
Memorial Day, Service, and Responsibility

An article from the *Cathedral Times*.

On this Monday, May 25, I will pause to honor those military men and women who have given their lives in service to our country, the United States of America. Government offices will close for the day, and many private companies and services will also close. Honorable citizens and families will visit cemeteries and graveyards. There will be various parades and observances. Even people at a simple barbecue or picnic will surely pause a few seconds to remember.

Here in the United States, our Memorial Day remembrance will be almost entirely voluntary. I doubt, for instance, that there will be many air raid sirens actually stopping traffic on the interstates. However, it was not like that in Israel a month ago, when I was on a pilgrimage there and my trip coincided with Israel's Memorial Day. In Israel, of course, the days officially begin at sunset. On that evening of their Memorial Day, precisely at 8:00 p.m., air raid sirens sounded across the country; and the country almost literally stood still. Restaurants that were open (most were not) stopped serving. The country observed a moment of respectful silence for fallen soldiers and victims of terrorism. The next morning, at 11:00 a.m., similar sirens sounded again, signaling that observances were beginning again.

I like voluntary observances, just like I honor the voluntary nature of much in America – including religion! One of the true genius pieces of our Constitution, and one of its true history-making features, is the separation of Church and State. It is when we voluntarily choose activities and vocations that we respect and honor them.

Still, I also admire some countries' required years of civic service. The country of Israel, of course, has its problems and challenges; but I admire its requirement that all young men and young women spend two years in civic service. Most of that service is military, but not all of it is. I suppose it is partly for that reason that the country observes Memorial Day so broadly and strictly – because pretty much everyone has served in some way.

In our country, one reason that the State generally honors the Church, and even allows the Church certain tax advantages, is that the Church teaches citizens good things. The Church, for instance, is one institution that can teach the value of true service. It is the Christian Church, in Jesus, who gives the State one of its most effective sayings on Memorial Day: "Greater love has no one than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends" (John 15:13).

Indeed, the Christian Church has much to teach society and the world about love. We teach that true love is not just a feeling. It is also a responsibility, and sometimes that responsibility costs a great deal. I thank God for the service of people who loved life and liberty—for all—so much, that they lost their lives for those rights. Those who I remember on Memorial Day are not only military people; they are those who have served life, liberty, and justice for all, in any capacity. Thank you.

