

# A Questionable Period

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July 5, 2014*

Mayor and Mrs. Lentz, Chief Guenther, our dear president of the Fort Hill Country Historical Society, Captain Fink, my dear friends in the Mundelein community.

This past week has been an eventful one in our nation. A huge controversy erupted this past week over the interpretation of one of our foundational documents. And the controversy is growing, as is only possible now in the age of the internet as an article in the New York Times on July 2<sup>nd</sup> propelled the matter into the blogosphere. Despite the strong opinions on both sides of the issue, the Times correctly concluded that the matter is far from settled and that future re-examination of the arguments may lead to significant changes affecting all interpretation in the future.

It's hard to believe such turmoil could be caused by nine people. And it is especially difficult to imagine this considering that they aren't even judges, but paleographers!<sup>1</sup> That's right, a bunch of classical scholars trained to study the differences in manuscripts as a means of arriving at the most authentic meaning have

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<sup>1</sup> The author of the argument, Danielle Allen, cites several other paleographers in her draft paper. It was a happy coincidence for my rhetoric in that paragraph that their number added up to nine, which is that same as the number of justices on the United States Supreme Court. They include, in addition to Dr. Allen herself: Carl L. Becker, Julian Boyd, Edward Dumbauld, Joseph J. Ellis, Jay Fliegelman, John Hazelton, Pauline Maier, and Catherine Nicholson.

discovered that a mistaken punctuation mark has altered our understanding of the Declaration of Independence.

Danielle Allan, a professor at the Institute of Advanced Studies at Princeton University, has discovered that a period is missing in the earliest manuscripts of the Declaration. And, in terms of grammar and syntax, its absence really changes how we should understand the teaching the document.

The “actual” punctuation mark, which may either be a comma or “an errant spot of ink” creates the impression that the list of self-evident truths ends with “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” Instead, Dr. Allen argues, it is only the beginning of a long sentence expressing Thomas Jefferson’s contention that the reason governments exist is also among those very self-evident truths.<sup>2</sup> She argues that the rights, and the governments which protect them, are, in Jefferson’s mind, derived from the same source.

The source is what makes this story important for a minister of religion to mention at an annual patriotic celebration before offering the opening prayer. Listen to what comes before the whole paragraph.

When in the Course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the

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<sup>2</sup> Jennifeer Schuessler, “If Only Thomas Jefferson Could Settle the Issue” in *The New York Times* (July 2, 2014)

opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.<sup>3</sup>

The source for what follows is the Law of Nature and Nature's God. This means that certain rights are not conferred by governments, only recognized. That's the point as Jefferson goes on:

We hold these truths to be self-evident,

- that all men are created equal,
- that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness (*here is the location of the period, comma or errant spot of ink*)
- That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed,
- That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness.<sup>4</sup>

Now, I have just read the text without the period, and in a way where you can hear a statement of *four* self-evident truths. But instead of the four truths being equality, life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, this way of reading show them to be:

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<sup>3</sup> Continental Congress, *The Declaration of Independence*, U.S. Archives edition modified as explained in the text. [http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/charters/declaration\\_transcript.html](http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/charters/declaration_transcript.html)

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

- 1) equality,
- 2) the three unalienable rights,
- 3) government which derives its power from the governed, and
- 4) the right of the people to abolish and replace its government.

And you can hear the grammatical and syntactical logic, which can be asserted because by applying reason to the laws of nature and Nature's God, these truths appear as self-evident. This is the broadly religious basis and justification for what the members of the Continental Congress declared that July 4, Anno Domini 1776. And it is this same broadly religious basis which allows us to pray together today.

Now, I am not in a position to settle the matter of whether there is a period or not. But Dr. Danielle Allen's provocative discovery shows us once again the true magnitude of what happened that first fourth of July, and reminds us all what is at stake. What began in Philadelphia affected the whole world and continues to do so because of the contribution our nation makes both at home and far beyond our borders. All this is a reminder to us that we all have a continuing role to play in preserving what began that day. So, please bow your heads as I offer this year's prayer for the opening of the Fort Hill Patriotic Celebration.

Let us pray:

O God, who arrange all things according to a wonderful design,

Graciously receive the prayers

We pour out to you for our country, the United States of America,

That, through the wisdom of its leaders and the integrity of its citizens,

Harmony and justice may be assured

And lasting prosperity come with peace.<sup>5</sup>

We make this prayer in your Name and for your Glory,

Amen.

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<sup>5</sup> Holy See, "For the Nation or State" in *The Roman Missal*, Third Typical Edition (Chicago, Liturgy Training Publications, 2011), 1286.