how well do we fulfill the responsibilities of our citizenship: in healing the sick, feeding the hungry, visiting the lonely, freeing the oppressed? When our heavenly country is in conflict with "earthly things" as St. Paul calls them, do we really demonstrate our true allegiance to heaven? These are good questions to ponder during Lent.

But lest I give the impression that heavenly citizenship is all duty and obligation, let me point out that most of us would say we love America, our earthly country. We love what is best about it, we love its ideals. And when we are at our best as Americans, we fulfill our civic obligations less from duty than from love. Likewise, when we are at our best as Christians, we fulfill our heavenly obligations less from duty than from love. And that it is exactly what God seeks from us.

The other night at Lenten School, those of us in attendance heard Kathleen Norris say that the verb "to believe" in its origins means, "to give one's heart to." To believe in God is to give one's heart to God. God grant us grace to acknowledge our heavenly allegiance, in thought, word and deed, not because it's our duty as citizens, but because we give our hearts to God.