

Almost every country in the world has a patron saint. For example, the patron saint of Ireland is St. Patrick; the patron saint of Russia is St. Andrew; and the patron saint of Italy is St. Francis of Assisi. The Patroness of Mexico is Our Lady of Guadalupe, whose feast is next Monday, December 12th.

Today, December 8th, is the Patronal Feast of the United States of America. Under the title of Immaculate Conception, our country has enjoyed a unique relationship with the Mother of God.

It is significant that the flagship of Christopher Columbus, one of three ships, was named *Santa Maria de Concepcion*.

In 1760, Pope clement XIII chose the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary as the principal Patroness of Spain and its possessions. At that time in history, Spain claimed as its possessions what are now the States of Florida, Georgia, Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, California, Nevada and all lands south of the Snake River in what is now the State of Idaho.

In the year 1846, when the United States was a very young country, only 50 years old, all 22 of the bishops of the United States at that time, declared Mary the Immaculate Conception, the Patroness of the country. This was eight years before Pope Pius IX solemnly declared on December 8th, 1854, that the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception of Mary is an article of the Catholic faith.

Every student here, during the course of your theology studies, will know the meaning of the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception. Because today's feast occurs during Advent, there is an understandable confusion among some about whom this feast refers. In the Eastern rite churches, today is called the Conception of St. Anne, Mother of Mary, which probably clarifys the biological portion of this doctrine.

Part of the Catholic uniqueness of this feast in terms of Mary being the Patroness of the United States is that since the beginning of the European settlement of North America, this is a predominantly Protestant country.

Among the original 13 colonies, all but one prohibited the free exercise of the Catholic faith. That one exception was, fittingly enough, called Mary's Land, or Maryland. In all others, in some places more than others, Catholics were forbidden by law to openly practice their religion. For example, in New York, at one time what I am doing now -- celebrating Mass -- was not only a crime, it was a capital crime, punishable by death.

Such was the deep suspicion and indeed hatred of the Catholic Church by those who called themselves "Nativists," if only because their ships arrived on the North East shores before ours did.

This continues to be an anti-Catholic country, but less and less as time goes by. Only 47 percent of the American people have an unfavorable opinion of the Catholic Church. Some of them are even former Catholics.

Today, the Vice President, Mr. Biden, is a Roman Catholic. Six of the Nine Justices of the United States Supreme Court are Catholics. The Speaker of the House, Mr. Boehner, is a Catholic, as were five of his predecessors.

A high percentage of the US military are Catholics, including the recently retired Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, Admiral Mullen.

It would seem that statistically, Catholicism, which approaches nearly 1/4 of the US population, has arrived.

But, it is still acceptable in this country, in some quarters to be anti-Catholic for all the wrong reasons. At least today, there are no overt organized campaigns to persecute Catholics. But, as mentioned, it has not always been so.

In the 1840's, the most violent of religious persecutions took place in this country, and not all of it was directed against Catholics. The newly founded uniquely American Religion, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, experienced the same kind of violence.

There's an old saying that the enemy of my enemy is my friend. And so, for the last 171 years, the LDS Church and the Catholic Church have been friends.

When the Saints were driven out of Nauvoo in Southern Illinois in the middle of the winter of 1840, after the murder of Joseph Smith, they had no idea of where to go next. The new President, Brigham Young, sent pioneer settlers north to Canada and south to Mexico in order to prepare a possible exodus, anywhere outside the US.

Brigham Young thought about going West, which was not yet part of the US, but no one among the Saints had ever been that far west of the Mississippi River.

But there was one man who had been to the Rocky Mountain region, including what is now Idaho, and that man was a Jesuit Priest, Father Pierre Jean de Smet. On one of his returns to the East, he happened to visit the Saints in Winter Quarters Iowa when they were deciding where to find a safe haven to practice their religion. De Smet stayed with the Saints over a month and drew maps, which the Saints used to find what is now the State of Utah. Brigham Young and Father de Smet became good friends. And for the rest of his life, Brigham Young had a deep and abiding respect for the Catholic Church. The first school in Utah was founded by a Catholic order of nuns, the Ursulines. Brigham Young sent his children to that school. He also donated the land in Salt Lake City, on which stands the beautiful Catholic Cathedral of the Madeline.

In the pioneer days of Idaho, communities were isolated from one another, some were Mormon, some Catholic and some mixed. The story is told of a Catholic railroad chapel car which would roll into a Mormon community where only a handful of Catholics resided. The priest could always rely on the local Mormons to sing the various parts of the Latin Mass, since there were not enough Catholics. Even today, Catholics do not sing anywhere nearly as well as Mormons do.

So, what does this have to do with Mary, the Immaculate Conception? Well, this is a unique Catholic doctrine and we believe that Mary protects this country, among whose enshrined values is respect for freedom of religious expression.

Unfortunately, we Americans do not always live up to our ideals. So, we require a model of pure idealism, free of sin, to help us achieve our sometimes failure to live up to our own values.

Now, to bring this point a little closer to home.

This is a Catholic school in a land where Mormons and Catholics have a shared history and a mutual friendship. We respect the religious values of every person in this school, since we are honored to have among us a significant number of non-Catholics.

Given the propensity of young people toward humor, we understand that sometimes we can go too far. To tell you the truth, when I was in high school, I can not remember a time when I laughed so much or so hard as I did in high school. But, sometimes satire can be misunderstood. Even humor has its limits.

We try to think of ourselves here at Bishop Kelly as a “little city on a hill,” to use a biblical expression often applied to the ideals of our country. It’s too bad that biblical values are not always applied in every aspect of our national life. It’s too bad that the word “love” does not appear in any of our national founding documents. But it does appear in our holy scriptures.

God has blessed this country, despite our often irreligious behaviors. We believe as Catholics that every person is created in love, not just in equality. And we are honored that Mary of the Immaculate Conception continues to protect all the people of this nation and helps us to progress toward the realization of our ideals. Mary, Mother of God, immaculately conceived, ever sinless, is the providential guide of this huge land, with diverse cultures and religions, and even no religion. We are the inheritors of a great promise. So, may Mary protect us all.

And may God bless the United States of America.