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ORATION

—OF—

William J. Onahan, LL.D.,

OF CHICAGO, ILLINOIS.

Delivered at the Thirty-Second Annual Commencement of the University of Notre Dame, Indiana,

WEDNESDAY, JUNE 21, 1876.

NOTRE DAME, IND.:
SCHOLASTIC PRINT.
1876.

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ORATION.

VERY REVEREND AND REVEREND FATHERS,
LADIES AND GENTLEMEN:

When I yielded to the request and invitation, with which I was honored by the esteemed President of Notre Dame University, to deliver a brief address on the occasion of the Annual Commencement, it was not without an effort on my part to persuade him that his heart or his judgment were at fault in the selection. Assuredly I would feel proud and honored were I able to justify the wisdom and discreetness of his choice by presenting to you an address that would be worthy of the occasion, and interesting to the large and distinguished audience assembled around me. I would indeed be deterred from attempting so responsible a task were I not persuaded in advance that my poor effort would be received with the most kindly and generous indulgence.

I am, moreover, encouraged by the reflection that however imperfectly I may be qualified to assume the roll and office of teacher or mentor in the halls of this University, I yet may be enabled to draw from the lessons acquired in the broader school of the world and of history, some reflections which may serve to engage and interest my audience. An ancient philosopher remarked, and the observation has since become trite, that education does not end with the termination of a school or college career. The great world which now opens its portals to the many young, eager-bounding hearts and ambitious intellects who to-day surround me, is only a larger and broader school than the one whose hospitable roof and generous

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tutelage they are now about to depart from. I need hardly say that in this school of the world the tasks will often be found far more irksome than those allotted in these academic halls, the task-masters far less indulgent, and the applause and rewards for their efforts vastly less generous and certain than those hitherto enjoyed in these benignant surroundings.

It is not my purpose, however, to philosophize on the problem of life, nor on the duties and responsibilities which now devolve upon those who are about to enter into competition for the prize or goal which duty or ambition sets before those who now vault into the arena of the world. I have mapped out for myself a less comprehensive but perhaps more congenial task.

The influence and the teaching of a Catholic college must of necessity impress itself on the character and future of its students and graduates. In the class-room and the lecture-hall they have acquired a knowledge of the arts and sciences from professors able and accomplished: in the sacred aisles of yonder church they have been imbued with the more valuable lessons of faith and of duty.

I do not fear to be misunderstood. I speak as a Catholic—albeit an unworthy one—to Catholics. I do not seek to awaken or wound any just religious sensibilities. I would be unworthy to occupy the honorable position in which I now stand before you, were I to do so; but facts should not be ignored, nor is it wise to be silent when duty demands of us to speak out. There is everywhere a jealously and widespread distrust of the power and influence of the Catholic Church. We see her oppressed and trampled upon in Germany and in Poland, her priests and religious exiled or imprisoned, her churches closed or violated, and the sacred offices and functions prohibited.

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In Italy, once the proud centre of faith and unity, the Church is curbed and fettered, her possessions—consecrated by ten centuries of almost undisturbed tenure—confiscated, and her venerable Pontiff a virtual prisoner in that capital of which it may be truly said every stone in its churches and palaces belongs of right not to Italy but to the Catholic world, which has contributed of its blood and treasure to their erection and preservation. Switzerland imitates its Russian exemplar, and even Catholic France, under the influence of infidel zealots, seeks to curb and restrain the just influence of the Catholic Church. England, too, has lately been filled with clamorous outcries on the subject. Nor has our own land wholly escaped the infection. It becomes a serious question, therefore, for Catholics—Why this outcry against us? Is there, then, a natural incompatibility between the Catholic Church and the wellbeing of the State? Is there in the relations which must necessarily exist betwixt the one and the other a peril or a danger for which the Catholic Church or its teachings is responsible?

