

PRIESTS AND POLITICS

By Charles Kickham

From *The Irish People*, June 4, 1864.

There are men in Ireland at present, who, while representing themselves as Nationalists, seem to regard it as a fundamental principle in politics, that it is unlawful to embark in any project of National regeneration, without first consulting the oracles of the Catholic Church, and asking for their sanction. Against this notion we deem it our duty strongly to protest. We regard it as a notion at once delusive and pernicious.

Doubtless all true and just ways of delivering one's country must be consistent with the teachings of religion; but, in order to find out whether a given plan of liberation may be lawfully adopted, there is no need, we say, of first testing it by those teachings. The methods of finding out most of the truths, necessary to our practical life in this world, are quite independent of religion. Religion has no *direct* necessary connexion with such things. Of course religion, rightly interpreted, approves of everything that is good; but it rather avoids *direct* interference with politics and all other worldly business.

We are not under the obligation, when about to eat our dinner, of first enquiring, whether the Catholic or any other Church may approve of eating dinners. "Nature and nature's law" give us sufficient proof and authority in this matter. And, in like manner, when our country requires to be set free, if we make good use of our reasoning faculties, we can, without being obliged to consult the teachers of this or that Church, find means to compass the glorious result of National independence.

In truth this ultra-Catholicism in politics of some of our *soi-lisant* patriots, our would-be political guides, is to be looked upon as thoroughly evil and unpatriotic in its tendency. Let us earnestly warn our countrymen against such cries as "*Liberty through Catholicity*" and "*Catholic amelioration*" – those favourite catch-words of certain superlatively devout barristers, who once upon a time, in their "hot youth," made a mighty parade of patriotism, as far as speech and song

went but who, now that they have reached the years of sober discretion, are fast subsiding into loyal and well-paid assistant barristers. Independent of all other considerations, the political doctrines of these holy O'HUNBUGS are most absurd and mischievous in a country, circumstanced as Ireland is, with a numerous and powerful section of the people Protestant. If Irishmen mean to make themselves free, they must laugh to scorn as childish all utterances, such as that notorious piece of rhetorical balderdash, attributed to THOMAS FRANCIS MEAGHER, but so unworthy of his talents – “the liberty of Ireland must be baptized in the holy wells!”

We may safely affirm that, as a general rule, ecclesiastics are not to be coveted as political guides. It is natural we should expect to find in them a knowledge of all essential truths of theology. But it is ludicrously illogical to infer, that, because they are acquainted with theology, they must necessarily be political adepts. 'Twould be as sensible to conclude that a good doctor couldn't scribble doggerel. So far from priests being infallible in politics, they are, generally speaking, the most unsafe and fallible of all political teachers. This truth has been illustrated over and over again in Irish affairs. Their electioneering blunderings and divisions have shocked all persons possessed of unjaundiced minds. Was it not their influence that pushed SADLEIR, the suicide, and KEOGH, *the judge*, into political prominence? These men, and others like them, were their political boons to Ireland. In fact, the ecclesiastics, who, in the different ages of the world, have meddled with civil government, must, with a few great exceptions, be classed among the most narrow-minded politicians and the worst rulers of mankind. This should in no way excite our wonder; for the very education and training, most fitted to make them admirable in the discharge of their sacerdotal functions, are calculated to incapacitate them for a political career. In a word, excellent priests are generally execrable politicians!

We believe our countrymen are fast arriving at a perception of this truth. We beg to say this with all due deference to the speech, delivered the other day at a public meeting by a certain learned aldermanic barrister. This gentleman was once a great patriot, too, and used to speak in quite another guess sort of fashion. Indeed, he

professes to be a “Nationalist” still; but we half suspect, that *he* also has grown to be wise in his generation, and has learned “a thing or two” about “the way of the world!”

But, even if it were expedient to invite the clergy to become our political guides and leaders, we believe there is no more insensate idea than to expect that the majority of the Catholic bishops and parish priests of Ireland could ever be induced to give in their adhesion to the National cause. No! the vast majority of the bishops and parish priests will never cordially support the cause of Irish independence. The best that can be expected from them is neutrality. Full well they know, that, if the people of Ireland became a free people, they would no longer submit to clerical interference with their temporal concerns. The clergy should thenceforth rest satisfied with a legitimate spiritual influence. Their temporal domineering would be at an end for ever. This consideration would of itself prevent the majority of the clergy from acting a really patriotic part. Besides they fear to embark in revolution, as timid travellers shrink from entering an unknown land.

The majority of the higher clergy will *never*, by deeds of patriotism, repay the Irish people for their devotion and fidelity during the dark penal days. Doubtless, in order to keep up as long as possible the delusive motion that they are patriot leaders, they will be ready to join sham-patriotic movements leading nowhere, such as the Tenant League, the new National League, and others of that stamp; or they will join narrow struggles, tending to promote their own immediate interests; but to a real National movement they will never give their adhesion in good faith. Can any one, save a knave or a fool, deny the malignant and persevering hostility of most of the clergy to the national cause, since '48? And yet, for sake of the mocking phantom of a chance of conciliating and winning over the Bishops and Parish Priests, numbers of our patriotic humbugs chime in with the teachings of those narrow-minded men, who within the last thirteen or fourteen years have revived bigotry; thus, as far as in them lies, sacrificing the attainable and substantial benefit of Protestant co-operation!

In God's name, let us have done with such nonsense for ever!

COPYRIGHT NOTICE – The transcription of this text originates from the scans of The Irish People available on the Villanova Digital Library. As such, this work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License. Please read the terms of the license to understand the rights and responsibilities entrusted to you via this license.

