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BICENTENNIAL CELEBRATION OF THE BIRTH OF
GEORGE WASHINGTON
(1732-1932)

"George Washington: His Catholic Friends
and Allies"

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George Washington: His Catholic Friends and Allies

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by Rev. Dr. Peter Guilday).

"Let us now praise . . . our fathers in their generation . . .
such as have borne rule in their dominions, men of great power,
and endued with . . . wisdom . . . ruling over the . . . people
and by the strength of wisdom instructing the people in most
holy words . . . their bodies are buried in peace, and their name
liveth unto generation and generation. Let the people shew
forth their wisdom and the church declare their praise."
Ecclus. 44.

A triumphant sorrow broods over the land this national holyday of remembrance. Silence came with the dawn; and we listened again in the quiet of the morning to the death chant of those who have gloriously fallen on every battlefield of the nation from Lexington and Concord to St. Mihiel and the forest of Argonne.

It is a day of recollection given to our patriotic dead. Over the peaceful scenes where they lie at rest, our eyes are straying; and before our gaze there is slowly passing the army of the slain.

We stand at the roadside of the living, mourning over the legions whose souls are marching down the valley of death onwards to immortality. They pass, these martyrs and confessors of the faith in American idealism.

They have answered the supreme call of life; their glory is our glory; their honor, our honor; their victory, our noblest heritage.

It is with these mingled emotions of joy and sorrow that we look across the valley of the Potomac to that ivy-covered tomb wherein lies all that is mortal of our bravest soldier, the first commander-in-chief of our armies, the founder of our republic, the first of our presidents, the wisest of our rulers, the foremost inspirer of the destinies of America: General George Washington.

As we open the book of the memorial of his life and measure again the ineffable worth of the man, we see along the years from his birth in 1732 until his death in 1799, all those who helped to form his character, to guide him from boyhood into manhood, to create in him the greatest military leadership of the republic, to assist him in the burdens of the presidency of the United States, and to bring to a close those last years of repose before he was called to his reward.

In a multitude of ways, through the efforts of patriotic groups during this bicentennial year, all these personages on the immortal canvas of George Washington's life are being brought back to memory.

The entire drama of his career is being woven again these days of jubilee into a tapestry, made up of all the strands of the past—of that past of which he shall ever remain the greatest gift of Almighty God to the American nation.

The shadowy figure of his father, Augustine Washington, who died when he was eleven years old; the sturdy figure of his mother, Mary Ball Washington, who lived to see him become first president of the republic; the attractive memories of his affectionate half-brother, Lawrence, who passed away when George Washington was on the threshold of manhood—these are the chief personages in the days before grave responsibility came to him.

George Washington enjoyed during these earlier years the better social conditions which set in at that time. In 1743 our wisest philosopher, Benjamin Franklin, wrote that the first drudgery of settling the new colonies was then nearly over, and that there were many in every province in circumstances which placed them at ease and afforded them leisure to cultivate the fine arts and to improve the common stock of knowledge. Among these was the family of Washington then established at Mount Vernon, by Lawrence the first of its proprietors.

Out of the record of these early years little remains; but there is one relic which George Washington always cherished, and which we of the Catholic faith will ever hold sacred—a little tattered notebook in which he had copied at the age of fourteen the one hundred and ten directions of a French Jesuit manual of conduct for schoolboys, entitled *Rules of Civility*.

The copy in Washington's hands was an adaption by an English Jesuit, and it must have been well known to the Maryland boys who were students at that time in the English Catholic preparatory schools of France and Belgium. This is the only historical link we have with Washington's boyhood. This Jesuit College manual is hailed by all his biographers as a vital key to Washington's character. "With these rules," Owen Wister has written:

The boy's strong-built, rough and passionate nature was deeply instilled before he stepped forth upon his adventurous journey in the world. The part they played in his life—since his public and private acts show their spirit and teaching at every turn—was of the first importance, not to him alone, but also to his country

They nurtured in him during these impressionable years of his moulding the outstanding characteristics of his later life—consideration for others, simplicity, modesty, truthfulness, courtliness and elegance of manner, common sense, capacity for friendship, the spirit of tolerance, supreme courage and a profound Christian understanding of the providence of God. Of these one hundred and ten rules, one may be cited as predominant in his character: *Learn to keep alive in your breast that little spark of celestial fire called conscience.*

Armed with the shield of these Catholic college admonitions, Washington had no need to fear any faltering, once the serious duties of responsibility came. And they came quickly.

