

Luncheon Address

by

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To all the delegates at this Convention I extend a very cordial welcome to the Diocese and to the University. We like it to be thought that hospitality is a special mark of both our Diocese and our University, and I hope that during your stay here you will find it so.

I am not an historian. Therefore I speak to you as one outside your sacred circle. I do know that history deals with everything that can suffer change, and that man himself is its central subject. It is biography on a large scale. Because man is God's creature and his life is guided by Divine Providence, the Christian historian understands that he is doing a Christian work in studying, writing or teaching history. He sees history as more than a mere chronicle of events and dates. Events of history for him are parts of an integrated divine scheme being worked out here on this earth, despite the crooked ways and the useless and harmful detours on which leaders of men have so often drawn great multitudes of people.

Economics and politics are favorite and fruitful fields for the historian because they constitute so intimate a feature of man's life. It is necessary, however, for the historian to realize that economics and politics must always be viewed in their context. The Christian life is one complete whole, and economics and politics are part of it. Tragically, many modern writers have made these two very important phases of human life subservient to purely materialistic ends. They have cast them hopelessly adrift after tearing them away from their sure and fast Christian moorings. Economics and politics without God and Religion, without the spirit and practice of justice and charity, must inevitably become a menace to society. And so they have become in many of their aspects.

For some centuries, scholarship has been largely in the hands of men devoid of the concept of the unity of Christendom and of the Christian life; in some cases they have been hostile to truth and prejudiced against it. The intellect weakened by error and heresy is blind to the light of truth. Many modern writers of history have suffered from circumstances that chained them to the defense of error. Unfortunately, in too many instances, history became the tool of biased writers and deliberate propagandists.

All the intellectual extravagances of the last few centuries hardly need

refutation any longer. By their fruits we know them. “An evil tree cannot bring forth good fruit.” These extravagances have brought forth the modern monster of money-civilization, statism, and education that has no soul, an economic system that is cruel and relentless. Exploitation, depression and war mark the weary course of even our lauded Twentieth Century.

Dwarfed intellectualists dealt religion serious blows. Since they deposed God and deified man and the material world, it was inevitable that they should relegate religion and Church to mere sections of sociology. Theology, the queen and centre of all the sciences, was reduced by them to the status of a servant in her own household. History, which has all its real significance from its attendance upon the queen, consequently lost its true worth and dignity. Having been deprived of its meaning, it lost its objectivity.

A brighter era is dawning. There are natural and supernatural forces which slowly but surely are breaking the chains and restoring history to its proper role. The natural unquenchable thirst for truth in the mind of man eventually surmounts obstacles created by distortion and falsehood. The revival of real history has been due not only to a growing body of Catholic scholars but, in no small measure, to the non-Catholic modern scholar who is shorn of prejudice and endowed with a keen intellect. Often without religion himself, he does not fear the honest examination of Western history – so meaningless without the story of the Church. With a brilliant and dispassionate mind, he does not fail to see the eminent and singular truth of the Church’s impact on the course of events, or, on the contrary, the evils resulting when that influence was lacking. Convinced of the futility of measuring everything by material standards, observing materialistic human society being consumed unto death by the moths of war and the rusts of greed, he sets his own objectives on a higher plane than material gain. Thereby he manifests one of the basic qualifications for honest scholarship, or for that matter honest work in any intellectual or professional sphere. Such men have in recent decades written substantially sound history.

The Magna Charta of Catholic historians is the Encyclical, “*Sæpenumero Considerantes*” of Pope Leo XIII, published in 1883. It is no mere coincidence that the same Holy Father who provided the social and economic world with its great charter “*Rerum Novarum*,” should likewise have given historians the instrument whereby they can safely steer themselves through the hazards that beset the course of those who study history. Opening the Vatican archives to every competent scholar – no matter what his religion or racial affiliation – was in itself a daring challenge which confounded those who accused the Church of fearing the truth and of being ashamed of her own history. Moreover, the definition of historical principles given by Pope Leo XIII was a singular service, not only to Catholic historians but to all scholars.

Pope Leo emphasized the importance of historical study and declared

that the Church has nothing to fear from historical truth. Actually, authentic history is a magnificent and spontaneous defense of the Church. Authentic history does not magnify human weakness out of all proportion. The true historian is not distracted from the grand story of the Church and Christian civilization by the errors and corruption of individuals or groups. Indeed, the evils that have, from within our own ranks, beset the Church and Christian life, make the record of good, by contrast, stand out as a continuous series of convincing and brilliant victories.

The first law of history, says Pope Leo, is to dread uttering falsehood; the second is not to fear stating the truth. The historian should never be open to suspicion of partiality or error. The Christian historian seeks the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Truth, Who dwells in the whole Church and in the souls of its members.

All history ultimately draws its significance from the central event of history, the Incarnation of the Son of God. Our Catholic historical studies may be concerned with the broad record of the universal Church, or the smaller record of diocese or parish; it may cover the career and work of prelate, priest or people; but in all our studies, we are seeking truth. The search for truth is the noblest task to which man can dedicate himself. It can take many forms, and can lead us into many and different fields; but every word of truth, every sentence of truth, and every volume of truth, can help to bring us nearer to Him Who is not only the source of all Truth, but Truth itself, and Who became incarnate that man “may have life, and have it more abundantly.”