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Following is the homily given by Rev. Gerald L. Bucke, Parish Priest, St. Joseph's Parish, West End, Boston, on Sunday morning, Sept. 19, 1976. The occasion was a Bicentennial liturgy offered in celebration of Irish contributions to America, this event one of a series of five ethnic celebrations (French, Polish, Irish, Portuguese, and Italian) sponsored by the parish during the Bicentennial year. During this Mass, Auxiliary Bishop John M. D'Arcy was principal celebrant.

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THE IRISH CONTRIBUTION TO THE AMERICAN NATION

The strongest temptation, on an occasion such as this, is to follow the well-trod path of panygeric in dealing with the contribution of the Irish to the American nation.

Hundreds of St. Patrick's Day addresses; occasions furnished by the coming of an Irish ambassador, or an Irish Prime Minister; the advent of some Irish writer or some Irish cultural group—all have determined the packaging of the same message. The starting point is usually the contribution of some Irish man or woman, at different times, to the history of our country.

Some, for whom a little blarney is always a substitute for history because it goes much farther, are accustomed to start with the voyages of Brendan the Navigator. The farther back you go, they feel, the less likelihood of your being questioned or disputed.

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Then there are those who begin with the voyage of Columbus, because they feel uncomfortable and threatened if we are not ahead of the English at Plymouth Rock. They begin with the stop-over of Columbus at Galway Harbor to take on supplies, and, naturally, a couple of hefty Galway men, in case he should run into trouble with the natives along the way. They would handle the situation with a couple of "black-thorn sticks" and a simple "fag a baile."

Others, whose research is on solid ground, begin with those who served Washington in the continental army . . . like his aide-de-camp, Stephen Moylan; or with Patrick Carr of the Boston Massacre; or, with someone like Thomas Fitzsimmons, who was one of the Irish Catholic delegates to the Constitutional Convention; or like Charles Carrol, who signed the Declaration of Independence.

Because I choose to depart from this particular approach, which never fails to win approval and to warm the cockles of our hearts, does not mean that I do not appreciate its value. But it really does not tell me anything about those countless thousands of Irish immigrants who dug the banks of the Erie Canal; of those Irish who explored the whole area of our great plains and settled there; of those who poured into the streets of Boston, New York, and Baltimore; of those, nameless and numberless, whose ships foundered in Atlantic storms, almost within sight of the land to which they were sailing; or of those, nearer home, whose vessel foundered off Cohasset, and where nearly half of all hands perished.

It seems to me that this occasion, this morning, calls us to a fresh opportunity, and an entirely different and distinct starting point. It challenges us to examine, if only very briefly, to discover what was that in the American Revolution, which providentially offered an opportunity to the best of the native genius of the Celt to be part of it; and, conversely, what was that in the Celtic character and heritage which, by its presence, provided a guarantee of the success of the American Revolution.

This brings us, this morning, to examine a parallel period of history in the

life of both countries.

From 1620, the landing on Plymouth Rock, to 1776, America was taking shape. All the forces which were brought to this new world, linked with those which were found here—economic, social, political, religious—were striving to assume a structure and find a direction. The thirteen colonies were beginning to find their place and to give direction, by their growing power, to life in this land. The forces of history, along with the opportunities, which, on every level, bring a country to unity and determine its identity, were beginning to come together and to funnel down to a pivotal moment which would express itself in the Declaration of Independence.

While, from 1620 on, the forces which were to determine the destiny of a new nation, in a new continent, were coming together, in another country, three thousand miles away, sitting on the edge of Europe, there was a different historical experience.

Nineteen years before the Mayflower found Plymouth Harbor, a blow, which would shatter the whole Gaelic Society, was struck. The Battle of Kinsale, 1601, in which the Irish Chiefs were finally defeated, marked the destruction and the disintegration of the whole Gaelic Order. And, almost ninety years later, when the 13 original colonies had assumed their clear existence on the East coast of our country, the last prop, which supported the civilization of the Irish people, was pulled out. The fabric of a nation collapsed with defeat in the Battle of the Boyne in 1695.

