

The observance of the 20th anniversary of Nine-Eleven provides all Americans with the opportunity to take stock of the events of September 11, 2001: to remember those who were killed and to honor the courage of first responders and some ordinary citizens who lost their lives in order to save the lives of others.

Most people are unaware that September 11 was designated “Patriot Day” by a bipartisan act of Congress in 2002. That is unfortunate, because patriotism is a natural virtue incumbent upon all Americans. It is the respect and love we owe to our national homeland.

St. Thomas Aquinas says, “After God, man is a debtor chiefly to his parents and his country. Wherefore, just as it belongs to religion to give worship to God, so it belongs to piety, in the second place, to show reverence to one’s parents and one’s country.” (*ST.II-II.101*)

One of the results of Nine-Eleven was the creation of the Department of Homeland Security, which protects the United States from foreign and domestic acts of terrorism. Initially, the word “homeland” rang strangely in many people’s ears. They were not used to calling the United States their homeland. But the word evokes the instinctive love that people have for their country, which is akin to the instinctive love they have for their family. That is why people sometimes refer to their country as their motherland or fatherland. We and our fellow citizens are members of the same extended family, bound by the kinship of politics, culture, and a shared national identity.

The American flag, the Stars-and-Stripes, is a potent symbol of our shared identity. It represents what we as Americans aspire to be: one nation, under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.

As Catholics we profess that our true and lasting homeland is not on earth but in heaven. Yet, we cannot hope to enter into the “civic spirit” of the communion of saints in the City of God in heaven unless we first learn to cultivate a true and proper love for our temporary homeland on earth.

Patriotism is a duty. It is the love we owe our country. It does not paper over our nation’s flaws. Instead, it serves as a powerful motivator for addressing and mending them. As Americans we divide ourselves into political parties because we have different points of view about how best to realize “the American dream.” But parties, by definition, presume a whole of which they are but parts. It is the good of the whole that every party should seek to promote. When a party confuses itself for the whole, it ceases to be a party. It also ceases to be patriotic.

As I reflect with other Americans on the events of Nine-Eleven, I am especially mindful of the passengers and crew of United Flight 93, the last of the four planes to be high-jacked that day. Having heard how the other planes had been used as missiles against the World Trade Center and Pentagon, they banded together to prevent their plane from being used as a missile to destroy lives on the ground. In a remarkable show of unity and concern for their fellow citizens, they knowingly gave their lives for others. I can think of no purer expression of patriotism.