

Une Voix d'Irlande – A Voice of Ireland

*A speech delivered by Fr Thomas Quinn to the First Congress of the French Language in Canada in 1912
(Translated by Dr. Jason King)*

I do not belong by birth to the French family. The language of my childhood is a foreign language, and if I am afforded the great honor to speak before this patriotic gathering, then it is as an adopted child and son of Ireland.

But, ladies and gentlemen, the adoption was a complete success and I claim my place at the paternal table. The French language, it is mine as it is yours. Those dedicated priests spoke the language through which my father could die in peace in the land of exile, forgiving his persecutors in Ireland! My adoptive parents spoke that language when they took me in at five years of age; they spoke it when they instructed me in my youth! It is still the tongue of old, and it is in this language that I am here today to recognize the people of French-Canada who adopted and took in an Irish son...

French Canadians, you can proudly claim the right to speak your language. It is a right for which you have made sacrifices!

This right so long disputed, and sanctioned by royal authority itself, seemed now safe from hostile forces.

But after coming out victorious from this long struggle, the French-Canadian race had to contend with something still more painful, the ingratitude and treachery of ostensible friends. And I come, ladies and gentlemen, to this troubling question of the relationship between my original and my adopted race.

Cruel irony! Deplorable contradiction! Both races seem to live next to one another, in this land of America, their ancestors were in Europe, inseparable allies. Cremona, Fontenoy, Laugfeld, you have witnessed the warriors of the Emerald Isle who amazed you with their bravery and heroism, and ensured that France had brilliant victories....

Why, in changing countries, do these paragons of justice and law break their alliance with the old sons of France? Why, above all, does that noble patient, chivalrous people, which has suffered from oppression, want to be oppressive to turn? And that in circumstances marked by the blackest and most revolting ingratitude?

I spoke of evil and oppression. What people underwent the weight of evil and oppression as much as did those in Ireland? It is not my intention, on this occasion, to recall its history of bloodshed which is so ingrained in the Irish story.

Allow me, however, ladies and gentlemen, to describe an incident in which I was involved, an incident in which I was myself an actor and victim.

It was in 1847. A famine, even worse than the one which had preceded it, threatened the Irish people with total extinction. The most astonishing part of the awful spectacle was, not to see the people die, but to see them live through such great distress.

During the course of three years, more than four million unfortunates, miraculously escaping death, took the road of exile from their native country. Like walking skeletons they went, in tears, seeking hospitality from more favored lands.

In the designs of Providence, we were cast upon the shores of Grosse-Ile after a stormy passage of two months at sea. A malady, known nowhere else to science, – the famine fever – came to add its untold terrors to so much other suffering and misery.

Canada, however, had foreseen the advent of these people and had acknowledged them as brothers in Christ. Stirred with compassion, French-Canadian priests, braving the epidemic, contended for the glory of rushing to their relief. French-Canadian clergymen, be eternally blessed for your heroism! You, above all, who fell victims to your devotedness! Glorious martyrs of charity, enjoy forever in glory the reward you so justly merit!

Thanks to your untiring charity, my unfortunate parents were able to sleep their last sleep in peace with God, pardoning their enemies, and carrying with them to the grave the ineffable consolation of leaving their children in the care of French-Canadian priests.

I still remember one of these admirable clergymen who led us to the bedside of my dying father. As he saw us, my father with his failing voice repeated the old Irish adage, "Remember your soul and your liberty".

Sixty-six years have passed since then, but my soul belongs to the French-Canadian people, and my spirit jealously guards their rights and freedoms.

If the episode I just recounted was not enough to instill a love of French-Canadians, there was another incident from my youth that would forever determine my preference for my country of adoption.

My adoptive parents to allow me to retain my mother tongue enrolled me in an English school, run by two old women, who were imbued with a sense of narrow bigotry. One day when the Blessed Sacrament passed in the street, led by a priest, I wanted to kneel, following the Catholic custom. My mistress reacted violently with an expression I will not repeat. I was forced to obey her, but never returned to the school. My education in English was over. It was not the language of my soul or my freedom!

The people of French-Canadian, too, were once abandoned by their mother country, and so they became orphaned. They had imposed on them a foreign language, unknown, and said: "It is not the language of our soul or our freedom!" After long and perseverant efforts, they finally obtained the privilege to speak French on an equal basis with English. But even where it was strongest, they never attempted to impose on others who lived near them their ideas and language. They wanted their freedom, but never sought to restrict the freedom of others. This is my ideal! And that is why these people have my affections and my preferences!

Dear descendants, God thank you, for your fathers cared for those starving and shivering with fever, and you are now seeking the right to speak your language, in the name and under the guise of religion, not to have imposed on you a foreign idiom!

I regret them deeply, but these attacks will succeed only in strengthening your national feeling and love of your mother tongue.

And if a man who is highly placed and venerable dares to speak out against the French in the preaching of the Gospel, there will always be some eloquent patriot to embody in himself the claims of his race, with a noble and respectful firmness.

Your language has been entrusted with a glorious mission and not a bankrupt one...

This right all must recognize, and my countrymen first. The Irishman is by nature a generous soul.

Just as O'Connell, defending his unhappy country, crushed by oppression unnamed, still found the time and means to claim religious freedom for his co-religionists in England and Scotland, who had been banished from these lands for three centuries, I recognize in his words the voice of Ireland, because he spreads the word of justice and freedom.

Ireland, real as God made it, by the ministries of Patrick, the Columbans and their successors, deserves and will always have my admiration and love. From it and not a bastard Ireland that is disfigured by unhealthy contact I proclaim myself a proud and devoted son.

Ladies and gentlemen, in this celebration of speaking French, I will, I believe, be the faithful interpreter of the feelings of us all, in expressing the wish and hope to see an end soon to the unfortunate and disastrous divisions between us. In this hospitable land of Canada, there must be a place in the sun for all races, for all languages, without any group seeking to stifle or limit the rights of another.

The Irish and French-Canadian races, both of them Catholic, are walking hand in hand towards the same ideal: the extension of Christ's kingdom, what a wonderful sight it would give the world! And is religious progress the principle of their union?

Is this a dream or a mirage that lies before me? The future will tell.

In any event, I, as the child of a courageous mother, who struggled against her oppressors, bit by bit, to preserve his heritage and freedom, tell my French-Canadian friends and my benefactors: struggle without fear, like O'Connell and Redmond, because your cause is right and just and cannot perish.

[Thomas Quinn, 'Une Voix d'Irlande', in Premier Congrès de La Langue Française au Canada. Québec 24-30 Juin 1912 (Québec, 1913), pp. 227-232. Translated by Jason King].