



On Dignity & Freedom

A Pastoral Letter of the Ukrainian Catholic Bishops
of the United States for the 250th Anniversary of
American Independence

Our Preamble

As the United States celebrates 250 years of independence, we, the Ukrainian Catholic Bishops of the United States, offer these reflections on America's founding ideals, on the Ukrainian community that has been part of this nation's story for seven score years, and on the responsibility of each generation of Americans, including the present one, to safeguard and renew the freedoms with which it has been entrusted.

From its beginning, the American experiment has rested on the belief that every person possesses certain inalienable qualities and rights simply because he or she is a human willed into being by God. As bishops, we affirm this God-given dignity and these inherent rights. God created each of us out of love, conferring immeasurable value upon every "unique and unrepeatable" person, as St. John Paul II reminds us. The love of Christ, most fully revealed on the Cross, is not only the source of our salvation, but also the foundation of

human dignity and the basis for the rights that belong to every person.

Rooted in the enduring teachings of the Gospel, we offer these reflections as Ukrainian Catholics and as Americans. We look to the moral vision that helped shape the United States, the legacy of the Ukrainian-American faithful who came before us, the witness of Ukraine today, and the challenges facing the United States in the present moment.

Above all, we wish to offer a practical invitation, a call to action: to bring the love of Christ into daily life, into our families, our communities, and our civic responsibilities. Only such love can leaven our political inheritance and social life, providing the basis for renewal, both personal and national. Only such love can revive our hearts, strengthen our common life, and foster a society that reflects the dignity of every human person.

America as a Moral Project



The Liberty Bell, with Independence Hall in the background
(Philadelphia Archeparchy Archives)

*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.*

—The Declaration of Independence, 1776

The men who gathered in Philadelphia in 1776 were not only making a political choice; they were taking a moral stand. The Declaration's famed preamble does more than explain why governments exist; it also asserts for whose sake they exist—namely, for the sake of human beings, who are created equal by God and who possess rights that no tyrant can strip away.

The power of these ideas is attested both by the words themselves and by the response they received among the men and women who embraced the American project, who dared to leave behind the comfortable or familiar to build a new kind of nation, one shaped by a specific vision of what it means to be human. They blazed a trail. For their successors, merely to follow that trail is insufficient; the path must be continuously

repaired and improved, broadened and lengthened.

Hence, the responsibility of maintaining and extending the Founders' vision, of honoring and building upon preceding generations' achievements, belongs to all Americans today. Reading the Declaration, Americans are invited to a just civic pride: not pride in power or wealth, but pride in an idea flowing from the divine gift of human dignity.

The American Dream, at its best, is not a dream of material achievement and cannot be measured as such. Rather it is the dream of a just world, in which these God-given rights are the basis of government and society. This is an American Dream worthy of continuous recovery and renewal.

America Imagined & Encountered



The Taras Shevchenko Memorial, Washington, DC, honoring Ukraine's national poet (Public domain)

*When will we at last meet our Washington,
bearing with him a new and righteous law?*

—Taras Shevchenko, “The Fool,” 1857

Anyone visiting Washington, D.C., can find these words inscribed in Ukrainian on the base of the Taras Shevchenko Memorial, which was dedicated in 1964. Yet Shevchenko himself never set foot in America. The famed artist and poet, widely recognized as the father of the modern Ukrainian nation, spent his life in the Russian Empire, fighting against the Russian imperial oppression under which most of his country groaned. Orphaned as a child, having endured serfdom, imprisonment, and cruelty because of poetic protests against tsarist despotism, Shevchenko was keen to perceive, even from afar, the hope that America presented to the world.

