

Archbishop John Hughes and New York. Committee of Catholics, *Address of the Roman Catholics to their fellow citizens, of the City and State of New York* (New-York : H. Cassidy, printer, 1840), <http://archive.org/details/addressofromanca00newy>. Excerpts, with page numbers as they appeared in the original.

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Address of the Roman Catholics to their Fellow Citizens of the City & State of New York  
Fellow Citizens : PAGE 3

We, the Roman Catholics of the city of New York, feeling that both our civil and religious rights are abridged and injuriously affected by the operation of the " Common School System," and by the construction which the Common Council have lately put on the laws authorising that system, beg leave to state our grievances, with the deep confidence in the justice of the American character, that if our complaints are well founded, you will assist us in obtaining the redress to which we are entitled—if they are not well founded, we are ready to abandon them.

We are Americans and American citizens. If some of us are foreigners, it is only by the accident of birth. As citizens, our ambition is to be Americans—and if we cannot be so by birth, we are so by choice and preference, which we deem an equal evidence of our affection and attachment to the Laws and Constitution of the country. But our children, for whose rights as well as our own, we contend in this matter, are Americans by nativity. So that we are like yourselves, either natives of the soil, or like your fathers from the Eastern World, having become Americans under the sanction of the Constitution, by the birthright of selection and preference. We hold, therefore, the same ideas of our rights that you hold of yours. We wish not to diminish yours, but only to secure and enjoy our own. Neither have we the slightest suspicion that you would wish us to be deprived of any privilege which you

PAGE 4

claim for yourselves. If, then, we have suffered by the operation of the " Common School System" in the city of New York, it is to be imputed rather to our own supineness, than to any wish, on your part, that we should be aggrieved.

The intention of the Legislature of this State, in appropriating public funds for the purposes of popular Schools, must have been (whatever construction the lawyers of the Common Council put upon it,) to diffuse the blessings of education among the people, without encroachment on the civil and religious rights of the citizens. It was, it must have been, to have planted in the minds of youth, principles of knowledge and virtue, which would secure to the State a future population of enlightened and virtuous, instead of ignorant and vicious members. This was certainly their general intention, and no other would have justified their bountiful appropriation of the public funds.

But in carrying out the measure, this patriotic and wise intention has been lost sight of—and in the city of New York at least, under the late arbitrary determination of the present Common Council, such intention of the Legislature is not only disregarded, but the high public ends to which it was directed, are manifestly being defeated. . .

JUMP TO PAGE 8

[W]e ask you, fellow- citizens, to say whether this, not common, but public, school system, as it is now administered, under the interpretation of the Common

Council, is calculated to raise up for your successors in the State men of this description; or, rather, whether it does not promise you men of a different and diametrically opposite character? The Common Council makes it a condition, an essential one of those schools, that religion shall not be taught, for this would be sectarianism. And thus the intellect is cultivated, if you please, but the heart, and moral character are left to their natural depravity and wildness. This is not education; and above all, this is not the education calculated to make good citizens.

Education cultivates all the faculties of the human soul, the will, as well as the understanding and memory.

The public school system not only does not cultivate the will (for this can hardly be done without the aid of religion,) but it almost emancipates the will, even in the tender age of childhood, in reference to the subject of religion itself. We have found in the hands of our children lessons setting forth, in substance that, after all, *humane* feelings and actions are about the best religion. . .

JUMP TO PAGE 9

Thus far, fellow-citizens, we have stated our objections to the present system of common school education, not as they affect us more than any other denomination of Christians.

We have stated them in view of the bearing which that system is likely to have on interests in which you are concerned as much as, or more than ourselves, viz : religion, morals, individual and social happiness, and the welfare of the State.

We believe it was the warning voice of the illustrious Washington, among the most solemn words of the patriot, breathed into the ear of his beloved country, to beware of the man who would inculcate morality without religion.

We now come to the statement of grievances which affect us in our civil and religious rights, as Roman Catholics.

Under the guarantee of liberty of conscience, we profess the religion which we believe to be true and pleasing to God.