At the moment of the collapse of one nation and one civilization, a new country had brought together all its resources, which would deepen, develop and break forth into its own identity in the American Revolution in 1776. And in that hundred years, which was to give birth, providentially, to the American Dream, the whole Irish nightmare had begun.

History books have carefully chronicled all the instruments which were used to bring about this nightmare: legal devices, political pressure, military might,

social imprisonment, economic deprivation, religious persecution—all of them summed up in one phrase: The Penal Laws. But no one has ever written a line more eloquently descriptive of what happened than the poet who saw the devastation:

Now we may turn aside and dry our tears
And comfort us and lay aside our fears
For all is gone.
Our music vanished and our skill to sing.
Now we may quiet us and quiet our moan
Nothing is whole that could be broken
Nothing remains to us of all . . . that was our own.

At that period of total desolation, two resolutions broke upon this world within a dozen years of each other. The one less than five hundred miles from the shores of Ireland; the other, across an ocean, more than three thousand miles away. Yet the one, and not the other, called forth a new heart and a new hope from a people so totally crushed, and providentially provided to this new country the people who would be the best guarantee of the success of their revolution.

What was the heart of the American Revolution? What was its genius which touched so deeply the Irish heart, and filled it with so much hope?

It was found in two pivotal convictions: That human life is anchored in God. This Declaration of Independence affirmed human life, rooted it in God, and guaranteed its rights as unalienable because they came from God.

And secondly, it affirmed the supremacy of the human person. Fr. Bruckberger, a French priest who lived in America for ten years, contrasted the two revolutions in his book, Image of America. The French Revolution, he said, wrote large on the walls of the Hall, where the Assembly met: "the citizen is born, lives, and dies for his country." It enshrined, in the place of the divine right of kings, another absolute, but clothed in a different garb: the divine right of the state. The American Revolution marked out, above the king and the state, the supremacy of the person.

This was what called the Irish to America, not the individual exploits of particular heroes who had come from Ireland, however worthy of praise were their

exploits. It was the call to be a free people. For it expressed in a new country, in a new continent, the vision which had been part of the whole Irish heritage and civilization which had been destroyed: the freedom of the human person.

From 1820 to 1870, more than a million and a quarter Irish immigrants came to these shores. They fanned out into every state, took root in every city, found a home in every town, shared in the deliberations wherever men assembled. And it was providential for our country that they came in such numbers. For this new nation was in the very midst of the struggle to make real and living the principles to which it had wedded itself, and to which opposition had already arisen.

Already there were forces within our Land which challenged whether it would be a federation or a Republic. There were economic factors which would continue to promote slavery, in the face of a declaration of liberty and justice for all. There were social forces, and religious forces, which thought that this new nation should somehow or other be a country where the "covenanted" people alone would be supreme. All of these forces, so strong already, were divisive and destructive of America.

It would be easy to document, city by city, where the Irish huddled and lived, that they had taken to heart the democratic spirit and process, which alone would guarantee the American dream. But, it seems to me, the one unshatterable proof is seen, in those forces, upon which the Union depended in its most critical hour. It was found in the forces which rallied to the call, that the union must be preserved. From the fifty-two regiments which were called to our nation's cause, thirty-five carried an Irish designation in their regimental name, and in their regimental colors.

One hundred and eighty years after our Declaration of Independence, and our long struggle to make it real, John Kennedy, on the day of his inaugural address, when he was sworn into office, articulated what had been the guiding principle of the life of the Irish immigrant. "Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country." Across this country, in almost every state, this

is what had brought the Irish here, for the American Revolution had touched the deepest chords of their existence and of their Irish heritage: a people determined to be free!

The heart of America was a call to freedom. But within America there were two other areas of the American way of life to which the Irish made a substantial and significant contribution. One was the area of education.