For him, America represented a possibility, still to be fully realized, that all human beings could live together with mutual respect for the God-given rights and liberty of all. Shevchenko's perception of the U.S. was discerning: admiring but not naïve. For him America was not just as an imagined community. It was an encounter. The year after writing those famed verses extolling Washington and the American idea, Shevchenko developed a profound friendship with Ira Aldridge, a pro-abolitionist Black actor from New York whose Shakespearean performances met with widespread acclaim throughout Europe. Their memorials in Washington, D.C., stand two and a half miles

apart. The Aldridge Theatre at Howard University includes a copy of a portrait of him made by Shevchenko.



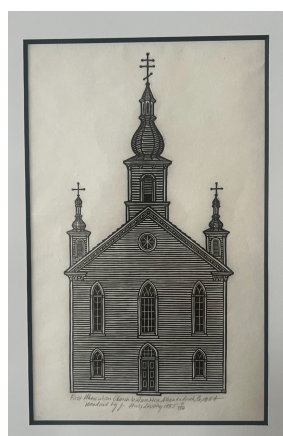
Portrait of the American actor Ira Aldridge,
by Taras Shevchenko, 1858 (Public Domain)

Shevchenko dreamed of America as a land of liberty, and within two decades many Ukrainian immigrants would set out across the Atlantic to make this dream a reality. Each wave of migrants arrived with hope in America's promise. Receiving the freedom to exercise their God-given rights, the new Ukrainian-Americans gave back in return. Through grueling labor and enterprise, military service, and contributions to religious, civic, and cultural life, they helped build America while becoming part of its story.

The first large groups of Ruthenians, as Ukrainians then called themselves, arrived in the United States from the Austro-Hungarian Empire in the 1870s. But they did not come with outstretched hands. Their hands were calloused, ready to work. They were peasants from Galicia and Transcarpathia, who had

heard from coal company recruiting agents about a land where honest work brought honest wages.

And they contributed to their new home far more than exhausting physical labor. Even if illiterate, they set about building houses, communities, and especially churches. The first of our parishes in the United States was the Church of St. Michael the Archangel in Shenandoah, Pennsylvania, which was consecrated in 1886 at the initiative of Rev. Ivan Volansky, the first Greek Catholic priest to serve on American soil. Parish after parish followed: in Jersey City, Minneapolis, Hazleton, Kingston, Olyphant, Elmira, Pittsburgh, Philadelphia. By the First World War there were almost two hundred. These churches, though first and foremost temples of worship devoted to the One God in Trinity, also served every facet of community life. They were schools, meeting halls, newspaper offices. Here language was preserved, disputes settled, and children raised in the old ways on new soil.



Jacques Hnizdovsky, First Ukrainian Church in America, Shenandoah,
Pennsylvania, 1884, woodcut, 1985 (Philadelphia Archeparchy Archives)

Eastern Catholics also stepped immediately into American civic life. They founded mutual aid societies that rescued families from destitution long before the American social safety net existed. They established newspapers, choral societies, and cultural organizations that enriched the civic fabric of cities from New York to Philadelphia to Chicago. Ukrainian Americans served in both World Wars, in Korea and Vietnam, in the Gulf War, in the Global War on Terror, and beyond, not as guests of this country but as its sons and daughters.

The post-World War II era brought a wave of political refugees, displaced persons fleeing tyranny and religious persecution: veterans, clergy, intellectuals, those who had survived

both Soviet and Nazi occupation, deportation, and genocide. Others came after the Soviet Union collapsed and the Iron Curtain fell. Most recently, hundreds of thousands have found refuge from the new Russian war against independent Ukraine. Each group brought its own gifts, new voices, and fresh talents. Today many are playing an increasingly visible role in technological and digital breakthroughs.

The 250th year of American independence marks not just an anniversary of America's founding in 1776. It also celebrates the legacy that followed over a quarter of a millennium—including all those Ukrainian-Americans, among them Eastern Catholics, who have contributed to the life of this nation.

The American Ideal & Ukraine's Witness Today



Statue of Liberty, New York, New York (Public Domain)

In our rapidly changing world, freedom is never secured permanently. Each new generation endowed with freedom must discern how to use that freedom and how to defend it against the forces that would erode or wrest it away.

