The passage from St. John’s Gospel gives us part of the Lord’s prayer at the Last Supper consecrating his disciples for their mission following his Resurrection. Jesus prays not only for a unity among all his disciples, but a unity participating in his own communion of intimate love with the Father in heaven.

His prayer also asks this unique communion of life become a source of evangelization. Jesus says, “They may all be one, as you Father are in me, and I in you, that the world may believe that you sent me.” (emphasis added)

The communion of life, the church, is meant to be an attraction, inspiring others to be part of this life we share with God, with each other, and with all humanity. Ultimately, there is only one humanity, and we all have a share in the only human condition there is. There are never different human natures for different categories of people.

The bishops of the Second Vatican Council stated this truth clearly in the opening paragraph in The Dogmatic Constitution of the Church. “Since the Church is, in Christ, like a sacrament or as a sign and instrument both of a very closely knit union with God and of the unity of the whole human race, it desires now to unfold more fully to the faithful of the Church and to the whole world its own inner nature and universal mission.” (Lumen Gentium #1 emphasis added)

The Church’s inner nature is a communion of life with God and all humanity. The Church’s universal mission is, through God’s grace, to grow ever deeper in this communion of life, and to summon all humanity to a deeper communion with God and everyone else. All are welcomed to participate and encounter the Risen Lord within the privileged bonds of the Church’s life.

This divine call always suffers rejection and opposition. Throughout the centuries and millennia, forces of domination, exploitation, racism, cultural superiority, greed and other evils shatter the human community, divide and oppress. In our own time as well, many forces undermine this communion of life.

One of those darker forces on the rise throughout our world are various forms of “nationalism.” “Nationalism” is very different from “patriotism.” Pope St. John Paul II, speaking before the United Nations in October 5, 1995, “We need to clarify the essential difference between an unhealthy form of nationalism, which teaches contempt for other nations or cultures; and patriotism, which is a proper love for one’s own country. Nationalism, particularly its most radical forms, is thus the antithesis of true patriotism, and today we must ensure that extreme nationalism does not continue to give rise to new forms of...totalitarianism.”

Patriotism always places “love of God” as primary, and “love of country” as secondary. Our “love of country” then flows from our “love for God.” Nationalism, on the other hand, places the nation as first recipient of our loyalty and devotion, with love of God as secondary. In this order, all religions are in grave danger of becoming servants of the state, instead of providing a moral conscience for the state.

This distinction in increasingly important with the rise of nationalism in many nations in our world leading to increasing decline of strong democracies. Democracies are under threat in such countries as Poland, Italy, Hungary, Philippines, Turkey, the Czech Republic, Venezuela and Brazil. There are also nationalist parties gaining strength in France, Germany, Great Britain, and other European nations. Nationalism in many of its forms leads to an idolatry of worship of the nation, “the fatherland”. Nazi Germany raised this idolatry of nation to an art form!
This idolatrous mindset alone places nationalism in direct conflict with the Church. The weakening of democracies across the globe affects all of us at least in this one very important way: In the history of the world, so far, democracies have not gone to war with other democracies. It can then be proposed that democracy provides a stability supporting peace. The weakening of democracies can be a harbinger of greater possibilities of war. That should concern all of us. And it certainly is an issue for faith.

Immigration is one of the major issues behind this surge of nationalism. Across the globe, more people have been driven out of their homelands since the conclusion of World War II. Massive numbers of millions of people left homeless from war, civil insurrection, genocide, famine, and natural disasters are in need of finding permanent homes for their families.

Many nations having welcomed large numbers of these refugees, have experienced a backlash within their own populations. Major issues surrounding immigration can stir up great fears, questions, and concerns among the people already living in that nation. This is both common and understandable. But fears must be addressed, questions answered, and concerns receive attention of elected leaders. But darker forces of nationalism are exploiting fears, answering questions with lies and half-truths, and responding to concerns by scapegoating the very immigrants themselves.

Pope Francis has courageously promoted the rights and needs of all immigrants, often in the face of ridicule and rejection from pro-nationalism proponents. Other Vatican officials have been very vocal, especially regarding these nationalist political parties and their policies regarding immigration. Immigration is a highly charged issue in our own nation as well.

Every nation needs to be able to control their own borders and no Catholic teaching argues for open borders. But Catholic teaching places the needs of immigrant, refugees, and others having lost their homelands as a priority needing to be addressed.

We need to understand our own Catholic history in two essential time periods. First, in the 1800’s at least until 1950’s, waves of immigrants into our country raised up powerful forces of anti-Catholicism in the United States. During the 1800’s in Maine, several Catholic churches were burnt or vandalized. In the 1920’s there were over 15,000 members of the Ku Klux Klan in Maine aligning against increasing numbers of Catholic and Jewish immigrants.

Secondly, regarding nationalism and totalitarian governments, our history is quite disturbing. In the 1930’s, Catholic European nations were the first to embrace fascism as their form of government: Spain, Portugal, Austria, and Italy. The reasons for this are complex and varied, but we must reflect on history before deciding that could never happen again. It might, in fact, be happening now again in Europe.

Be aware of Catholic politicians in Europe and elsewhere trying to cover up their totalitarian inclinations with their Catholic faith. We can make no judgment on their personal identity as Catholics. But when they propose certain nationalistic ideologies as “Catholic”, those ideologies need to be regarded as “snake oil”, both undermining the faith and threatening a return to the 1930’s.

Pope Francis has continually called the Church to go to the margins of society where the uninvited, the disenfranchised, and the exploited are left to survive on the scraps from others’ tables. Only there can a true communion of life begin; one in which the Risen Lord will be discovered and served. There a foundation of true peace can develop. As Jesus said in the gospel, “I have given them the glory you gave me...that they may be brought to perfection as one, that the world may know that you sent me, and that you loved them even as you love me.”