

## Why I am becoming an American citizen.

By Sister John Mary Adshead O.S.B., August 27, 2018

When I tell people I've applied to become an American citizen, they often look at me with shock. "Now? Why now? Look at what's happening in our country! Look at the chaos! Why would you want to become an American *now*?" And I say, "That's exactly why I want to be an American". I tend to be a contrarian, but I feel, now more than ever, it's time to put a stake in the ground, to claim *this* land as my land, and commit myself to this country, for better or worse. You might think it for worse, but from where I'm standing on the outside, I still want in, and I'll try to explain why.

Those words of the marriage vows – for better or worse – resonate with me, because my application to become an American comes out of the Monastic Vows I made two years ago to the community of Regina Laudis. Making those vows before God to commit myself to this particular place, this Community, required a leap of faith. One of the special Benedictine Vows we take is the Vow of Stability, and on a practical level, this means living within the enclosure of the Abbey land. As what they call a citizen of the world – born on one side of the world, and lived on the other— committing to be an enclosed nun, forever, in a small town called Bethlehem, located in Litchfield County, state of CT, USA, was a big deal to me. It meant giving up a life of free independent movement, that I would no longer see many of my friends, and that I would no longer be able to spend time with my mother in England. That was a real sacrifice.

So why would I do *that*, let alone becoming an American? First, because I felt called to be here. As Mother Abbess said at my Vows ceremony, "Sister John Mary heard the voice of the Lord calling her, with many different accents, from NZ to England to America and to Regina Laudis where her heart has come to rest". Heart is the operative word, because making Vows is a declaration of love. We make these vows not to an abstract notion of monastic life, but to a particular people and community. Moreover, the vow of stability means not only staying put, but staying in relationship with each other, and as you all know, that isn't easy, and depends on staying power, or grace. But I made the leap, and have landed on the other side, and it's starting to feel a lot like home.

Out of making those Vows has come a desire to become an American citizen—a kind of fourth vow, expanding this heartfelt commitment beyond the members of this Community, to the people of this country, and to them, I am profoundly grateful. When I arrived here twenty years ago seeking more opportunities, I was struck by people's warmth and generosity. I was welcomed into homes

across America: from San Francisco to Sanibel Island, from Freeport, Maine to Memphis. No one ever let me spend Thanksgiving alone in my apartment - I was always one more person an American family could make room for. I have been reading a lot of biographies of the Founding Fathers recently, and as I delve into this country's history, I see that this generosity of spirit, these values were there at the inception of this nation, that they are intrinsic to the country, to its constitution, and that I believe is still part of the American way.

But...you say, haven't we lost our way? I don't want to gloss over the issues, and I could give you plenty of reasons as to why I might decline to become a US citizen, or a Catholic for that matter, such as the fundamental abuse of power and people. Political parties have polarized, public debate has become hateful, institutions corrupt. But my decision is not based on political affiliation but on my personal experience with "real live" individuals, and this country has given me a life and a home here with this community. I have found that there are still a lot of good people in America, and a lot of good that Americans have done. There is a culture of helping one another here, a culture of philanthropy, and volunteerism and charity. All of you here have given yourself in some way to a cause, to help someone out who needed it. There are "sung" heroes, like Senator John McCain, and there are unsung heroes, the ones that you and I know in our communities. America is still the most generous country in the world, and I would like to respond to this generosity by making another leap of faith and say, Count me in.

But when it comes right down to it, I think that you—all you who serve or have served in—the US Armed Forces—are the people I feel most grateful to, because you gave and give me a freedom that I am free to take for granted. When our first Abbess, as a nun in Paris, saw the US army liberating Jouarre she felt compelled to establish this monastery in a response of gratitude for her freedom. For me, also, World War 2 will always be in the present tense for me, because the sacrifices made then still underpin our liberty, especially in Europe, today.

This year on D Day I called the gentleman with us here today, Jim Rogers, just to thank him again for his services that day at Normandy 74 years ago. Jim and I were introduced to each other several years ago – he had worked in the fragrance industry and I had started to make perfume here at the Abbey. So we met and the rest is fragrant history, and Jim has been my mentor since then. I said I called Jim, but in fact, I had to leave a message, because Jim – in his 90's - was gallivanting around Ireland when I called – showing you can't keep a good soldier down! Jim, you embody the American

spirit of service and sacrifices made then, and I am proud to know you, and I'm grateful to you and all of you in the Armed Forces who continue to safeguard our freedom now.

Again, I recognize the fact there are many whose freedom is compromised, whose rights have been trampled on, in this country and in our Church. But however tattered the flag of freedom might seem to us, to me there is still much to be grateful for. I am the child of the Cold War, and I saw first-hand in 1990 the ravages of Communist in countries which not only could you not enter, but you couldn't leave either. There are still many countries like that, where opposition leads to imprisonment, torture and even execution. Just last week some Vietnamese sisters visited us and said that the Government in Ho Chi Minh wants to close their motherhouse because it's on valuable real estate for new development. Recourse to law is not an option.

So, my application to become an American is a declaration of gratitude, hope, and faith in your country. Becoming a citizen for me is a contemplative act, a prayer for America's future. "In God We Trust" is a formula I truly believe in.