Lawrence Washington had passed away but a few months, when as a young man of twenty in command of one of the four Virginia military companies, George Washington entered upon his long career as a soldier.

The thirty-one years which followed were to witness at their outset the conquest of the land that lay between Virginia and the valley of the Ohio, and the end of French dominion in North America.

He was to be at Braddock's side when that general fell in mortal battle in 1755, and that same year to be made commander of all the Virginia troops and to be hailed throughout the colonies as America's foremost soldier. As a young married man, he was a member of the Virginia Assembly when Patrick Henry took the leadership of the South in the coming struggle for liberty. Like many others, he anxiously hoped that peace might be made with the motherland without armed opposition, for he was then living at Mount Vernon the life he loved so well, that of a Virginia gentleman and planter.

These middle years were the happiest of his life. We have a pen portrait sketched at this time by one of his old comrades, describing him as being as straight as an Indian, measuring six feet two inches in height, his frame indicating great strength, his constitution magnificent, wide-shouldered, with a well-shaped

head, blue penetrating eyes, a good firm chin, a pleasing, benevolent and commanding countenance, an agreeable voice, with a demeanor at all times composed and dignified, his movements and gestures graceful, his walk majestic, and the handsomest man on horseback in the Old Dominion.

Such he appeared to a contemporary when at the age of forty-two, "no longer in the May-morn of his youth but ripe for the mighty enterprise" that lay ahead, Virginia sent him back to Philadelphia in May, 1775, to represent her in the Second Continental Congress. A month later, Congress appointed him commander-in-chief of the Continental Army and placed upon his shoulders the greatest duty ever faced by an American citizen.

There is no need to recount the serried facts of the next six years of the Revolutionary War. Four dates are sufficient to reawaken the holiest of its memories—July 4, 1776, when the Declaration of Independence was proclaimed by the most illustrious assemblage of patriots which has ever appeared in our annals; October 17, 1777, when Burgoyne surrendered at Saratoga; February 6, 1778, when the first treaty of the young republic, the alliance between the United States and Catholic France was signed, bringing at long last into the struggle for liberty the strongest weapon of the war; and October 19, 1781, when the noblest scene of all occurred, the capitulation of the enemy at Yorktown—a victory won in part by that fine army of 7800 French Catholic soldiers with Count de Rochambeau at their head and a French fleet of forty ships of the line under Admiral De Grasse, manned by 20,000 French Catholic sailors, who were being cared for spiritually by ninety chaplains of our faith.

These years are the most remarkable epoch in the history of our country. Every fact and every incident of the War which brought us freedom will forever be cherished in our hearts. Among these facts are some that should be recalled on this occasion and in these surroundings.

The first, and probably the most significant, in Washington's career from the Catholic viewpoint, is the stand he took at Cambridge, on November 5, 1775, shortly after assuming command of his soldiers.

Justice had at last unsheathed her sword of righteousness in Massachusetts; peace had come from Virginia—that peace colonial life had never fully enjoyed:—peace to worship God according to one's conscience; and peace and justice kissed, that day at Cambridge and truth at last sprang out of the earth.

Nothing in the political or religious development of either colony can explain the order Washington gave that brave day of November fifth, the anti-Catholic colonial holiday. There is only the magnanimous and tolerant heart of America's greatest general to interpret correctly the command to his soldiers that the observance of the ridiculous and childish custom, as he called it, of burning the effigy of the Pope would not be permitted to disgrace his headquarters. He could not, he said in the order issued that day, help expressing his surprise that there should be officers and soldiers in his army so void of common sense as not to see the impropriety of such an intolerant step. This was the first note struck for religious freedom in the rising republic.

