

(Address given by the Reverend Theodore M. Hesburgh, C.S.C., President of the University of Notre Dame, at the Irish Fellowship Club Banquet, Conrad Hilton Hotel, Chicago, Tuesday, March 17, 1953.)

THE "FIGHTING IRISH"

I am happy this evening, Ladies and Gentlemen, to bring to the members of the Irish Fellowship Club hearty festal greetings from the home of the "Fighting Irish." That is a name we cherish warmly at Notre Dame. Nearly fifty years ago, it was given to us with something of a sneer: We were just "The Irish" then, but Father John W. Cavanaugh, who had a passionate love for Ireland and the Irish, said: "Let's take that name for our own and make them like it" - and more than forty years of friendly battle with all comers have added the epithet, "Fighting," and I hope made the name honorable. For all true Irishmen are fighting Irishmen; the important thing is what they have fought for. That is an honorable and a glorious cause; may no Irishmen ever forget it. It is this cause that we celebrate tonight, on the anniversary of Ireland's patron saint.

There was, of course, that merely pugnacious Irishman who said of the first world war that "It wasn't much of a war, but better than no war at all." And, then, there is the Irishman who wrote me the other day, approving our decision not to play a bowl game in Miami. "Imagine," he wrote, "the Fighting Irish of Notre Dame playing in the Orange Bowl!"

But seriously, ladies and gentlemen, with the exception of George Washington and Abraham Lincoln, I do not believe there is any character in our national history whose memory is so universally celebrated in this country as is Saint Patrick's. There is hardly a single city of any size where on some day close to March seventeenth groups of Americans of all national descents do not gather about the banquet table, or in halls, or homes, to extol in music and song and fervid speech, that people who look to Saint Patrick as their

patron saint and the founder of Christian Ireland. Radio and television this week have been alive with the melodies of Ireland. Rotary Clubs, Kiwanees, Lions, Chambers of Commerce, have made Ireland the subject of their weekly luncheon talks; and hundreds of those diners, I have noticed, who give only a stammering performance of the opening stanza of the "Star Spangled Banner," are fluent with the words and melodies of "My Wild Irish Rose" and "When Irish Eyes are Smiling." Why is this? Surely, it is not because the people generally know much about Saint Patrick. It is certainly not because they are acquainted with the great Christian missionary who came to a people of high civilization, of extraordinary intellectual vigor, of sweeping imagination, and by the magnetism of his personality, and the alchemy of divine grace, turned those native powers into forces for the spread of Christian truth and the moulding of heroic Christian character. No, ladies and gentlemen, the English-speaking world celebrates this festival of the Irishman because, exiled from his native shores, he has won a place in the hearts of Americans by his wit, his song, his traditional courage, his flaming imagination, his patient suffering, his implacable will to preserve, at the cost of life itself, those rights which God gave to men, and which no man or group of men can rightfully take away.

It is this, ladies and gentlemen, that the Irish have been fighting for, not only in Ireland, but in every country where there was a struggle for freedom from tyranny; in France, in Spain, and America; in South America and South Africa. His blood has crimsoned a hundred battlefields; and some one has well said that what they need behind the Iron Curtain is a couple of dozen real Irishmen with shillelaghs to clean up that mess. Seriously, it is a source of pride that the Irishman has never ceased to fight tyranny and uphold

the rights of free men; and today, after two thousand years of Christian culture, in spite of all our advancement in science and literature and art, the question that is paramount today in the parliaments of the world is the fundamental question of human freedom; whether men shall live as free human beings, or be the slaves of a tyrannical and inhuman civil power.

