

Pride

30 October 2008

There have been rumblings from the McCain/Palin campaign that Senator Obama is not proud to be an American (and maybe isn't even an American at all). All this got me thinking about the nature of pride and what such comments might mean. Am I proud to be an American, given that I chose to leave the country some thirty-five years ago? I turned to my dictionary for help and found several definitions of *pride*. First, inordinate self-esteem. Secondly, lofty self-respect, a reasonable delight in one's position, achievements, and possessions. Third, proud behaviour or treatment; insolence, arrogance, disdain. Finally, show, ostentation, display. All but the second definition seem to fit in with the Biblical reference to pride as the first of the Seven Deadly Sins, so if we're thinking in positive terms, the second definition seems to best fit this discussion.

People often casually remark to me that I must be proud of my children. That leaves me pleased but also a bit perplexed. I'm happy with them, but whatever their achievements, they belong to them, and if there is pride involved, it should be their pride, not mine. They aren't my possessions and they aren't my achievements. But this is a question of personal pride. The issue at hand is more about collective identity than personal pride.

We all have a sense of collective identity. We often define ourselves by belonging to groups such as those of sex, age group, nationality, racial or ethnic group, profession, economic class, hobby, education, religion, political party and endless other shared enthusiasms. These groups give us a sense of belonging and sometimes a sense of strength beyond ourselves. I've been a Red Sox fan all my life and when the team finally broke through the curse of the Bambino, I was happy for the team and all those other Red Sox fans. But proud? I can't really say that. I didn't win any ball games for them. Most of our group identifications are harmless enough, even beneficial, at least until they become extreme enough to render our behaviour irrational and violent. I disagree with friends who claim that religions have caused more harm than good. The major religions have all promoted decent and humane behaviour, but the exaggerated sense of group identity has often turned their adherents into brutes. Nationalism has done the same.

Often the most intense group identification seems to grow out of a shared persecution. We've all seen otherwise rational Irishmen on St. Patrick's Day drunkenly proclaiming how proud they are to be Irish; we've seen Italo-Americans who have never been to Italy wearing big buttons with the message *I'm Proud to be Italian* at San Gennaro Festivals; and we've seen Afro-Americans donning dashikis and proclaiming *Black is Beautiful*, when the message in the white society around them as they grew up was exactly the opposite. Jewish solidarity appears to be more the result of centuries of persecution than shared

religious belief. We can understand and even share the feelings of all these groups. At the same time I hope that this type of sentiment is not what's at work in discussing American pride. Collectively, Americans alive today are among the most privileged people on the face of the earth. We're hardly a put upon minority in the world at large, even if the General Assembly at the UN doesn't always defer to our every whim and every country we invade doesn't greet us with flowers. We can be happy about our good fortune, and maybe that does fit the second definition of pride, but again, for me that is not exactly what I am proud about as an American.

As members of a group, we can and do feel pride in our collective achievements, even though individually our contributions may be minor. This can be justified by sharing the ideals and values of which we are proud. Thus we can all be proud of a Constitution that has served as the model for most modern democracies. We can be proud that we belong to a country that provided enormous opportunity to (most of) those people who arrived on its shores. I am both a proud and grateful beneficiary of that policy, even though, like my great-grandparents, I crossed the Atlantic in search of a better life on the other side. However, if we take pride in our nation's collective achievements, that pride is hollow if we feel no shame when we renounce its core values and allow our best traditions to be destroyed and our Constitution to be ignored. "My country right or wrong" is a commonly held view around the world but it was not the idea upon which our country was founded. We have much to be ashamed of in the past few years. Our leaders have failed us, both practically and morally, and we have failed as voters and as citizens in not calling them to account. The American pride we have seen lately has been mostly of the third definition: insolence, arrogance, and disdain. I can only hope that in the coming days we start the long road back to reclaiming legitimate American pride.