

## **TO THE BISHOPS OF FRANCE**

(25 November 1830)

Henri-Dominique Lacordaire, OP

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The government reveals its stand: it has just informed Catholics of the fate it has reserved for us; it has attempted to try your patience, to learn to what degree it can allow itself to be daring in abuse and in destruction. Do not believe that it will desist. The Catholic religion is no longer its own and neither the law nor public opinion will shield you as a rampart against it. From now on, the nomination of your colleagues to the episcopacy is loosened from all legislative and moral security. From now on, the nomination has been handed over as booty to agile ministries who will succeed each other and, in passing, will take the opportunity to carry away your hierarchy along with theirs. You have now fallen to a level worse than that of the Greek bishops at the capture of Constantinople. It matters little to Mohammed to give them colleagues who follow their wishes and to let fall on them, from the height of his victory, that sign of mercy, worthy of a Muslim who believed in his god, and who did not doubt the influence of his law. But your enemies are not your conquerors: they do not believe, they cannot persecute you. What is left to them? Wiles, progressive laying waste of the episcopacy and of teaching, oppression of the French clergy of the second order by a superior clergy of their choice. The work has begun; whatever precautions have been taken, the veil has been torn and your eyes can discover, through the years and the events, the kind of altar of the Lord they will set up.

Bishops of France! You, brothers in the same priesthood, you, our fathers because of your apostolic preeminence and of your undying affection for us, bear with your children

who speak to you, allow them to implore you to look out for your honor and our common salvation. If we have offended you, forget the sorrows that in our hearts we never wished to inflict. If you deemed some of our political opinions poorly justified, reject them, without confusing them with the sacred and certain interests of the Catholic Church. Have pity on yourselves and on us; let it not be said that you found our entreaties more inopportune than the oppression of our enemies. Be sensitive to the misfortunes that were still bearable because they hurt only the present, but that have become endless since the hierarchy, jeopardized in its roots, threatens future centuries with incalculable evils.

As long as the heads of religion are men of its choice, it has nothing to fear; neither persecution nor hunger will kill it. Neither persecution nor hunger brought about the death of the Churches of the Orient, of Germany, of England; they died through the corrupt intervention of power in the formation of the episcopacy — either because the bishops willingly sold their independence, or because they did not realize how far free and believing men could offer resistance to profane wills. It is now your turn, you, sacred remnants of our bishops — your turn to suffer this stealthy attack from civil authority. Its agents have pored over your heads, whitened from previous hardships; they counted your years and rejoiced over them, because man's lifetime is short. As soon as you die, they will place on your chairs priests honored by their confidence, whose presence will subvert your ranks, yet without destroying your unity. Later, what is left of shame will disappear from their actions; ambition will achieve on the earth horrible behaviors; the last of you to remain, as you lay dying, will be able to descend the steps below the main altar of his cathedral in the conviction that his funeral ceremonies will be those of the entire Church of France.

What will be for us the guarantee of their choice? Since the Catholic religion is no longer that of the country, the ministers of the State hold and are bound to hold a legal indifference toward us; is it their indifference that will be our guarantee? They are laymen: they could be Protestant, Jewish, atheists; will their conscience be our guarantee? They

were chosen from the ranks of a society imbued with a stubborn prejudice against us; will their prejudice be our guarantee? In fine, they have been in office for only four months; will their past be our guarantee? They have opened their mouths only to threaten us; they held our their hand to beat down our cross; they have signed ecclesiastical ordinances to approve arbitrary laws whose victims we have become. They left standing agents who violated our sanctuaries, who allowed corpses to rot there before God; they have tolerated that in all theaters our vesture become the dress of infamy, while their right-hand men ordered us to wear it, under penalty of being arrested as vagabonds released from penal servitude. Not even once did they protect us from any single issue of France. They offered us as premature victims to all strong emotions. These are the men from whom you would consent to receive your colleagues in the task of leading pastors!

The episcopate which would come from them is a doomed episcopate. Like it or not, it will be a traitor to religion; it will be parricide — a crucial plaything for the thousand changes that transfer power from one hand to another; it will register in our ranks all the ministerial and anti-Catholic opinions that the majorities, one after the other, will cherish as their work. In agreement on only one point, the new bishops will bend their clergy into trembling submission before the most foolish whims of a minister or of a prefect. In that Babel, the language of servility is the only one that will not change. Mean souls are never lacking to those who are looking for them. They will find some, they will train some. . . . After having dishonored us in the minds of the people, one day they will turn us over into the hands of authority; the latter will see it as a favor to offer us life in exchange for our conscience. To ignominy there will follow schism. The few men who remain faithful to the dignity of their priesthood, long-time victims of those who were supposed to be their protectors, will finally escape from a cursed land and will go to make distant fields fruitful with their tears. Bishops of France! We implore you not to leave behind you such an awful legacy. Since you are our fathers, show compassion to your posterity; offer a better sign of love to those who will live after you; they alone will be able to protect your tombs and keep

them from becoming wastelands.