A few years ago, Mr. Winston Churchill criticized the government of Ireland for its neutrality in the second World War; and in that speech he proudly spoke of the valiant stand of England alone after the fall of France and before the United States had entered the conflict. Mr. Devalera, in a calm statesmanlike speech, answering him said, "Mr. Churchill is proud of Britain's stand alone----- But could he not find in his heart the generosity to acknowledge that there is a small nation that stood alone, not for one or two, but for several hundred years against aggression; that endured spoliation, famines, massacres, in endless succession; that was clubbed many times into insensibility, but each time, on returning consciousness, took up the fight anew; a small nation that could never be made to accept defeat, and has never surrendered her soul. Mr. Churchill is justly proud of his nation's perseverance against heavy odds. But we in this island are still prouder of our people's perseverance for freedom through all the centuries. We of our time have played our part in that perseverance, and we have pledged ourselves to the dead generations, who have preserved intact this glorious heritage, that we, too, will strive to be faithful to the end, and pass on this tradition unblemished."

That's what I mean by the "Fighting Irish." And there was never a time in the history of America when we were in more desperate need of that fighting spirit. For the spirit that kept that fire alive in the hearts of

Irishmen was a religious spirit. It was a spirit that worshipped God, and was not ashamed to go down on its knees to thank God for the gift of human freedom. And it was that spirit that inspired our founding fathers to declare that "All men are created equal and endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, among which are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." One Irish-American who signed the Declaration of Independence was fighting Irishmen enough to tell the world where he could be found if someone wanted to question his belief. Alone among the signers, he located himself: John Carrol of Carrolton.

It is American doctrine that Almighty God is the source of our liberties, and no man may take them from us. But today the great heresy of our country is not atheism, but secularism; not the denial of God, but the neglect of God, barring him from our political, social, family, and educational life. The Communist in America today can rise up and demand these rights as an American citizen, though his aim is to tear down the very temple of human liberty; but it is an offense against the American Constitution, as interpreted by the highest court in this land, for the future citizens of America to be taught in American public schools the religious foundation underlying the inspiring message of our American Declaration of Independence: that God is the source of human liberty, the best guarantee of human rights. When a nation or a civilization loses its spiritual roots, that nation or that civilization is dying, even though externally it may seem to prosper. And if we, as American citizens, dare sit with folded hands and silent lips, while that religious faith which has been the very life blood of our liberty is drained from the veins of young America, then some day a fanatical minority may well take

control of this government and blot out our human rights as they have been blotted out yesterday and today behind the Iron Curtain in Russia, Hungary, Yugoslavia, and Bulgaria. It can happen here.

The whole history of Ireland and the Irishman for seven centuries has been a protest, too, often written in blood, against government that would rule by force of arms rather than by justice and reason; a protest against the denial of political and religious freedom. So bitter, so heroic, so unending has been the struggle for freedom in Ireland, that we who have never lost that blessing might well appraise its value by the blood that has been shed in Ireland, by the lands that have been confiscated, by the Irish homes that have been left in ashes because our fathers would not submit to a tyranny that deprived them of the rights God gave all men.

It is not as if the Irish were born into a state of subservience, though Saint Patrick himself knew the sufferings of a slave. For over a thousand years ere "The emerald gem of the Western world was set in the crown of a stranger," she had been a strong, free, cultured people. She was a federated nation of four kingdoms, with an ardhri and a triennial parliament, at a time when England was a Roman colony, and France a welter of small tribal powers. Her great Book of the Law gave organized justice to Ireland, before the English and the French had risen above the oral judgments of individual chieftains. And for this people, high in its ideals, noble in its ambition, advanced above all its neighbors in scholarship, a nation in which Christian sanctity found its summertide, to be suddenly cast into the dust, and made the victims of cruelty and treachery for seven centuries is something to wonder at. And this from the land of gentle Chaucer, and Shakespeare, who added almost a new splendor to beauty and justice!