The Founders understood this. For them, liberty was not an abstract ideal. The Declaration of Independence was also a declaration of war against any tyranny that would deny the American people their God-given rights.

Today, Ukraine is making the same declaration. Ukrainians are not fighting for territory alone. They are fighting for the same truths that the Founders called self-evident: that human beings are created equal, that their rights come from God and not from governments, and that no empire has the authority to extinguish them.

Freedom is a fragile thing and it's never more than one generation away from extinction. It is not ours by way of inheritance; it must be fought for and defended constantly by each generation.

—Ronald Reagan,
Inaugural Address as 33rd Governor of California,
January 5, 1967

Freedom is not free. Americans have known this and have paid for it in blood throughout their history. Today Ukrainians are paying the same price in their own blood. Their struggle, however, is not for Ukraine alone. It is a witness to the world that the principles of the American founding are not the property of one nation or one moment in history. They are universal, and they are always worth defending.



Damaged military vehicles at St. Michael's Square,
Kyiv, Ukraine (Philadelphia Archeparchy Archives)

The Future: What We Still Hold to Be True



Metropolitan Andrei Sheptytsky during his visit to Philadelphia, 1921 (Philadelphia Archeparchy Archives)

States are built on unity and respect for authority and legitimate leadership; they are strong because of these. Where these are lacking, even the strongest state is bound to collapse.

—Metropolitan Andrei Sheptytsky,
Address to Ukrainian-Americans, Philadelphia, 1921

The words of Venerable Andrei were uttered 105 years ago in the city that is both the birthplace of the United States and the center of the Ukrainian Catholic Church in America. And they still speak to us today. They address all Americans living through a time of acute political and social dissonance, a turmoil that points to a deeper problem—a spiritual problem, one which Archbishop William E. Lori of Baltimore in a recent pastoral letter identifies as a “crisis of hope, identity, and communion” (*In Charity & Truth: Toward a Renewed Political Culture*, 2026).

What is needed today to rebuild the “unity and respect for authority and legitimate leadership”

of which Venerable Andrei speaks? What kind of leadership engenders authentic respect? The solution lies not in displays of power, postures of dominance, or louder argument, but in close and compassionate accompaniment of the people, with hearts open to the poor and weak. The solution also requires genuine reflection that is noble in its point of departure and in its aims, manner, and method. Such reflection elevates and ennobles all participants. And it requires true listening, without preparing a response while the other is still speaking. Such reflection appeals for the kind of solidarity that goes beyond tolerance and extends to genuine accountability for one another.

This type of listening and solidarity are nothing but expressions of love. God, who is himself Love (1 Jn. 4:8), is the ultimate Listener—he is ever patient with our prayers, our laments, our groans. And what greater expression of solidarity is there than the Incarnation of Jesus Christ? God-like love—expressed through listening, solidarity, and every other type of self-sacrifice—becomes the basis for community. And it is this life of the loving community, leavened by the Gospel, kindled by the love of God, that provides the Christian antidote to the present plague of distrust and hate, alienation and isolation.

America has given security, prosperity, and religious freedom to multiple generations. Such extraordinary gifts do not sustain themselves automatically. A society holds together not merely because its institutions are strong, but principally because its people are bound to one another in trust and shared purpose. When that bond frays, no constitution can repair it, no power can hold it together.

The human person carries within him or herself a natural fruitfulness: the capacity to build, to give life, to form community, to contribute to something beyond him or herself. But fruit requires roots, and roots have need of a shared soil: a common sense of what human nature is, where human dignity comes from, and what we owe one another because of it.

In all this, we observe, once more, that the bond between America and Ukraine is more than historical. Both peoples have known the defense of human dignity against forces that would diminish or extinguish it. Their intuition about

this dignity—both its holiness and its fragility—is an inheritance that both nations hold in trust.