This is the inquiry which I shall now briefly attempt to answer. I do not purpose, it would be presumption in me to attempt, to enter into the domain of theology, and discuss faith and dogma. I shall deal with the question of

THE CATHOLIC AND THE CITIZEN,

or, if you please, the Catholic citizen and the State purely in their secular relations.

John Stuart Mill, in his essay on representative government, says that "Community of language and community of religion is of importance as contributing to an enduring nationality." Another distinguished writer, whose thoughts and opinions on American institutions have been in many respects remarkable for their prescience and sa-

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gacity—De Tocqueville—remarks, referring to the future of this country:

"The time will come when 150 millions of men will be living in North America, equal in condition, the progeny of one race, owing their origin to the same cause, and preserving the same civilization, the same language, *the same religion*, the same habits, the same manners, and imbued with the same opinions propagated under the same forms."

Time and the logic of events have given new force and significance to his prophecy. The jealousy and distrust of the power and influence of the Church is not a new or latter-day suspicion. It is as old as Christianity itself, and found a notable example in the public teaching of our Divine Saviour; and in every succeeding age, in almost every country, there have arisen similar fears, conflicts and divergences. That these fears of the power and ecclesiastical authority of the Church, whether entertained in good faith, or arising from interested motives, are ill-founded and have no just basis, I think can be clearly shown.

The Catholic Church inculcates the duty and obligation upon all her children of unreserved loyalty and fealty to the State and the constituted authorities thereof, with only this qualification that they shall "render to Cæsar the things that are Cæsar's, and to God the things that are God's." The Church does indeed enforce the obligation of primary obedience to a law whch is of necessity higher and more authoritative than any which may be enacted or enforced by any merely human authority or government, but common sense and Christian teaching alike combine to convince and satisfy us that between the legitimate political domain of the sovereign or the State and the ecclesiastical or spiritual authority of the Church, there is not and in

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the nature of things cannot be any just conflict. Unhappily, these antagonisms have occurred in all ages and probably will not cease until the end of time.

Among the legacies and promises left to the Church by her Divine Founder was the assurance that her existence would be an unceasing conflict, and the final triumph would come only at the end. I have said that we owe our first and highest allegiance to God and His laws. We owe a subsidiary obedience to the State. God gave us existence, a soul, faculties, and a destiny. The State, which is our own creation, protects us in our material interests and property, and is the agency by which we seek to promote and protect our temporal wants and aspirations. It can exact allegiance from us only in affairs of purely temporal concern. It is entitled to demand of us obedience to its laws and authority, but when it enters the sanctified domain which is consecrated to God, when it attempts to regulate and restrain the Christian in the free exercise of those duties which God and nature impose as primary obligations, it becomes in fact an usurper and trespasser. The Church in her theology, by the mouth and pen of her great doctors, has very clearly defined the doctrine of the obedience due from the subject or citizen to the sovereign and State, and no Protestant writer or authority has ventured to advocate doctrines and principles so broad and liberal in the interest of human freedom.

The theory now so widely prevalent and enforced of the unqualified supremacy of the State, makes of the latter an earthly Deity and requires of us to bow down and worship it. It demands an acceptance for itself of that dogma which it so scoffs at when claimed by the Church, namely, Infallibility!

History, that philosophy which teaches by example, is a

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witness to the glory and development which is compatible with the highest Catholic civilization.

In what regard has this not been demonstrated? It is attested in the genius and the piety which has covered Europe with monuments of architectural grandeur that are now the marvel and wonder of the traveller; and in the arts by which Catholic talent has adorned and embellished the cathedrals and palaces of the Continent, and which have consecrated to religion the loftiest inspirations of the human intellect.