Some have thought that his noble action was due to the presence of his closest Catholic friend, Colonel John Fitzgerald of Alexandria, who had joined the colors at Cambridge shortly after Washington had taken command and who had been appointed but a few days before secretary and aide-de-camp of the General.

Others have interpreted Washington's courageous act as due to his profound admiration for another Catholic who had been appointed on August 11, 1775, Muster-Master General of the Continental Army—General Stephan Moylan, who also proved his bravery, especially during the dark night at Valley Forge, up to the very end.

But the historic truth is that Washington had shown his conscientious religious scruples some months before this, when, on September 16, 1775, in his instructions to Benedict Arnold, then about to begin the invasion of Canada, he warned Arnold, knowing his animosity to our Church, that as far as lay in his power, he was to protect and support the free exercise of the Catholic faith in that country, and that any American officer or soldier showing contempt or ridicule for that faith was to be punished immediately.

If the Continental Congress the year before had only displayed such a spirit of religious freedom, the campaign in Canada might have succeeded; but the first State papers issued by that body unfortunately contained a bitter attack on the Catholic Church and had alienated Catholic Canadian sentiment; as Father John Carroll was to realize to his sorrow when in February, 1776, at the request of Congress, he accompanied Benjamin Franklin, Samuel Chase, and his own cousin, Charles Carroll of Carrollton, to Montreal in an attempt to win the sympathy of Canada.

Our eyes naturally follow the battle-lines in any war, but we must not overlook as worthy companions to Colonel Fitzgerald and General Moylan not only the great number of Catholic soldiers who were fighting under the American flag, but other splendid characters whose participation in the ultimate victory is none the less brilliant and who have therefore an honorable place among the Catholic friends and allies of Washington.

Undoubtedly the foremost of these Revolutionary worthies is Charles Carroll of Carrollton, then the wealthiest citizen of America, the Catholic Signer of the Declaration of Independence, who will ever remain for us an ideal Catholic American—loyal to his faith and equally loyal to the ideals of the Republic.

No man in the august assembly at Philadelphia in the summer of 1776 could sign that immortal document with a clearer intelligence than Charles Carroll of Carrollton.

In his student days abroad in English Catholic Colleges, as his later writings show, he was imbued with the fundamental American principles of liberty, justice and equality by Jesuit masters who had been taught these democratic doctrines by illustrious members of their own Society—St. Robert Bellarmine, Francis Suarez and others who had fought gallantly against the non-Catholic doctrine of the divine right of kings. Indeed, the very wording of Jefferson's famous preamble to the Virginia Bill of Rights and to the Declaration of Independence had for Charles Carroll of Carrollton, as well as for all educated Catholics of that time, a ring so familiar that the phrases themselves seemed to be taken from these Catholic political writers of the seventeenth century.

Of all the challenges that might be given to those who fail to understand the Catholic theory of government, none can be made with more security than this—in Catholic teaching and practice alone, the real origin of the political principles enunciated in the Declaration of Independence can be found with a clarity that defies negation.

There was also close to General Washington that fine Catholic patriot, Thomas Fitz Simons of Philadelphia, whom historians are only lately recognizing as equally responsible with Robert Morris and Fitz Simons' father-in-law, another Philadelphia Catholic, George Meade, the grandfather of the victor at Gettysburg, for the successful financing of the war.

Washington knew these men well; and to their loyalty to the cause he never hesitated to give just credit in the success which eventually came to our army.

He knew personally those gallant soldiers from Catholic Poland, Kosciuszko and Pulaski.

As he gazed out over the ranks drawn up to witness the surrender at Yorktown he beheld the flower of the Catholic nobility of France. Orono, the Catholic chief of the Maine Indians, who held the balance of power against Canada for

the American Cause, he never met; but he was not forgetful of the spiritual welfare of these loyal redmen after he became President.

He had been told of the tribute paid in the Virginia Assembly by Governor Patrick Henry to the patriot-priest of the West—Father Pierre Gibault of Vincennes, to whom George Rogers Clark gave praise for the peaceful conquest of all that vast country north of the Ohio to the borders of Canada.

