

REOPENING OF THE UNIVERSITY¹

(12 October 1831)

Henri-Dominique Lacordaire, OP

After having rested from the intrigues of the year 1831, the University has just taken up with pride the rounds of its duties. Indeed, it did suffer incredible disgrace, but, for all that, it survives. The government has found it appropriate, in compensation for the contempt of France, to entrust it for one more year with the exclusive education of the French people. We need not mention the oaths sworn to the people, nor the brief period of time in which to fulfill them; there comes a time when it is unworthy of a people to discuss oaths that have been sworn to them. The word presupposes some respect in those being addressed; but what respect has the Minister shown for the voice of France which, for the past fourteen months, has claimed freedom of instruction? France had written this freedom in the Charter. Fathers of families, concerned about the future of their children, called for it with strong cries. On several occasions, the two Houses had sent their petitions to the Ministry; except for those that thus far have not been acknowledged, a great number arrives every day at the Bourbon Palace. Most of our deputies themselves, when they were plain candidates in a general election, became involved in defending freedom of instruction, or, at least, they made professions of faith on that point — attesting much more to the will of the country than to the little fidelity of the elect to their promise. This proved that, while vowing it, they were bowing to another power than that of their conscience. More impatient than their deputies, some citizens opened free schools in several places of the Kingdom; many of them were acquitted by courts which would not recognize as law this most wretched decree of the Empire. One entire accused township, known to have defended with armed men the teachers of its choice, was declared innocent by the judgment of a jury. If the cause of freedom of instruction fell elsewhere, it failed with such influence that the judges, in spite of the most aggravating circumstances, dared not condemn the presumed guilty beyond the minimal penalty they could apply. Public opinion spoke in their favor; it is remarkable that in so civilized a country, not one newspaper, whatever its party, deemed it possible to defend the monopoly of instruction. Most of them attacked the

monopoly vigorously; those least favorable to the liberation of the mind and of religion did not even honor the bondage by maintaining complete silence. Finally, the University, as blinded as it was in its desire to survive, felt itself so disapproved of that it did not utter one word to rehabilitate its cause; it was unable to find among its personnel one man of letters who would revenge its injuries. And what injuries? It was informed that for twenty years it had been corrupting all the hopes of the country, that its students had neither faith, nor knowledge, nor morals; that it had served all despotisms, venerated all symbols, that it was the object of universal hatred, of the hatred of fathers, of the hatred of children, that this hatred had no equal, except the contempt that it inspired in everyone. The University was told this every day of its existence for one year; it was challenged to take as judges between it and its accusers twelve fathers of families, chosen at random. What did it reply? Nothing. After having educated all the youth of France for twenty years, it was unable to find in those twenty generations one grateful individual, one who would deign out of pity to bear testimony and tell its enemies: you outdid justice. At the end of one year of this bloody vengeance from public opinion, fallen henceforth below dishonor, the University humiliated itself before the country. It acknowledged respect for freedom of instruction through the mouth of its grand master, on a solemn occasion, in the middle of laurel crowns that its hand was to distribute to an ungrateful generation, like the previous ones. Indeed, the Monopoly repeated to itself the judgment pronounced against it by the Charter, by the courts, by the press, by fathers of families, by its own students, by the speeches of the crown, by the entire world. But something more was required; by his admissions against the monopoly made in the House of Peers, Mr. Persil gave a final blow to the University. In fact, it can be said, never were the will, the needs of France expressed at such a high level nor more clearly.

What did the Minister make of this? He piled promises onto promises; he calculated how often he would have to lie to families during another year to turn them over to the mercy of the monopoly. It is this deceptive plan that the reopening of the University has just put into action. It was not enough that the exercise of our rights had been suspended until today, the government found a way of getting its despotism to move faster than time. Since a year begun is a year completed, in matters of education, it is true to say that two years have passed since the July Revolution, without our having the freedom that was promised. Some fathers of families who were expecting it, deprived their children of all instruction during the preceding year, in the hope that, later, they would be allowed to have them taught without exposing them to corruption. But that year would be lost without fruit,

unless they agreed to lose a second year, perhaps equally fruitless. One generation will be victim of the heinous calculation of the minister, thousands of families will see fade away the hopes they had placed in the faith and the innocence of their children. And yet, in this there is found a charity to protect their hopes! There is a charity that must be fulfilled *with the briefest delay possible!* In this, there is a throne that lives only by its sacraments! In this, there is a responsible ministry! It is true that this relates to financial support from France and not to the innocence of families! Let us leave all those people and look to ourselves.

In our first campaign against the University, we attacked it by pointing out its incompatibility with every kind of freedom, whatever its nature, by revealing the shameful secret of its schools and all its acts of despotism, by having petitions signed and by founding free schools. Our second campaign will follow the same course since it is incumbent on us to seize freedom with brute force. We will not cease writing against the Monopoly, to call attention to its ignorance, its godlessness, its nonsense; we will pile up petitions on petitions, we will found free schools, not in one or two places, but everywhere a generous man can be found, a fervent Catholic, whom we will be able to convince to take part in the deliverance of his country. Already our plans are set so that a second free school be opened in the second city of the Kingdom; we are grateful to the men filled with faith and independence who are willing to take it over. Shortly, others will be opened in other cities. We implore Catholics to set all their prospects and all their ambition in that direction. It would be a serious error if the judgment of the Court of Peers convinced them to judge attempts similar to the one condemned as useless. Freedom is obtained only by the strength of condemnation; in fact, had it not been condemned, it would already be a reality; *now freedom is not given, it is seized.* This is a maxim that we must ceaselessly keep in mind. Let France be filled with free schools, let a thousand courts condemn them and expel teachers and students, let the university tax be refused and paid only on order from the courts, let petitions be signed everywhere and sent to Mr. de Montalivet, who will ignore them. The result of all these condemnations, of all this contempt, will be freedom of instruction.

