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## **Prayer Underpinned American Independence**

**by Fr. Stephen Lynch, OFM**

Prayer played an important role in the American struggle for independence. The First Continental Congress (Sept. 5-Oct. 26, 1774), which was made up of delegates from all the colonies except Georgia met for the first time, in September 1774. In a letter to his wife, John Adams described the spiritual backdrop as the colonies were about to launch the Revolutionary War for independence.

"When the Congress met, Mr. Cushing made a motion that it should be opened with prayer. It was opposed by Mr. Jay of New York and Mr. Rutledge of South Carolina because we were so divided in religious sentiments--some Episcopalians, some Quakers, some Anabaptists, some Presbyterians, and some Congregationalists--that we could not join in the same act of worship.

"Mr. Samuel Adams arose and said that he was no bigot, and could hear a prayer from any gentleman of piety and virtue who was at the same time a friend to his country. He moved that Mr. Duche, an Episcopal clergyman, might read prayers to Congress the next morning. The motion was seconded and passed in the affirmative."

Adams continued: "Accordingly, next morning Rev. Duche appeared with his Episcopal vestments and read the 85th Psalm. I never saw a greater effect produced upon an audience. It seemed as if Heaven had ordained that Psalm to be read on that morning.

"George Washington was kneeling there, alongside him Patrick Henry, James Madison, and John Hancock. By their side there stood, bowed in reverence, the Puritan patriots of New England, who at that moment had reason to believe that an armed soldiery was wasting their humble households. They prayed fervently for America, for Congress, for the Province of Massachusetts Bay, and especially for the town of Boston [whose port had been closed and in which British troops were being quartered.

"And who can realize the emotions with which they turned imploringly to Heaven for divine help. It was enough to melt a heart of stone. I saw the tears gush into the eyes of the old, grave, pacifist Quakers of Philadelphia."

Diverse as it was, the spirituality of the First Continental Congress gave the initial spiritual encouragement that was needed on the road to American independence. The First Continental Congress proved to be an inspiring example of the fraternal unity that can come through devout prayer.

When Francis Scott Key saw the American flag flying over Fort McHenry, he was thrilled by the sight, and the knowledge that the fort had not fallen. Key wrote some verses on the back of a letter. Later, after the British fleet had withdrawn, Francis Scott Key completed his poem on the defense of Fort McHenry. Within a few days the poem was put to the music of an old English song. Both the new song and the flag became known as The Star-spangled Banner. Congress made the phrase In God We Trust the nation's official motto in 1956, but it probably originated

from verse 4 of The Star-spangled Banner: "And this be our motto: 'In God is our trust.'"

The Fourth of July celebrates the signing of the Declaration of Independence. This is a good time to remind ourselves of the final sentence of the Declaration, which reads: "And for the support of this Declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes and our sacred Honor."