PAGE 10

We inherit it, (many of us) from our persecuted fathers, for we are the sons of martyrs in the cause of religious freedom.

Our conscience obliges us to transmit it to our children.

A brief experience of the public school system, in the city of New York, convinced us that we could not discharge our conscientious duty to our offspring if we allowed them to be brought up under the influence of the irreligious principles on which, these schools are conducted, and to some of which, we have already alluded. But besides these, there were other grounds of distrust and danger, which soon forced on us the conclusion that the benefits of public education were not for us. Besides the introduction of the Holy Scriptures without note or comment, with the prevailing theory that from these even children are to get their notions of religion, contrary to our principles, there were in the class books of those schools, false (as we believe) historical statements respecting the men and things of past times, calculated to fill the minds of our children with errors of fact, and at the same time to excite in them prejudice against the religion of their parents and guardians. These passages were not considered as sectarian, inasmuch as they had been selected as mere reading lessons, and were not in favor of any particular sect, but merely against the Catholics. We feel it is unjust that such passages should be taught at all, in schools to the support of which we are contributors, as well as others. But that such books should be put into the hands of our own children, and that in part at our own expense, was in our opinion, unjust, unnatural, and at all events, to us

intolerable. Accordingly, through very great additional sacrifices, we have been obliged to provide schools under our churches and elsewhere in which to educate our children as our conscientious duty required. This we have done to the number of some thousands for several years past, during all which time we have been obliged to pay taxes-and we feel it unjust and oppressive that whilst we educate our children as well, we contend, as they would be at the Public Schools, we are denied our portion of the School Fund, simply because we, at the same time endeavor to train them up in principles of virtue and religion. This we feel to be unjust and unequal. For we pay taxes in proportion to our numbers, as other citizens. We are supposed to be from one hundred and fifty to two hundred thousand in the State. PAGE 11

And although most of us are poor, still the poorest man amongst us is obliged to pay taxes from the sweat of his brow, in the rent of his room or little tenement. Is it not then hard and unjust that such a man cannot have the benefit of education for his child without sacrificing the rights of his religion and conscience ? He sends his child to a school under the protection of his church, in which these rights will be secure. But he has to support this school also. In Ireland he was compelled to support a church hostile to his religion, and here he is compelled to support schools in which h!s religion fares but little better, and to support his own school besides.

Is this state of things, fellow-citizens, and especially Americans, is this state of things worthy of you, worthy of your country, worthy of our just and glorious constitution? Put yourselves in the poor man's place, and say whether you would not despise him, if he did not labor by every lawful means to emancipate himself from this bondage. He has to pay double taxation for the education of his child, one to the misinterpreted law of the land, and another to his conscience. He sees his child going to school with perhaps only the fragment of a worn out book, thinly clad, and its bare feet on the frozen pavement; whereas, if he had his rights, he could improve the clothing, he could get better books, and have his child better taught, than it is possible in actual circumstances.

Nothing can be more false than some statements of our motives, which have been put forth against us.

It has been asserted that we seek our share of the School Fund for the support and advancement of our religion. We beg to assure you, with respect, that we would scorn to support or advance our religion at any other than our own expense.

But we are unwilling to pay taxes for the purpose of destroying our religion in the minds of our children. This points out the sole difference between what we seek, and what some narrow-minded or misinformed journals have accused us of seeking.

PAGE 12

If the public schools could have been constituted on a principle which would have secured a perfect NEUTRALITY of influence on the subject of religion, then we should have no reason to complain. But this has not been done, and we respectfully submit that it is impossible. The cold indifference with which it is required that all Religions shall be treated in those schools — the scriptures without note or comment — the selection of passages as reading lessons, from Protestant and prejudiced authors, on points in which our creed is supposed to be involved — the comments of the teacher, of which the Commissioners cannot be cognizant, — the school libraries, stuffed with sectarian works against us — form against our religion a combination of influences, prejudicial, and to whose action it would be criminal in us to expose our children at such an age.

Such, fellow-citizens, is a statement of the reasons of our opposition to the public schools, and of the unjust and unequal grievances of which we complain. . .