

This year the Ascension falls on Memorial Day weekend. I see a connection between the two, that is, “What is worth living for? What is worth dying for?” After the American Revolution, the United States were governed for several years by the Articles of Confederation, a document setting up a loose confederation between the 13 autonomous, sovereign states. But it soon became clear that the country was drifting apart. The Articles created a central government too weak to be effective. Realizing this, a group of the most prominent statesmen in the United States met in 1787 in Philadelphia to draw up a new constitution. The convention’s deliberations were secret, but everyone knew it was happening, so there was great interest and concern among citizens at what these worthies might be contemplating. In his notes on the last day of the Constitutional Convention one of the Maryland delegates, Dr. James McHenry, recorded the following incident. As the final debate ended Benjamin Franklin left Independence Hall and one of the crowd outside, a Mrs.

Powell, asked, “Well, Doctor, what have we got – a Republic or a Monarchy?” “A Republic,” Franklin replied, “if you can keep it.”

Despite that opening story, this is not a political homily. Instead I want to use Franklin’s words and veiled warning as an analogy for our own necessary involvement in the Church. The republican form of government Franklin championed requires not only a legal form, a set of laws enshrining elections by popular vote, etc. that is, a constitution. It also requires that a society’s citizens possess the virtues necessary to maintain that constitution – and die for it, if necessary (“A Republic . . . if you can keep it”).

The Catholic Church requires even greater commitment and virtue from us if she is to fulfill her mission on earth. This is Ascension Sunday when we celebrate Jesus’ Ascension into heaven forty days after His Resurrection. We heard an account of that in the first reading. But in leaving us bodily, Jesus is not abandoning us. He is going in order that He might send the Holy Spirit to help us fulfill His mission.

We learn of that mission in the Gospel today. This is Jesus' Great Commission to the Church. "Go . . . and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you." This is a call to discipleship and zeal. We are meant to be active agents of Christ in the world.

It reminds me of another incident from American history. In his Inaugural Address on January 20, 1961, John F. Kennedy famously challenged Americans to, "ask not what your country can do for you – ask what you can do for your country." His challenge was received by that generation as a call to sacrifice for democracy and freedom here and around the world. I do not mean to equate Kennedy's words to Christ's call to Discipleship. Kennedy's phrase does, however, make me wonder. How many of us DO ask what Jesus can do for us more often than we ask what we can do for Jesus? This consumer attitude exists

among us. We can see ourselves more as Jesus' customers than His agents.

The Church is the Body of Christ, in which we are meant to live and take an active part. One reason those words from Kennedy's Inaugural Address are so well remembered is that they did give many Americans of that era a sense of mission. Kennedy was good at that. He also gave us the mission to reach the moon by 1970. And we made it – because we were challenged by a lofty goal that was great and possible, if we stretched.

Jesus' Great Commission should give us Catholics our own sense of mission. Our baptism is the foundation of our relationship with Jesus. But we don't become His Disciples until we intentionally accept His mission to go into the world, with firm purpose, to let other people know Jesus, and how He opened for us a way to be united to God forever through His suffering, death, Resurrection, Ascension into Heaven, and His sending the Holy Spirit to us at Pentecost. It's the

greatest mission imaginable – and it’s possible – if we stretch ourselves!
That mission is the whole point of the Church’s existence. That’s why we were each baptized – to live out and share that possibility of total happiness with God.

How’s that going? On this weekend when we remember the sacrifices of so many for the sake of the country, let us ask ourselves, “Do I have any sense of having accepted a mission in my own relationship with Jesus, and of actively sacrificing for, and pursuing, that mission within His Church? If not, there is something deep and exciting missing from my spiritual life. Will we accept Christ’s mission? That’s the great question of our life.

As Benjamin Franklin’s words that day in Philadelphia 230 years ago suggested (“A Republic . . . if you can keep it), it’s one thing to be offered a gift (the Constitution, in the one case – the Church and the possibility of eternal life, in the other). It’s another thing to live out the possibilities of that gift to the fullest (to remain a healthy, engaged

democracy – to become saints). To do that takes commitment and sacrifice. Next Sunday is Pentecost. Be praying and thinking about this question – “Do I see myself as a Disciple of Jesus who is on a mission for Him?” I’ll talk more about this then.