What we still hold to be true is this: dignity and liberty are not self-sustaining. They must be cared for and protected. Their continuance summons us to a communal commitment, to accept responsibility not only for our own flourishing but for that of others. Where that commitment is alive, human life thrives. Where it is absent, even the strongest state, as Sheptytsky warned, is bound to decline and even collapse.

The Second Vatican Council expresses quite forcefully the Christian imperative to assume accountability for civic affairs:

The laity must take up the renewal of the temporal order as their own special obligation. Led by the light of the Gospel and the mind of the Church and motivated by Christian charity, they must act directly and in a definite way in the temporal sphere. As citizens they must cooperate with other citizens with their own particular skill and on their own responsibility. Everywhere and in all things, they must seek the justice of God's kingdom. The temporal order must be renewed in such a way that, without detriment to its own proper laws, it may be brought into conformity with the higher principles of the Christian life... (Apostolicam Actuositatem, ch. 2 § 7).

Accordingly, we remind our faithful of the need to manifest their love for one another and all our neighbors through civic engagement. The Church is not a political organization, yet she charges the laity in particular to animate civil

society through Christ-minded involvement in the political process. This begins with maintaining basic political literacy—always enlightened by the Gospel and informed by the Church’s social teaching—and with basic political participation in the electoral process. All Christian members of a democracy should continually form their civic consciences and exercise their right to vote. This is a citizen’s duty and moral obligation. Christians should also be ready to serve in public and governmental roles, thus bringing the love and truth of the Gospel into those spheres.

And yet let us be clear: the path forward we are proposing is not a political or ideological program. It is a spiritual one. It begins with the willingness to be divinely transformed in our understanding of who God is, who we are, what we owe one another, and what kind of people we intend to be.

Ultimately, this is the path of the Cross, which is none other than the path of love. On the night in which he was given up—or, rather, gave himself up for the life of the world—the Lord spoke to his disciples, telling them, “Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (Jn. 15:13, 13:35).

If the greatest love is self-sacrifice, and if love is the sign of true discipleship, then our path is the path of self-sacrificial love. This love summons us to listening, solidarity, and dwelling in community. In the political and social sphere, such love demands that we make use of our own liberty to secure the freedom and rights of others, especially the most marginalized, the most friendless, the weakest.

Closing: In God We Trust

*But we have this treasure in earthen vessels,
that the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us.*

—2 Corinthians 4:7

Human strength is limited; the principles entrusted to human beings outlast them.

Societies carry within themselves a tension: they are capable of great good yet are marked by limitation. What sustains them is not their own permanence, but the moral and spiritual content placed within them.

The United States and Ukraine alike are entrusted with more than political systems. They are stewards of a vision of the human person, whose dignity is not accorded by circumstance and whose liberty is not a temporary privilege, but a responsibility carried across generations. Thus, the freedoms treasured by both nations must be embraced and not simply inherited.

For Americans and Ukrainians alike, this truth has never been abstract. It has been tested in struggle, in war, and in the quiet labor of building communities. It has been sustained in churches, in families, in shared acts of faith and solidarity.

And yet the final guarantee of freedom's endurance is not human will alone. It is trust in God: trust that what is lived out in truth, justice, and love cannot be lost, even when it is wounded or obscured. In that trust there is no denial of suffering and no escape from

accountability. There is instead a quiet confidence that the significance of all human effort is not to be measured by its immediate outcomes. We should be confident and intrepid. In humility we know the outcome of all honest life and effort in the Lord. As the holy Apostle Paul declares in his Epistle to the Romans, "All things work together for good for those who love God, for those who are called according to His purpose" (Rom. 8:28).

What has been received must be carried forward. What has been built must be guarded. What has been wounded must be healed. And what has been entrusted to human hands must ultimately be returned to God, for he remains faithful through all generations.

We do indeed hold these truths to be self-evident.

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