Has the Church been a curb to material progress or to national renown? What States have attained the glory or surpassed in opulence France and Spain when their destinies were controlled and their laws administered by a Cardinal Richelieu and Ximenes? Is it commercial greatness is in question? Then let the enterprise and maritime renown of the Catholic republics of the Adriatic and of Holland tell the story! In what regard have they been successfully rivalled? Their decay has been due to natural, not to religious causes. Or if the latter was in question, it will be found that they have deteriorated because of their denial or departure from well-known Catholic principles. Empires have risen and fallen, have reached the zenith of human power and greatness even before the advent of Christianity, and the now deserted and lonely ruins of Thebes and Palmyra, and others which abound on the borders of the Mediterranean, admonish us that wealth and opulence is peculiar to no condition of modern civilization; it can be attained under the auspices of barbaric regime, as well as under the splendor and glare of modern enlightenment. History, and its lessons and teachings for the past three centuries, has been for the most part presented to us in a false guise and perverted by reckless or foolish

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pens so as to bring the Church into dishonor and disrepute. De Maistre says "history has been an unvarying conspiracy against truth," but, despite the adverse combination of false pens, truth in the long run will inevitably prevail. It has indeed often seemed, as Macaulay suggested, that the power of the Church's long dominion approached a close, but ever and anon that supernatural agency, which has never failed her, appeared to intervene in her behalf and safely carry her through every peril; time and again that power and supremacy has seemed to be beyoud human salvation and rescue, but it has as often triumphed over all adverse influences. Do I need to appeal to the American writers who have sometimes reluctantly spoken her eulogies? to Bancroft, to Prescott, to Parkman, and a long chain of others whose prejudices have given way to their sense of justice. Let us recall, too, that while many sectarian writers have sought to prove that the Popes attempted to destroy civil monarchy by confiscating it to their profit, it is a great Protestant historian, Müller, who says that "The Father of the Faithful was during the barbarous ages a tutor and a guide sent by God to the European Nations."

Do you need a proof and striking example of the character and influence of Protestantism as opposed to Catholicity? Then mark the successive religious revolutions which desolated Germany after the subversion of Catholicity: maxims and theories destructive of all society were propagated; upon the field of battle and upon the scaffold blood flowed in torrents; towns and cities were desolated or destroyed. Life was without safety, and property without security. The infidel disorders and revolution of a later century nearly brought down the whole European superstructure and civilization in total wreck. And the

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young Catholic intellect of this and of other lands should never forget the debt of gratitude due to the first of Frenchmen and the grandest of modern Catholic writers when he challenged modern infidelity to the combat in a memorable speech in the French house of Peers, when he proudly said: "*We are the sons of the Crusaders, and we will never draw back before the sons of Voltaire.*" But if you want a less defiant utterance and exclamation, then I tell you in the language of Tertullian and the gentle Fenelon: "You have nothing to fear from us, but we do not fear you." It is alleged that Catholic teaching favors despotism, and would maintain the doctrine of the Divine right of kings! Even the most casual student and writer needs only to consult the pages of Suarez, of Bellarmine, and of the Angelic Doctor, Thomas Aquinas, in refutation of this assertion. Never was charge more ill-founded. I repeat again here, the greatest doctors and most honored theologians have always spoken and written on the side of the largest and widest popular liberty.

A great French Bishop has lately answered in a characteristically clever book the charge that the Church is inimical to progress, to civilization and to human dignity; let me ask what existing institution has done for civilization what the Church has accomplished? What other human institution or sect has labored without ceasing for the establishment and maintenance of hospitals for the infirm, of asylums for the insane and afflicted, of refuges for the Magdalene and the outcast, and of homes for the poor and the orphan? Tell me the Church or denomination that makes similar sacrifices to maintain and support the widest and most generous system of schools, and that presents today so liberal and munificent a scheme of higher training in colleges and institutions?

