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Independence

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Independence

We have many words in spoken English that take the prefix "in," where the meaning is "not." Independence means not dependent - a most valued concept for most Americans. For purposes of reflection, the spoken word can be turned around to another positive meaning where "in" means in. For example, we could judge that in some situations we are better off when we are in dependence upon others. The pronunciation is the same but the meaning is not at all the same, and allows for helpful considerations.

We are familiar with another word, interdependence, which seems easier to think about than dependence, since our culture values freedom and individual rights to an extreme. All the goods of civilization, everywhere in the world, are only possible through various forms of interdependence. When we are able to trust one another, we can depend upon people and gain immeasurable benefits that are not attainable where dictatorial coercion exists. Interdependence is marked by the exercise of different gifts by different individuals for the sake of the common good. Life in any kind of community is fully human when we can live in dependence upon one another.

We know from experience that not all people are worthy of our trust; some persons are more reliable than others, and, sadly, there are those who would take advantage of us even to our harm if they were able to gain something for themselves at our expense. Interdependence, in general, is necessary for any small group or great nation, but is not automatic, and not to be taken for granted as everyone's ideal or practice. We choose whom we will trust, and to what extent, even in societies where some are identified as authorities, leaders and teachers. In all our relationships, including with family and friends as well as in the great variety of social, business, civic and religious organizations that merit our attention, we make careful decisions about the level of trust we will place in each and every person. We want to receive the benefits of depending upon others, but we also want to protect ourselves from being hurt or harmed.

As we grow from childhood to adults, especially in western cultures, we describe maturity as a move from total dependence to relatively complete independence. But, with a bit of honest reflection, we recognize that we are actually interdependent. And, if we reflect further, we will find that at the deepest level of our lives we might be of such maturity as to consciously and freely live in dependence upon God.

To become fully human, we need to become independent, at least to a large extent, from those who give us birth. But in relation to our Creator, we do

not outgrow, or need to step beyond (if it were possible) reliance upon a love that absolutely and always has our welfare as "top priority." When infants are well cared for all their needs are met, as they can do nothing on their own. But each individual develops only by making independent choices and dealing with their consequences. With God, the fullest expression of our independent freedom to choose is that of responding to ever-present love: in persons, in creation, and to God's presence within and outside us.

Just as we can make wise independent choices about how we will live with appropriate interdependence in our human relationships, we are free to make decisions, with ongoing reflection upon our experiences, for living in dependence upon God.