

(Address given by the Rev. Theodore M. Hesburgh, C.S.C., President, University of Notre Dame, at the 178th Anniversary Banquet of The Hibernian Society of Baltimore, Maryland, March 17, 1981)

THE "FIGHTING IRISH"

I am happy this evening to bring to the members of the Hibernian Society of Baltimore hearty festal greetings from the University of Notre Dame, 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 adjective, "Fighting," and I hope has made the name honorable. For all true Irishmen are fighting Irishmen; the important thing is what they have fought for, the struggle for freedom. This is an honorable and a glorious cause; may no Irishman 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." But seriously, 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 March 17th, 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 Irish people who look to Saint Patrick as their patron 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 second verse 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, 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, that freedom and those rights which God gave to men, and which no man or group of men can rightfully take away.

It is this 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, and Spain, and America, North and South. Irish blood has crimsoned a hundred battlefields. 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 hundred 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.

Some 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 to 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 of freedom unblemished."

That's what I mean by the "Fighting Irish." And there will never be a time in the history of America when we will not be in 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 Irishman 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 Carroll of Carrollton.

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. That same struggle for economic freedom, too, is going on

in Northern Ireland today. 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 freedom and 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," the Irish had been a strong, free, cultured people. Ireland 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 victim of cruelty and treachery for seven centuries is something to wonder at.

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. But 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, 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 rebaptized 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."

That is the stuff of which Irish heroism 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.

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. Goodbye, 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.

This is what Christian faith can do to an Irish heart. And I don't know what else could do it. Let us all, especially this night, keep the faith.