We cannot forget those things; we dare not forget those things. Not that we must bear malice or hatred in our hearts; that is un-Christian, and vengeance belongs to God. We feel no bitterness towards Nero, though his martyred victims will ever be an inspiration to heroic Christian living. And to forget the story of those seven centuries in Ireland is to forget her martyrs; is to forget our own blood; is to forget the spirit of the "Fighting Irish" that has kept alive the fires of liberty in over half the world. It is to forget the inspiration to exalted Christian living left us by Emmet, and Wolfe Tone; by the O'Donnells and the O'Neills, by the poets of the sweet mouth, Padriac Pearce, Joseph Plunket, and Thomas McDonough, to whom life was sweet and beautiful, but who loved Ireland above the love of woman, and went gladly to die for her and her ideals, that we might be fired to live for them, and love them always. You may have read the last statements of several of the men who died because of their part in the rising of 1916. I think it is a sign of their noble character, that there is in those statements not one word of rancor or ill-feeling against any of their enemies. The cause of freedom and the fine fellows who died for it dwarfed into insignificance every lesser sentiment. They fought more for what they loved, than against what they hated.

"The cause for which I die" said Sean McDermott, "has been re-baptized during the past week by the blood of as good men as ever trod God's earth, and should not I feel justly proud to be numbered among them?..... It is not so much for myself that I feel happy, but for the fact that Ireland has produced such men." And Thomas McDonough wrote, "It is a great and glorious thing to die for Ireland, and I will forget all petty annoyances in the splendor of this. When my son, Donagh, was born, I thought to him and not to me would this be given. God has been kinder to me than I hoped." And it was the brave

Cornelius Colbert who spoke this prophecy, looking back upon his death as it were from his own grave, "When I died for Ireland and God, we had mobilized." That is the stuff of which Irish heroes were made. Let all Irishmen dare in their hearts to be forever mobilized in the cause of freedom, to love it, to speak for it, to fight for it, and, if need be, to die for it. For these men have left us and our children an album of heroic characters to teach us how noble men may become when inspired by a great faith and a holy cause; and these last words of dying heroes we and our children should learn by heart, for they contain the Christian philosophy of the true hero - of the soul too great and too pure for the littleness of hatred and revenge.

Let me then close this recital of these Irish heroes with a bit of the last letter of Padriac Pierce, the first president of the Irish Republic. It was written to his mother from the soul of a son full of filial love and the bravery of the strong. It reads:

"My dear Mother:

I have been hoping up to now that it would be possible to see you, but it does not seem possible. Good bye, dear mother You asked me to write a little poem which would seem to be said by you about me. I have written it and a copy of it is in Harbour Hill Barracks

I just received Holy Communion. I am happy except for the great grief of parting from you. This is the death I should have asked for, if God had given me the choice of all deaths - to die a soldier's death for Ireland and for freedom. We have done right. Do not grieve for all this, but

think of it as a sacrifice which God asked of me and of you I will call to you in my heart at the last moment.

Your son,

Pat."

And this is the little poem:

Dear Mary, Thou that saw thy first-born Son
Go forth to die amidst the scorn of men,
Receive my first-born son into thy arms
Who also goeth forth to die for men:
And keep him by thee till I come to him.
Dear Mary, I have shared thy sorrows
And soon shall share thy joys.

That is what Christian faith can do to an Irish heart. And I don't know what else could do it.

It has been the misfortune of Ireland that much of her history has been written by her enemies and falsely interpreted by them. But her own sons wrote her ballads. There is hardly a wrong of Ireland that has not been sweetened by one of her singers. And when the chronicles of history are but musty volumes upon the shelves of antiquaries, mothers will sing to their babes the heroic deeds of Irish patriots, will teach them the lesson of love for Ireland in the lives of a thousand martyrs, and the telling of those stories is all that will keep from a well-deserved oblivion the names of those who for greed or power laid waste the beauty of Irish homes, and stopped the beating of happy Irish hearts. It is for the sons of Irishmen to keep green forever the memory of those fighting men, because they fought for God and freedom. To

drink of their spirit, to emulate their sacrifice, is to assure ourselves that we will leave to our children and our children's children, a holy and a noble example that will live on in the world when we have been gathered to our fathers.