What are you afraid of? Are you not bishops? Moreover, you are Frenchmen; the laws protect you against arbitrary undertakings of civil authority. Today, the latter cannot touch a hair on your head without all of Europe erupting in flames. Conditioned by their victory, our enemies are no longer what they were; they met your rights mingled with theirs on the battlefield. The first drop of blood that will flow from your veins will make shocking the blood they spilled to overcome freedom. What, in fact, are we asking if not the execution of their own laws? What are we asking if not that they remain faithful to their oaths? They will betray freedom, the laws, and their oaths only at the price of their unending dishonor and of the tranquility of us all. What has deceived us up to now concerning the complacency of their power is that they exercise it in our favor within a circle in which minds are steeped in tradition. For our having formerly been outside of public law, because of our influence and the piety of princes, they treat everything we have as if it were a result of privilege and of favor. But should they touch our lives, should they touch our consciences, we will be left to cross our arms: the soil of Europe will flee from their footsteps. The personal property of two-thirds of the world will suffer the greatest catastrophe; at this thought, the enemies have already turned pale in fright. The Treasury building corresponds to our temples, its gold corresponds to our God. Only one step is left for them: the curtailment of our budget. Bishops of France! We say no more to you; it is up to you to decide whom you wish to leave in your chairs at your deaths: whether an episcopacy rich and corrupting, or an episcopacy poor and worthy of succeeding you.

As for us, who address to you these pleading words, who beg you a second time to forgive the displeasure we would have caused you: if our efforts with you are unsuccessful, we will shudder greatly, without losing the filial respect that is your due, however. God knows that we would give our lives to obtain our salvation through you! Nonetheless, we ourselves will not abandon you; we will use all the resources allowed by the laws of the

Church without decreasing the supreme rights of the Apostolic See. But to obey the councils and our conscience, we will protest against those who would have the rashness of accepting the title of bishop from the hands of our oppressors. As of today, we lodge this protest: we entrust it to the memory of all the French people in whom faith and modesty have not been lost, to our brothers in the United States, in Ireland, and in Belgium, to all those who labor for freedom in whatever part of the world they live. We will carry it, barefoot if necessary, to the city of the Apostles, to the steps of the Confession of St. Peter, and we will see who will stop on the road the pilgrim of God and of freedom.

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This article, as we have seen, was seized and submitted to the Courts. Here, in a few words, is Lacordaire's announcement in a flyer entitled: *To all our subscribers, to all the friends of religious freedom.*

Our edition of 25 November was withdrawn by the postal service on order of the Attorney-General. The cause for the seizure is an article entitled: *To the Bishops of France.* It dealt with the nomination of bishops which had just occurred, concerning which we called for, in supplication, the attention of our leading pastors. We enjoined them to forget the displeasures we had caused them and to take pity on the Church of France, threatened in its hierarchy. The passage principally censured contained a brief summary of our complaints against two ministries of the Revolution of 1830 and tended to prove that the civil authority offered no sufficient guarantee against its interference in the nomination of bishops.

Given that the discussion before the jury will hinge on this point, it is essential that we have an exact collection of arbitrary actions, of vexations of all kinds, that took place

against the Catholic Church in the provinces, while the authorities made only a few semblances of protection in our favor.

Accordingly, we ask all of our subscribers and the friends of religious freedom to make known to us, as soon as possible, all similar actions that *they have seen with their own eyes*. The name of the *locality*, of the *pastor*, of the *agents*, the precise *date* of the event need to be carefully reported, along with the *reasons* and the *results* of each incident. It is very important not to hide any of our mistakes and to act with extreme loyalty.

All Catholics and liberals of good faith need to rejoice in that this occasion offers us an opportunity to settle accounts, not with a country that supports freedom and tolerance for everyone, but with two ministries who, so far, have barely fulfilled the sacred promises of 7 August.

H. LACORDAIRE,

Priests, author of the article charged

Appended are the signatures of all the other editors.

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