Besides, what glory would there be for Catholics if, instead of gaining freedom of instruction, it were given to them? Those who bestow are so stupid as not to see that freedom of instruction is inevitable because it is a logical consequence of the state of the world. Well, all the better! For we will have that freedom, and, in addition, we will be the ones to endow the country with it. In future ages, when the question is asked: when was

human intelligence liberated and who were they who brought about this wonderful revolution, the historian will answer: It was the nineteenth century, and they were the Catholics; that religion had been accused of being afraid of freedom, wishing to enlighten men *by the glow of funeral pyres*. Instead of asking: if those who govern us, by the patience of God, were the ones to give freedom of instruction, what would happen? In five or six centuries, there would be some liberal person, paid by the ministry of his time, a man to create future *Messengers*, who, without striking a blow, would prove to his readers that Catholics always hated freedom of instruction. Now you have to think of history even more than of the present life. The greatest benefit of Providence to French Catholics is, without a doubt, that after forty years of revolutions, freedom was unable to establish itself without them in their own country and that they are the only ones today who seriously fight for it. Let them look around: the last revolution destroyed all political renown, shattered all reputations, laid bare the despotism of all parties; nowhere did it leave room for fairness or for a future. Here they are, the giants of three centuries; here they are, lying on the ground, using some remnants of life to speak: Luther, Mirabeau, or Napoleon, and to puff on those old dead embers. They begin this major ordeal of that error which consists in the absolute impotence of bringing about freedom, and of the even more dreadful impotence of loving freedom. What a catastrophe that would have been for Catholics if they had received freedom of instruction from them as a gift! Thank heaven, they did not receive it: their enemies did not realize what they would have done to Catholicism if they had granted it freedom. The judgment of the Court of Peers will be for posterity like those Charters of the Middle Ages, preserved deep in monasteries, to inform the coming centuries who, in the preceding centuries, were the genuine friends of freedom of the world.

On this point, Catholics should not deceive themselves. Let them not see as unfortunate the resistance to their deliverance; let them not view as condemnation what has absolved them forever; especially, let them not be discouraged because they paid three hundred francs to have their enemies write the name of liberty beside their own — and when they would be condemned to a fine a thousand times! — and when it will take fifty years of suffering before being free! It took three hundred years for the first Christians. Moreover, without arrogance, they were able to call themselves founders of the freedom of nations. No one can boast of having given them freedom; they have to thank only God for it.

This is why: Be courageous! If there is one father who loves his son, a mother who loves her daughter, a Catholic who honors his faith as something worthwhile, a man who wishes to be free — let them know that, only after the University disappears will France see families united, marriages holy and blessed, faith lively and fruitful, freedom, peace, lasting glory. But it is not enough just to know that; one must not be an accomplice of the University by a cowardly silence, or, if one does join it, one must not complain about all the evils it produced. God has already punished many fathers through their children for the patience with which they endured the Monopoly! But today, when it is up to them to destroy that Monopoly, when the Charter supports nature, a father, who does not condescend to invoke either one, thereby calls down on his race one of those curses that is nameless on the earth, because, visible as these curses are, they extend out to posterity beyond where the human eye can follow them and judge them. Virginius² killed his daughter to preserve her without stain. Woe to the father who kills his son and corrupts him with the same blow!

We exhort fathers of families, Catholic priests, Catholics of all levels and of all conditions, friends of freedom, whatever their beliefs, to busy themselves unceasingly with signing petitions against the monopoly of instruction, to open free schools everywhere they can, to resist in every way possible the despotism and the extortions of the University, to tarnish it by the press, to speak, to write, never to remain silent. As for us, as we continue to take our part in the common task, we will not cease to encourage our brothers and our fellow citizens to liberate themselves; we will take every opportunity possible to link action to word. Finally, lest anyone accuse us of going beyond the boundaries of a legitimate battle, we add the following words:

It is things that we are attacking, and not men; the men are unknown to us. It is impossible for the University not to have several men of great merit and many whose character is honorable. Their only weakness lies in not having done enough to secure in the country a place worthy of them. If they loved freedom more and if they understood better their own interests, they themselves would ask for freedom of instruction, they would await greater renown from a glorious competition rather than from a bondage they are the first to bear, a bondage that stifles talent, that reduces them to nothing as individuals. Moreover, as members of the University's staff, the reproach for the monopoly of its consequences will fall on them. Many have already become aware of this and claim with us freedom of instruction. It is a token of respect that we would like to offer to all of them; they have the

competency to earn this, because instruction will be free despite all the resistance of authority.

ENDNOTES [Trans.]

1. The University: the national board entrusted with control over all education.
2. Virginius: a centurion in Roman legend.

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.]