For the people of Ireland, at the outbreak of the American Revolution, learning had virtually stopped. There were still areas where education was bootlegged for the people, areas in Connemara and in Kerry. But over the rest of Ireland there was a terrible blight. Dr. Douglas Hyde, the first Protestant President of the Irish Republic, wrote of this pitiable situation in the most astonishing of words: "Irish children learned their letters with chalk on their father's tombstones."

In 1676, one hundred years before the American Revolution, Oliver Plunkett, who had come to Ireland from Rome, opened the first Irish school which had been opened in forty years, only to see it destroyed within fifteen years, at the time of his martyrdom.

Yet this same Irish people, when they came as immigrants to our shores, set up a network of schools, from Boston to San Francisco, which was unrivalled by any other group in this country, and in any country in the world. From Bishops Fenwick and Fitzpatrick in Boston, from John Hughes and Cardinal McCloskey in New York, from Egan and Kenrick in Philadelphia, from Purcell in Cincinnati, Carrol and Gibbons in Baltimore, Kenrick in St. Louis, from John England in the little diocese of Charleston, and John Ireland in St. Paul, from Bishop Freehan in Chicago, and Spalding in Peoria, there was not a single diocese, with an Irish Bishop, which did not express the commitment to education of the immigrant Irish people.

In spite of Know Nothing bigotry, in spite of violent persecution, in spite of a denial of state funds—from those who had the lowest and the least-paying jobs

came those voluntary, sacrificial offerings which built a system of education unmatched in any free country of the world.

Why did the immigrant build such a system of education? Msgr. John Tracy Ellis, the foremost American historian, put his finger on the reason: because they saw there could be no free human life without that moral dimension by which we live. And they saw that it was this moral dimension, affirmed in our constitution, which had to be supported and preserved, the more public education became secularized.

What did the Irish contribute to America? The unthinking and insensitive answer, given so often in the past is, The Faith. This overlooks the contributions made by the Spanish, the sacrifices made by the Poles, the work of the French and German missionaries, the contribution made so readily by the Italians—all part of our American civilization.

I do not mean to say that the contribution by the Irish, when we recognize what was done by others, was not large and substantial. Our own Bishop Fitzpatrick, on the occasion of the purchase of four Protestant Churches in this city, one of which was St. Joseph's, where we are assembled this morning, made in 1862, had this to say to Andrew Carney, a prominent Catholic layman, who had conveyed by letter to the Bishop the inquiry of many Protestants as to where he had discovered the gold mine to pay for these churches. His reply deserves to be quoted: "You can tell your Protestant friends, that I discovered no gold mine. My gold mine is the hearts of the poor Irish people, who, if the Church were to exist for a thousand years in this nation, would not be enough time to sing the praises of this people."

What I believe has to be emphasized is the particular dimension of the Catholic faith which the Irish brought: fidelity to the Holy Father, loyalty to the See of Peter.

Almost the last words which St. Patrick wrote to that people which had brought to Christ were: Sicuti Christiani, sic Romani--Let your Christian faith be matched by fidelity to the See of Peter.

William Shannon, in his book, The American Irish has stated: "the Irish put their stamp on the Church in America," then he goes on to speak on the number of Irish Bishops and priests. What I would point out is that the stamp is not in terms of numbers, but in terms of quality. They gave to the Church in America that special stamp: love for the Holy See, for the Holy Father.

I mean no disparagement on the more popular approach so often taken in the past, when the Gaels gathered--in glorying in the importance of the deeds of individual Irish men and women in the history of our country. What I wish to do is to deal with that numberless and nameless number of Irishmen who came to our shores: What touched their hearts? What was peculiar in the American Revolution which brought the best from them?

It was a hunger for freedom, a commitment to the moral dimension of education, and a love for the Church and for the Holy Father.

This was the unique contribution of the Irish immigrants, a contribution which is part of our own lives, as long as we recognize and acknowledge our own roots. To this purpose we can adapt the words of Scripture: "God, Who was in Christ, is now at work in us to accomplish His will, beyond all our hopes and dreams."