

LETTER OF THE MINISTER OF CULTS
CONCERNING PRAYERS FOR THE KING

(5 March 1831)

Henri-Dominique Lacordaire, OP

On 23 February, the Minister of Cults addressed to the Bishops of France a circular letter by which he enjoined them to add to the verses in the prayer for the king the name *Louis-Philippe*. This name, following the usage of the Church, is to be pronounced in the prayers which end the verses and not in the chant of *Domine Salvum*. Any false interpretation is thus forestalled since it is the priest who chants the prayer and who presents to God the name of the sovereign, while the faithful alone recite: *God save the king, and harken to us on the day when we will have invoked You for his benefit!* The purpose of this order maintained in prayer for the chief of State are full of propriety and grandeur. It is proper that the priest refrain from naming the king, and that, after the cheers of the crowd, in which his person is designated only by a common love, you can hear emerge from the depth of the sanctuary revered syllables that are the other name of France. An even more powerful reason commands this; it will be easily understood by those who noticed that in history, in military camps, in public forums, never do the people greet the sovereign by his name, except in civil strife, and that there returns very quickly, by an admirable instinct, a single truly popular word, dynamic, that excludes every other sovereignty than the one it recognizes: *Vivat imperator! Long live the king!* This is a cry of order and of peace, while the given name of the prince, spoken by the people, is an infallible sign of divisiveness, proof that the right to the throne is contested, and consequently a political error that the armies and the citizens as a whole never commit. The world has to have ministers for such an error to come to anyone's mind.

Consequently, the Catholic Church, which has a feeling for the things of earth, has forbidden the people to name the sovereign when praying aloud for him; she has allowed

this national cry to be repeated three times: *God save the king, and harken to us on the day when we will have invoked You for his benefit!* Moreover, she enjoined the priest, as representative of common thought and prayer, charged to entreat God for all men, a man whose word reconciles everything — she enjoined him to pronounce the name of the reigning civic officer and to call for silence at the moment of hatred, of ailments, of all private feelings before the important need that has given a head to the country. Suppose, to the contrary, that the people themselves had identified the sovereign by his name, I pray you to examine the consequences with an open mind.

During civil discord, citizens have only one common refuge, the church; only one functioning link, prayer; only one peace, which comes down from God onto the altar. There, for a little while, in tranquil chants, to the fragrance of incense, are forgotten the passions that rumble outside; we perceive citizens, divided by their hopes, mutually dreadful, kneel together and repeat together: *Peace on earth to men of good will!* If there is in this world a divine scene, I attest to it; if there is a divine harmony on this sinful earth is it not found in the gathering of people praying in this way, praising peace from the bottom of their hearts, despite the strife of the country? Moreover, if there is a deplorable frenzy, is it not to throw to these people some political chants instead of those traditional hymns that offend no one and that remind citizens that the hard realities of life are tempered by the mercy of the Lord their God? It is, indeed, indisputable that the name of the prince is not one honored by everyone. And since this universal admiration is even impossible after a revolution that displaced from the throne an ancient family, it would be to oblige the people to an act of partisanship in that place where they came to seek refuge from the memory of political parties. To do so, would make of the church a public place wherein citizens would protest by their cries or by the silence of their opinions, where they would judge each other, where some day blood might flow. Given that assembling before the altars is a sacred duty, it follows that the bell of prayer will call Christians to scenes of murder, in the name of God.

But suppose that those fears would never arise, that never would the debauchery of Saint-Germain be repeated in even greater dread, still it remains certain that you command of the faithful a prayer that not all of them wish to offer, and that the Church will become, if not a theater of armed divisions, at least a political arena and a place of inquisition where the police will learn from the lips of a Christian the secrets of his heart. Likewise, if today

one inquires whether the priest has offered the prayer of the king, one will then ask if a certain Catholic offered it, if perhaps he had substituted the name of a proscribed person for the crowned name. Thus, the church will become a den of spies. Moreover, if the police were to respect God — the police that can do so little since they respect nothing — by what right would there be imposed on French people the obligation to pray for the prince? In fact, *God save the king* is the cry of the people and not of the priest; the choral director only accompanies the people and regulates their voices. Indeed, here is a new freedom about which France knew nothing! Soon, no doubt, we will be forced to sing in the theater *God save the King*, and, as in the time of a famous emperor, soldiers will come to awaken us, if we are asleep, so we can applaud. Men like Nero no longer exist, to be sure; yet there are ministers who would lead people to the belief that, in the history of despotism, ridicule will become as famous as cruelty.

