

The Declaration of Independence and Catholic Teachings

By Bryan J Dickerson. 07/03/2025

In July 1776, representatives of the American colonies issued one of the most consequential declarations in human history. That month, these representatives adopted a Declaration of Independence from Great Britain which not only declared that the American colonies were seeking their independence but also the reasons for their desire for independence. This Declaration's statements on human rights and freedom coincide with the Catholic Church's teachings on this subject.

"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.--That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed..." the colonial representatives declared. These sentiments had been circulating amongst political philosophers for many years but never before had an organized political group set the achievement of these ideals as a political goal for an entire people.

Those participating in the American independence movement were undertaking a tremendous gamble because not only were they confronting the largest and most powerful Empire on the planet at that time but the American people were not unified in their desire for independence from the Mother Country. Indeed, the American people were sharply divided on this question with size-able percentages of the populace either remaining loyal to the British Government or indifferent to the issue altogether.

For those participating in the American independence movement, the consequences of failure could be catastrophic, as they stood to lose their homes and property, their livelihoods, their political rights, their freedom, and even their very lives. This was a fact that the signers of the Declaration were very cognizant of...as they so stated "And for the support of this Declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes and our sacred Honor."

Among those signing this Declaration of Independence were some of the most prominent men in the American Colonies at the time: John Hancock, Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, Samuel Adams, Richard Henry Lee, Benjamin Rush, Thomas Jefferson, and Charles Carroll of Carrollton, the only Catholic to do so.

Charles Carroll and his fellow signers of the Declaration of Independence recognized that human rights were not the gift of government but the benevolent gift of God Almighty who bestowed this gift upon His Creation at their individual creation. Government exists not to grant rights but to protect rights and to ensure an environment in which those rights may be freely exercised.

In its teachings, the Catholic Church also declares that human rights are granted by God and not by the state or society. Quoting from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith's Instruction on Respect for Human Life In Its Origin and on the Dignity of Procreation, The Catechism of the Catholic Church states:

"The inalienable rights of the person must be recognized and respected by civil society

and the political authority. These human rights depend neither on single individuals nor on parents; nor do they represent a concession made by society and the state; they belong to human nature and are inherent in the person by virtue of the creative act from which the person took his origin. Among such fundamental rights one should mention in this regard every human being's right to life and physical integrity from the moment of conception until death" (paragraph 2273).

On first visit to the United States as Pope, St. John Paul II made a point to stop in Philadelphia. During his visit to Philadelphia, Pope St. John Paul II stressed the legacy of the Declaration of Independence and its connection to the Divine. In his Homily for the Mass held in Logan Circle, the Pope declared:

"Philadelphia is the city of the Declaration of Independence, that remarkable document, containing a solemn attestation of the equality of all human beings, endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights : life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, expressing a "firm reliance on the protection of divine Providence". These are the sound moral principles formulated by your Founding Fathers and enshrined forever in your history. In the human and civil values that are contained in the spirit of this Declaration there are easily recognized strong connections with basic religious and Christian values. A sense of religion itself is part of this heritage." (See

https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/homilies/1979/documents/hf_jp-ii_hom_19791003_logan-circle-philadelphia.html)

The Declaration of Independence is a recognition of Divinely bestowed human rights. It is a political testament to human freedom. Both the Founding Fathers and the Catholic Church also recognize that individual rights are not absolute. With these rights come the inherent obligation to exercise those rights responsibly. "Every generation of Americans needs to know that freedom consists not in doing what we like, but in having the right to do what we ought," Pope St. John Paul II said during his Homily for the Mass celebrated at Oriole Park in Baltimore, Maryland in October 1995. (See

https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/homilies/1995/documents/hf_jp-ii_hom_19951008_baltimore.html)

As we celebrate our nation's 249th (*now 250th*) Anniversary of its declaring independence, we should do so mindful of the ideals enshrined in our nation's Declaration of Independence and how closely they coincide with the teachings of our Catholic Church. God granted us rights as His creation. In declaring independence from Britain, our Founding Fathers recognized that undeniable reality and set up a framework for its protection and promotion. May God continue to bless our nation with liberty, justice and peace.

Source:

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