

‘Ember Days’ to Independence

On Monday July 4 our nation celebrates the formal ratification of the Declaration of Independence and the birth of our nation, the United States of America. Friday, however, is the first of three days, which mark the anniversary of another important event in our nation's history stemming from that fateful day on July 4, 1776.

By the summer of 1863 our nation had been divided in Civil War for over two years. Emancipation had been declared the previous September and had gone into effect the following January 1, transforming the war from a conflict over states rights to a fight over the very meaning of Freedom itself. While the War raged throughout the country, its effects felt in the political, social and personal realms, two great armies were converging on the peaceful farmland outside Gettysburg, Pennsylvania in what would become the bloodiest and the most vicious conflict ever fought in North America.

For three days, July 1st, 2nd and 3rd, 1863, the Union and Confederate armies fought a decisive battle that became the turning point in the War. The battle, itself, encompassed many individual historic events carried out by remarkably ordinary men. One of these was the heroic charge of Colonel Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain

down the height of Little Round Top on July 2nd, the second day of battle. With only 256 men and little ammunition with which to fight, it became a maneuver that won the day and perhaps the War itself, earning Colonel Chamberlain, a simple college



professor from Maine, the Congressional Medal of Honor. The other, occurring on the third day, was the great charge through the center of battle led by General George Pickett. Pickett's Charge, the “high water

mark” of the Confederate Army of Northern Virginia, ended in bloody and humiliating failure.

On July 3rd, the Battle of Gettysburg came to an end with a victory for the Union Army, securing the safety of our nation's capitol just sixty miles to the south. The next day, July 4th, news would arrive of General Ulysses S. Grant's capture of Vicksburg, Mississippi, securing the entire span of the Mississippi River for the Union. With this news, after three days of

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devastating bloodshed, the victorious troops in Gettysburg, and the entire Union, celebrated the greatest 4th of July in our nation’s history. Union Soldier Elisha Hunt Rhodes would later write “July 4, 1863. Was ever the Nations Birthday celebrated in such a way before?”

We the people of the United States will pause from our daily routine on Monday, as is our annual custom, to celebrate the Freedom our nation enjoys. Some of us will feel moved to attend Mass that morning to pray that our nation may continue to renew itself in Freedom and extend that Freedom to all. We will pray to our Lord, whose Cross and Resurrection is the source of all Freedom, that we strive to grow ever more worthy of that Freedom, and that we may never take that Freedom for granted.

Some of us may remember our Church’s tradition of Ember Days. Connected to such feasts as Corpus Christi and the Triumph of the Cross (September 14) Ember or Rogation Days were days that looked to another major feast as a time of prayer and thanksgiving after the feast, or of penance and preparation immediately preceding it. Originally connected particularly to agrarian societies, Ember Days continue to be a part of our liturgical tradition as days set aside by our bishops for

prayer, thanksgiving, penance and preparation.

As we pass through these three days prior to the 4th of July, let the 1st-3rd of July be for us Ember Days-of-sorts that prepare us to celebrate our nation’s independence and the Freedom we enjoy. As we prepare this weekend to celebrate on Monday the Birth of our Nation, let us remember the anniversary of the Battle of Gettysburg and the great sacrifices many throughout our history have given to gain

and preserve that Freedom. Let us also pray that the many sins of our nation be forgiven and that we be renewed to the task of Freedom in our world. Let us remember with profound gratitude that the source of all Freedom is found not in the



American flag, but ultimately in Christ Himself. His sacrifice on the Cross secured for us Freedom from sin – a Freedom for which so many have dedicated their lives in the past and continue to give and dedicate their lives today. Let us pray fervently that the true Freedom, which is the salvation of Christ, permeate our community, our nation and our world, so that the cause of Freedom – political and spiritual – may be extended and celebrated by all.

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