Look to what the government is opening itself! In the countries that retained a greater attachment to the past, who will prevent the people from leaving when there is intoned a hymn, formerly sacred, today political? Who will prevent the people from keeping, all of a sudden, a profound silence, after having followed, up to that point, the sacrifices of its religious feelings? They respected the voice of the priest who, by himself, rose above the passions of everyone, consecrating the freedom of everyone in a unique respect, placing it under the protection of the holocaust still smoldering; no Christian felt himself wounded; rather, he withdrew into himself and offered, in an instant, the sacrifice of his feelings to Him Who sacrificed his Son for the salvation of the lofty country of all mankind. But now that prayer is an order given to the faithful by a minister, who will submit to this humiliating yoke? Will there be found everywhere choirs who agree to represent the voice of the people and, in spite of them, to raise that voice to heaven, whence it came down free and consecrated as the voice of God? Ah! How depressing are so many troubles, in the long run!

The minister, we do want to believe, had good intentions, even though the reasons for his step, put forth in the letter of 23 February, are of a very remarkable nonentity. He thought that the addition of the royal name to *Domine salvum* would prevent *troublesome interpretations about the feelings of the clergy for the king of the French and the institutions of the country*. What? A priest prays publicly for the king, mentioning him by name, and has to say that name four times instead of one so that there be no doubt about

his feelings! By the way, is a priest obliged to esteem the prince? Does the Charter make a duty of that love? The priest must submit to the law, nothing more; he has nothing else to prove. In fact, the ministers tell us some very extraordinary things; if despotism were justified by being absurd, they would remain in unending innocence. The Minister of Cults should have asked himself this question before he signed the letter: Why does the Catholic Church name the sovereign in the prayer of the priest but not in the verses sung by the people? As for me, a man of this century, who has never reflected on religious matters, should I not fear that, in seeking to destroy this established order, I would be committing a fault against common sense? Could a rule this ancient not have a hidden reason, precisely because it would betray indifference in following the contrary? If the Minister of Cults had interrogated himself in this way, he might have understood the words of the enigma and would not have made a law that, were it not rejected by invincible resistance, would cost France more blood during future revolutions than would an ordinance of persecution. We have already seen, a few months ago, the pikes of the National Guard rush to the choir stalls of a church, evict the singers, and intone the *Save the King Louis Philippe*. What they did then, others will do someday with greater justification. We will have in our churches a left side and a right side, the side of victory and that of defeat. Since nothing is so unstable as chance, more cruel than hatred born in the sanctuary, there will be no lack of blood after sacrilege and injury.

From another viewpoint, the letter of the Minister of Cults is moreover an unfortunate marker. In it, freedom of conscience is violated with an impudence truly overflowing with disdain. Up to now, we had indeed been ordered to pray, but without specifying the formula of the prayer and without breaking, with a stroke of the pen, our most ancient practices. What is left but to bring the Ritual and the Pontifical to the Minister so that he can read the changes that civilization commands be done? Indeed, if it is his right to regulate prayer, we do not see what is logically left of the power of our bishops. Undoubtedly nothing, nothing but freedom, the only logical thing left after we have lost everything we obtained from God. Yet we continue to proclaim freedom from afar, delighted that the ministerial follies hasten its coming, and that God has placed behind the greatest evils, as He placed at the bottom of the grave, eternal life. Glory to that God Whom we serve! While everything around us falls into discouragement — power, the people, the past, gold, war and peace — He reveals to Catholics their power, and, in the place of the crosses, beaten down on the ruins of forty years, He plants something that does not yet have

a name, something they will discover with anxiety mixed with joy, those who despair of the world and those who never despaired of God.

Translation from the French © 2012 by George Christian, OP, & Richard Christian. All rights reserved.
Excerpt from *Lacordaire Journaliste*, 1830-1848. Delhomme et Briguet. Paris, 1897. [Compiled by Paul Fesch]