Several years may have elapsed before Washington realized the part in the victory Catholic Spain had taken through Galvez, then acting-Governor of Louisiana, by furnishing supplies to our soldiers, or the important share of Oliver Pollock, "the Robert Morris of the West," who with another Catholic, Colonel Francis Vigo, sacrificed a fortune to enable Clark to carry out the conquest of the old Northwest Territory.

We are not certain whether Washington met that most romantic of all the soldiers of the Revolution—Timothy Murphy, but he did know and he esteemed highly the humble Catholic ferryman, Patrick Colvin, who guided his boats to safety across the Delaware for the victory at Trenton.

It was probably only after the war was over and peaceful communications had set in again between the United States and Europe that Washington and his comrades learned the full story of the magnificent generosity shown by the Catholic bishops and priests of France in taxing themselves to the extent of what was then six million dollars in order that Louis XVI might be free to carry out all that was implied in the Franco-American Alliance of 1778.

There was, however, another Catholic patriot who won Washington's heart—Commodore John Barry, whose victories for the American Cause on the high seas rival those of Paul Jones, and have gained him the traditional title—Father of the American Navy.

When the war was over and peace was declared in 1783, Washington, whose fame was heralded the world over as one of the greatest military leaders of all time, stepped back into private life with that Christian modesty and simplicity which had characterized his career as a soldier.

Sixteen years of life remained to him. Four of these he spent at Mount Vernon, building up his shattered estates; one, as president of the Constitutional Convention of 1787, where he listened to addresses in behalf of religious equality made by two of his Catholic friends, Thomas Fitz Simons and Daniel Carroll, the brother of our first bishop, and one of the three commissioners Washington appointed for the establishment of this our national capital; another year he spent as the one acknowledged moral force for creating the union written into the Constitution; eight more as first President of the new Republic; and then two closing years in peace and repose in the beloved surroundings of his Virginia home before the end came.

There is one supreme message in all his public utterances during these sixteen years, from his letter to the Governors of the States in 1783 to his Farewell Address in 1796, that shows his profound Christian faith and his belief in Almighty God's providence over the nation, and that message is his fearless recognition that without the abiding supports of religion and morality the Republic will never last.

In his letters to the different Churches which addressed him in felicitation the first year of his presidency, to the Lutherans, to the Assembly of the Presbyterian Church, the bishops of the Methodist Episcopal Church, the Baptist congregations, to the Quakers, and to the Hebrews, the same message is given—without a belief in God's providence, without our constant prayer to Almighty God for guidance and protection, without a close alliance between public morality and religious principle, and especially without an honest practice of religious freedom and equality, all that had been won during the darksome days of the

War, as well as during the critical years which followed, would inevitably be lost.

To the Roman Catholics in the United States, in reply to their congratulatory address, Washington's optimistic forecast of our national prosperity includes not only a just recognition of civic duty but also a strict adherence to the policy of religious freedom enshrined in the Constitution. He refers to the alliance with Catholic France in this reply and to the fact that without the aid of that nation our independence would have been well-nigh unattainable:

As Mankind become more liberal, (he writes), they will be more apt to allow that all those who conduct themselves as worthy members of the Community are equally entitled to the protection of civil government. I hope ever to see America among the foremost nations in examples of justice and liberality. And I presume that your fellow-citizens will not forget the patriotic part which you took in the accomplishment of their Revolution, and the establishment of their government, or the important assistance which they received from a nation in which the Roman Catholic faith is professed.

When the dread summons came that December day in 1799, Washington bowed his head in resignation. His work as founder of the Republic was finished. He had guided our nation through the first eight years of its infancy, and he was to leave behind him "not the empty sound of what is called an immortal name, but the mighty monument of that freedom which we enjoy, and the glorious bulwark of that Constitution by which it is protected."

One hundred and thirty-three years have passed since George Washington was called to his eternal reward. The America he knew has undergone a development never dreamed of by those who stood with him throughout the crisis of the Revolution and the founding of our nation. But through all this tract of years, Washington has lived in the hearts of all patriotic citizens of this Republic. His name is the talisman of our power at home and abroad. His memory is the safest guardian of our freedom. His life is the mirror of America's perfect idealism.

