

KCC Question of the Week

19 September 2011

Here's the Question of the Week:

On Sunday September 11th, I noticed the American flag was in the Sanctuary. I think it is usually by the doors to the Sanctuary in the room right outside the Sanctuary (the Narthex, right?). What do you know about that tradition in the congregation?

Here's an attempt at an answer:

You're right. That room is called the Narthex.

As to the tradition, I don't really know the background to it. It was already here when I arrived. But, if I understand it correctly, I kind of like it. I think it shows balance, a balance that is hard to keep.

The way I understand the tradition, the American flag is always clearly present and visible in the Narthex as you enter the building. That makes sense. We live in the United States, a nation well worth our love. Seeing them there reminds the worshiper where he or she is.

Also, on certain Sundays when there is a special call to pray for the nation – like September 11th – the flag is brought in to commemorate this.

The Apostle Paul asks his churches to pray for their national leaders. Paul is also happy to claim his Roman citizenship. He does this repeatedly in the Book of Acts. We too should pray for our nation and be happy to claim citizenship in it.

However, almost all of the New Testament core confessions about Jesus – Jesus is Lord, Jesus is Savior, Jesus is King, etc. – are not only religious confessions. They are also political in nature. What the confessions are saying is that Jesus, and not any nation or its ruler, is the believer's final authority. In essence, God is alone to worshiped and served, and Rome was not to be confused with God or his kingdom.

Whether the nation in question is ancient Rome or modern-day Germany, Canada, Honduras, or the US, this is good wisdom. Down through history, whether it's the Roman Emperor Constantine in the 4th century or a lot of the writing about America that has been done from the 17th century on, there is a powerful temptation to connect too completely the nation the Christian loves and the God we are called to love with our whole heart and mind and strength.

Sometimes nation and God agree. Sometimes they don't. But they never are one in the same.

It is from this analysis that I sense the wisdom of the congregation's tradition. Bringing the flag in on certain Sundays can make a powerful call to us to pray for our nation's well-being and wisdom. And, if you look at the calendar, there are a number of Sundays where this is done.

However, to prominently display the flag week in and week out in the central, chancel area where our worship is focused, would certainly contribute to confusing our need as Christians to worship God alone. Whenever this has happened down through history this has been a setback for the faithfulness of the church to Jesus Christ.

In addition, following Jesus includes us in a global community made up of his followers from all over the world. Although a Christian from the US may differ in culture, language, and national identity from another in Brazil, China, or Lebanon there is a connection in Jesus that transcends national difference.

Paul talks in the Letter to the Galatians about how in Christ there is no longer Jew nor Greek, male nor female, slave nor free for all are one in Jesus. In Christ, all other identities I may have, no matter how wonderful, are made secondary. To have a national flag front and center all the time can make this hard to remember and put into practice.

It's not a slight against the nation in question. It is an affirmation of the unique identity of Jesus. No matter where a Christian is from, to love our nation well we are called to love Christ more. How we handle the flag is a way of putting this into practice.

On a much lesser note, I think the current tradition also shows an awareness about how our worship space is constructed. In our Sanctuary, the typical front but non-central locations where congregations often put the flags (the US and the Christian) don't offer very good sight lines for the flags. Practicing the current tradition probably makes the flags more noticeable than putting them in substandard positions in the main room of the Sanctuary on a week-in-week-out basis.

Anyway, thanks for the question.

Peace in Christ,

Robert