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But perhaps I am departing from my theme, which is to prove that the true greatness as well as the surest hope for America is in the spread and acceptance of Catholic truth, and that no necessary antagonism exists between the one and the other. America is Catholic in her earliest traditions, as she should still be in her faith. Why should we not hold our heads erect, we the inheritors of the faith of a Columbus, of De Soto, of Calvert and of Champlain? are we not the spiritual children of a Marquette, a Brebœuf, a Carroll? and are we not animated by the same patriotic spirit and love of country which moved in the breasts and stirred the hearts of the Sullivans, the Fitzgeralds, and the Montgomerys, the Moylans, and the Barrys, of Revolutionary fame and memory?

There is on all the wide earth no more broad and generous field for the spread and development of Catholic truth than exists in this great Republic, nor is there any people more calculated to adorn and distinguish the annals of that Church. One of the great missionaries with whom America is favored, a member of the distinguished Order of Jesuits, in a notable address at a recent gathering in Philadelphia said that "the surest guarantee for the peace, the purity, and prosperity of American institutions, of good government and of free government, lay in the acceptance of Catholic truth." It was a Pagan philosopher who said that "the destruction of piety towards the gods would be the destruction also of good faith, of human society, and of the most excellent of virtues —justice"— and a modern French writer observes: "People talk of the danger of theocracy: but in what warlike nation did a priest ever lead men into slavery?" There is no cry raised against the Church that does not arise either from false or interested motives. She alone, when all else in human

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society was in confusion, preserved to us the semblance and the fact of order, in law and in government. When dynasties gave way, and empires and kingdoms were wrecked and deposed, the Church stood proudly erect amidst the general downfall—as she will always stand—unmoved and undismayed.

Great writers have written magnificent perorations on the marvellous fertility of her resources and the apparent indestructibility of her power. In the presence of the distinguished professors and the young gentlemen to whom these studies are so familiar, I need not attempt to repeat, still less echo in my own poor language, their majestic utterances. But this much I may venture to say, that in the general wreck and upheaval of empires in Europe, which the complications of the times show us to be inevitable, there is given to us in this favored land a great and a grand destiny. Exempt from foreign complications, we can now pursue unobstructed the great mission for which America was destined.

And for the Church, no greater arena exists the wide world over. Let me not be misunderstood or misinterpreted. The missionaries of the Church seek only to extend her spiritual dominion by those peaceful agencies and pursuasive utterances which have invariably characterized her teachings, and in no land more conspicucusly than in this. Now, as ever before, her priests and religious have in their hearts that beautiful motto which is inscribed on the banners of all her devoted children and servants: "*Ad majorem Dei gloriam.*" It is this spirit and this holy zeal which has won and redeemed by the labor of these devoted religious and their predecessors in the Faith, this once wild tract, until now it blossoms with the gifts and fruits of the earth, and greater boon still abounds

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in those institutions of charity, of learning and religion which are a gift and a blessing to humanity. Do you ask to know what is the ambition of the Church and these her too often maligned servants? It is to dot the land with institutions of Christian grace and benevolence similar to those which surround us here on every side. To wean men from vice to the practice of the exalted virtues—those virtues which adorn and beautify the human character, and in the acceptance and practise of which is the highest hope and surest security for the future of these States.

It is for you, gentlemen, who to day go forth from these hallowed precincts to your various homes in different States to carry with you into all the chequered pursuits of that active career which is before you the constant lessons of the teaching which I am sure you have wisely learned in the halls of your *Alma Mater*. I am but a poor and unworthy monitor, but I do assure you in the struggles which are inevitably before you that no experience which you may acquire will stand you in so great stead as those lessons which have been inculcated by your reverend Professors and teachers at Notre Dame. Be true to them, and in their possession you will have an enduring and unfailing joy.

One word more and I shall close. In this centenary year, America claims much and expects great things of her sons, and especially from those who bring to her ranks, in whatever sphere, the service of young hearts and uncontaminated intellects. We should seek to restore the purity and the virtue which these centennial days recall. Be it yours the duty and the glory to give to this land your loyal and most devoted services, and by bringing about that much-needed restoration of purity in public life, thereby recall and renew the era of the better days of this Republic.

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