It is, therefore, with a profound understanding of the meaning of a life like that of the Father of our Country that we assemble here this morning at the heart-centre of the Catholic Church in the United States in the most sacred of all religious ceremonies, the holy Sacrifice of the Mass.

Our celebration of the bicentennial of George Washington's birth would be incomplete had we not reawakened the memories of some of those gallant Catholic patriots who fought at his side for the cause of American liberty.

From that day until our own, the Catholic Church in this country has ever been the friend of law and order; at every turn in our political and economic fortunes she has been the staunch upholder of constitutional authority; in every crisis she has nobly withstood the elements of anarchy and misrule; and by the inherent force of her doctrine and her discipline, she has ever given strength to the Union and to the ideals of the nation. All down the years since Washington taught us the necessity of religion and of moral law as a basic element in the public and private lives of our citizens, the leaders of the Church have kept these ideals pure and wholesome in the hearts of the Catholic faithful.

We need the lessons of Washington's life in this our generation, as our fathers and grandfathers needed it in theirs. We need the remembrance of his patience, of his sober outlook upon the complex economic problems of his own day, of his caution in speech and in the written word, to carry us safely through the turbulent waters of discontent and depression which Almighty God has permitted to sweep across the face of the nation, not alone for our spiritual sanctification but

more especially for a cleansing of our hearts from the materialism which had almost taken possession of our souls. We need the lesson of Washington's religious attitude at Cambridge, of his spirit of prayer at Valley Forge, of the memory of his affection for his Catholic friends and allies during that supreme struggle, to subdue those elements of disorder which would charge the mental atmosphere of our people with the prejudices and the intolerances of an older and less enlightened age.

Looking backward across the century and a half of our national life to that epoch which justly bears Washington's name, America may take courage at the thought that every year since his death no other institution in the land has more steadfastly preached the lessons he taught us and has more consistently advanced the cause of true liberty than the Catholic Church of these States.

The legacy of his wisdom is our priceless heritage. We can add no lustre to his name. No eulogy will ever encompass the greatness of his glory.

There have been many sages who have directed us wisely since his death; there have been many heroes whose sacrifices we are recalling this day of sacred memory; there have been many legislators, many patriots, many saviors of our liberty; there is, and there always will be, but one Washington.

References

The National Catholic Welfare Conference, Department of Education, 1312 Massachusetts Avenue, N.W., Washington, D.C., has published *George Washington; some significant Readings and tentative Programs for the observance of the 200th Anniversary of his Birth* (pp. 122, selected bibliography) which contains the following reprints: John C. Fitzpatrick, *George Washington and Religion*, based upon his presidential address before the American Catholic Historical Association, December 28, 1928; *Archbishop Carroll's Eulogy on George Washington* (February 22, 1800), recently reissued by Messrs. P. J. Kenedy and Sons, New York, 1931, with a foreword by Dr. Guilday; Washington's *Rules of Civility*, from Father Gilbert J. Garraghan's essay in the *Historical Bulletin* (St. Louis, Mo., January, 1932); *Catholicism in the American Revolution*, from Dr. Guilday's *Life and Times of John Carroll* (New York, 1922); *Catholic Founders of the National Capital* by Margaret Brent Downing, from the *Catholic World* (September, 1917); *Charles Carroll of Carrollton* by T. E. Kissling, from *Catholic Action* (February, 1932); and *Our Medieval Inheritance of Liberty*, from *The State and the Church* by John A. Ryan and Moorhouse F. X. Millar, S.J. (New York, 1924). To these may be added: Cardinal Gibbons, "The Church and the Republic," *North American Review* (March, 1909); Sylvester J. McNamara, *American Democracy and Catholic Doctrine* (Catholic Truth Society, 407 Bergen Street, Brooklyn, N. Y.); volume one of the *Catholic Builders of the Nation* (Boston, 1923); Carlton J. H. Hayes, *Obligations to America* (New York, 1925); and Rev. John C. Roger, *Catholic Sources of the Declaration of Independence* (*Catholic Mind*, July 8, 1930).