

Signs of the Times: America's Sense of Exceptionalism

by Joseph Nangle, OFM | January 4, 2016 |



The essay below is the third in a series of “Franciscan Response” reflections by friars and partners-in-ministry about issues facing our culture. The series is part of Holy Name Province’s response to the call to revitalize Franciscan life and ministry in the United States — a key objective of the leaders of the American OFM provinces, who are evaluating ways to reconfigure Franciscan life in the U.S.

These essays are meant to provide social analysis as part of the many considerations aimed at creating a preferred future for the Franciscans of the United States. It is hoped that this initiative will generate dialogue among friars; all friars are encouraged to provide comments about the content of this and all essays in this series. These essays do not represent the official policy of Holy Name Province.

As we U.S. Friars Minor move toward our revitalization and reorganization and discern an appropriate Franciscan role in America’s society and Church, one reflection should center on this country’s sense of exceptionalism.

In many quarters of the United States, there exists an almost iron-clad conviction that our country holds a preferential place in the family of nations. Rarely is this “doctrine” challenged in public discourse. Rather, it has come to be something of an “article of faith” among us.

No doubt there are reasons to celebrate the “American experiment.” Our tried and true Constitution with its built-in system of amendments to address inevitable new realities; our peaceful political processes; the ability of ordinary citizens to have their voices heard, thanks to First Amendment rights — the list of such positive social and political structures is long. We do have a remarkable, participatory democratic system.

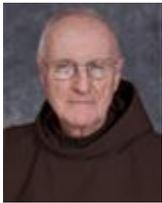
What is more, the separation of State and Church here has worked well; both to assure that neither body will impinge on or interfere with the other, while at the same time safeguarding the rights of both. This has allowed the United States to avoid any sort of “theocracy” or takeover by specific religious convictions — and, at the same time, has preserved the independence of all religious tendencies.

Given these enormously positive benefits imbedded in the American system, it is understandable that over time our citizens and leaders would conclude that we indeed are “that city on the hill” spoken of in Holy Scripture — a beacon, model and, indeed, goal for all nation states. But in the end this is a very dangerous self-description. The notion of American Exceptionalism has led to an imperial mentality on the part of successive government administrations here, with at least the implied complicity of our citizenry.

Examples include our military presence in virtually all parts of the world; our control over mechanisms of economic and social development in organizations such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund; our overriding presence at the United Nations and other such regional groupings; our interventions into and attempts to control less developed countries. Again, the list of our imperial power is long. We justify these aspects of a totally outsized American influence in the world by citing our “exceptionalism.”

For Franciscans, this is the antithesis of our worldview. We subscribe to a conviction that no one should lord it over another – in personal or societal relationships. We describe ourselves as “lesser brothers” to all humanity, particularly to the poorest of God’s daughters and sons. We follow in the footsteps of Poverello, who challenged even the Catholic Church when that body took on imperial powers. In a word, we stand over against any human institution which would accrue to itself any “right” of domination.

As we grapple with the many issues facing us in this revitalization process, surely one fundamental challenge is for us to live as a counter-cultural presence here — to preach the “full Gospel,” emphasizing a preferential option for the poor; to advocate wherever we can on behalf of the poor, marginalized, discarded peoples of our country and the world. In a word, we must consciously challenge American Exceptionalism.



— *Fr. Joe, a member of the Provincial Council, is stationed in Washington, D.C. He professed his final vows as a Franciscan friar in 1955.*