



## Citizenship and Independence Day

After celebrating the birthday of our nation, Independence Day last week, I have been thinking about citizenship. I suppose citizenship is generally something we take for granted. I am a citizen of the United States and always have been. I never had to formally pledge my allegiance or prove my loyalty, but I am a citizen. I have always been afforded the rights of a citizen and never had to do a thing to earn them. It was through the accident of my birth that I have been afforded these rights. I say “accident of my birth” simply because my mother did nothing to choose me and I did nothing to secure a birth in the United States. God had a plan for me, but nothing I did earned me my birth in the United States and this benefit of United States citizenship.

The United States has a somewhat unique tradition of citizenship through *jus soli*, a Latin phrase meaning the “right of the soil.” This right confers citizenship on anyone born within geographical borders of the United States. This right has been added to our Constitution through the 14th Amendment. Most other nations — all of Europe, Asia and Africa — enforce the idea of *jus sanguinis*, the “right of blood,” in which citizenship is inherited through parents rather than by birthplace. The United States has taken the position that language, culture or ethnicity does not create a citizen and thus the traditions of a person’s parents do not define a citizen. What is important is the jurisdiction of the nation. A person born in the United States is subject to the laws of the United States and is therefore a citizen and afforded the rights of citizenship. These competing ideas of the foundations of citizenship have existed for hundreds of years. Since the decision makers in the United States have always favored the “right of the soil,” I was unknowingly blessed with the benefits of US citizenship as an infant on a cold winter day years ago when I was born within the geographical boundaries of the United States.

What about those who were not born in the United States? The US does recognize the “right of blood” and children born abroad to US citizen parents are US citizens at birth, although they were born outside of the country. For the rest of the population of the world who wishes to become United States citizens, they must navigate the process of naturalization. In order to naturalize, a person must be a legal permanent resident and have a green card for (in most cases) at least five years. However, the reality is that the vast majority of the world does not fit into a category that would make them eligible for a green card. If a person is fortunate enough to obtain a green card, he/she must live as a person of good moral character in the US for five years. At that time they may apply for citizenship. If the application is approvable, he/she will be scheduled for an interview where eligibility is reviewed and is tested on the knowledge of English, United States history and civics (you can find the [naturalization test online](#) and embarrass your natural born citizen friends with their lack of the knowledge required to naturalize). If they pass the test, they will later participate in an oath ceremony where they formally pledge allegiance to the United States. They will leave the oath ceremony with a certificate proving United States citizenship.

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Both the Old and New Testaments tell compelling stories of refugees forced to leave their homelands because of oppression — migration and immigration are not unique to our time or place. The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops and Catholic Social Teaching instruct us that people have the right to migrate to sustain their lives and the lives of their families — nations have the right to regulate its borders and to control immigration — and nations must regulate its borders with justice and mercy. It is the tension between people’s right to migrate to sustain their lives and the lives of their families and the right of a nation to control immigration that calls Catholic Charities to serve new immigrants to this country and help them navigate our complex immigration system. If we are successful after years of working together, we are with individuals when they swear the oath of allegiance to the United States and become

citizens and are afforded all of the rights and privileges that were bestowed on me when I took my first breath and the doctor handed me to my mother.

There’s something to think about the next Fourth of July between hot dogs or while the fireworks are bursting overhead!