The Creed

The Catholic Review

I am most grateful to Archbishop José H. Gomez of Los Angeles, who has given me permission to reprint a recent article of his. Given its length, the second part will appear next week. I am very well aware of the contentious nature of this issue among our people. I hope that Archbishop Gomez' distinctive approach would be helpful in advancing the discussion.

G.K. Chesterton said famously that "America is the only nation in the world that is founded on a creed." And that "creed," as he recognized, is fundamentally Christian. It is the basic American belief that all men and women are created equal – with God-given rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

Every other nation in history has been established on the basis of common territory and ethnicity – the ties of land and kinship. America, instead, is based on this Christian ideal, on this creed that reflects the amazing universalism of the Gospel. As a result, we have always been a nation of nationalities. "E pluribus unum." One people made from peoples of many nations, races and creeds.

Throughout our history, problems have always arisen when we have taken this American creed for granted, or when we have tried to limit it in some way. That's why it is essential that today we remember the missionary history of America – and rededicate ourselves to the vision of America's founding "creed."

When we forget our country's roots in the Hispanic-Catholic mission to the New World, we end up with distorted ideas about our national identity. We end up with an idea that Americans are descended from only white Europeans and that our culture is based only on the individualism, work ethic and rule of law that we inherited from our Anglo-Protestant forebears.

When that has happened in the past, it has led to those episodes in our history that we are least proud of – the mistreatment of Native Americans; slavery; the recurring outbreaks of nativism and anti-Catholicism; the internment of Japanese Americans

during World War II; the misadventures of “manifest destiny.”

There are, of course, far more complicated causes behind these moments in our history. But, at the root, I think we can see a common factor – a wrongheaded notion that “real Americans” are of some particular race, class, religion or ethnic background.

A New Period of Nativism?

I worry that in today’s political debates over immigration we are entering into a new period of nativism.

The intellectual justification for this new nativism was set out a few years ago in an influential book by the late Samuel Huntington of Harvard titled “Who Are We?” He made a lot of sophisticated-sounding arguments, but his basic argument was that American identity and culture are threatened by Mexican immigration.

Authentic American identity “was the product of the distinct Anglo-Protestant culture of the founding settlers of America in the 17th and 18th centuries,” according to Huntington.

By contrast, Mexicans’ values are rooted in a fundamentally incompatible “culture of Catholicism” which, Huntington argued, does not value self-initiative or the work ethic, and instead encourages passivity and an acceptance of poverty.

These are old and familiar nativist claims, and they are easy to discredit. One could point to the glorious legacy of Hispanic literature and art or to Mexican-Americans’ and Hispanic-Americans’ accomplishments in business, government, medicine and other areas.

Unfortunately, today we hear ideas like Huntington’s being repeated on cable TV and talk radio – and sometimes even by some of our political leaders.

There is no denying significant differences between Hispanic-Catholic and Anglo-Protestant cultural assumptions.

But my point is that this kind of bigoted thinking stems from an incomplete

understanding of American history. Historically, both cultures have a rightful claim to a place in our national "story" – and in the formation of an authentic American identity and national character.

Toward a New American Patriotism

I believe American Catholics have a special duty today to be the guardians of the truth about the American spirit and our national identity. I believe it falls to us to be witnesses to a new kind of American patriotism.

We are called to bring out all that is noble in the American spirit. We are also called to challenge those who would diminish or "downsize" America's true identity.

Since I came to California, I have been thinking a lot about Blessed Junípero Serra, the Franciscan immigrant who came from Spain via Mexico to evangelize this great state.

Blessed Junípero loved the native peoples of this continent. He learned their local languages, customs and beliefs. He translated the Gospel and the prayers and teachings of the faith so that everyone could hear the mighty works of God in their own native tongue!

He used to trace the sign of the cross on people's foreheads and say to them, "Amar a Dios! Love God!"

This is a good way to understand our duty as Catholics in our culture today. We need to find a way to "translate" the Gospel of love for the people of our times.

We need to remind our brothers and sisters of the truths taught by Blessed Junípero and his brother missionaries. That we are all children of the same Father in heaven. That our Father in heaven does not make some nationalities or racial groups to be "inferior" or less worthy of his blessings.

Catholics need to lead our country to a new spirit of empathy. We need to help our brothers and sisters to start seeing the strangers among us for who they truly are – and not according to political or ideological categories or definitions rooted in our own fears.

This is difficult, I know. I know it is a particular challenge to see the humanity of those immigrants who are here illegally.

But the truth is that very few people "choose" to leave their homelands. Emigration is almost always forced upon people by the dire conditions they face in their lives.

Most of the men and women who are living in America without proper documentation have traveled hundreds, even thousands, of miles. They have left everything behind, risked their safety and their lives. They have done this, not for their own comfort or selfish interests. They have done this to feed their loved ones. To be good mothers and fathers. To be loving sons and daughters.

These immigrants – no matter how they came here – are people of energy and aspiration. They are people who are not afraid of hard work or sacrifice. They are nothing like the people professor Huntington and others are describing!

These men and women have courage and the other virtues. The vast majority of them believe in Jesus Christ and love our Catholic Church. They share traditional American values of faith, family and community.

Immigration and American Renewal

This is why I believe our immigrant brothers and sisters are the key to American renewal.

And we all know that America is in need of renewal – economic and political, but also spiritual, moral and cultural renewal.

I believe these men and women who are coming to this country will bring a new, youthful entrepreneurial spirit of hard work to our economy. I also believe they will help renew the soul of America.

In his last book, "Memory and Identity," written the year he died, Blessed John Paul II said: "The history of all nations is called to take its place in the history of salvation."

We must look at immigration in the context of America's need for renewal. And we

need to consider both immigration and American renewal in light of God's plan for salvation and the history of the nations.

The promise of America is that we can be one nation where men and women from every race, creed and national background may live as brothers and sisters.

Each one of us is a child of that promise. If we trace the genealogies of almost everyone in America, the lines of descent will lead us out beyond our borders to some foreign land where each of our ancestors originally came from.

This inheritance comes to American Catholics now as a gift and as a duty. We are called to make our own contributions to this nation – through the way we live our faith in Jesus Christ as citizens.

Our history shows us that America was born from the Church's mission to the nations.

The "next America" will be determined by the choices we make as Christian disciples and as American citizens. By our attitudes and actions, by the decisions we make, we are writing the next chapters of our American story.

May Our Lady of Guadalupe, the Mother of the Americas, obtain for us the courage we need to do what our good Lord requires.