

**Excerpts from *Address of the Catholic Lay Citizens of the City and County of Philadelphia, to their fellow-Citizens, in reply to the Presentment of the Grand Jury of the Court of Quarter Sessions of May Term 1844, in Regard to the Causes of the Late Riots in Philadelphia.* Philadelphia: 1844**

**ADDRESS OF CATHOLIC LAITY OF PHILADELPHIA**

Speaking of the causes which led to the riots, the Grand Jury ascribe them [3]

"To the efforts of a portion of the community to exclude the Bible from our Public Schools. The Jury are of the opinion that these efforts in some measure gave rise to the formation of a new party, which called and held public meetings in the District of Kensington, in the peaceful exercise of the sacred rights and privileges guaranteed to every citizen by the Constitution and laws of our State and Country. These meetings were rudely disturbed and fired upon by a band of lawless irresponsible men, some of whom had resided in our country only for a short period. This outrage, causing the death of a number of our unoffending citizens, led to immediate retaliation, and was followed up by subsequent acts of aggression in violation and open defiance of all law."

We regret that the Grand Jury had not the moral courage to utter, in distinct terms, what they are now avowed and admitted to have meant. They have, in the paragraph just quoted, without using the name Catholic, wantonly charged that denomination with "an attempt to exclude the Bible from the Public Schools," and they have also, though more guardedly, insinuated, that they "have attempted to interfere with the sacred rights, and privileges guaranteed to every citizen, by the Constitution and Laws of our State." THESE CHARGES ARE UNFOUNDED. If the Grand Jury, on what is avowed to have been "*ex parte testimony*," came to these conclusions, it was their duty to have presented the names of those who constitute "the portion of the community" with specific charges against them, to the end that they might be tried and punished. If they did not come to these conclusions, they have stated what they know to be untrue. So that, in either aspect, the Grand Jury, both in the manner of its investigations and conclusions, has given great reason for complaint, not only to the 60,000 citizens whom they have condemned without a hearing, but to every man in the community who respects the laws and desires that its administrators shall be *both wise and pure*. [4]

In the name and in behalf of the Catholic community, we explicitly deny that they have at any time, or in any manner made any effort "to ex-

clude the Bible from the Public Schools." In the most solemn manner we declare that they have never designed, desired, or attempted to exclude the Bible from the Schools. We have uniformly contended, not only for ourselves, but on behalf of our Protestant and Jewish brethren, for the fullest freedom of conscience both for children and adults in Schools or elsewhere.

The Grand Jury state that "the meetings of this party were rudely disturbed and fired upon by a band of lawless, irresponsible men." This statement, made on "ex parte evidence," is strongly denied by many who assert that they were eye-witnesses of the transaction, and who would willingly have given evidence before the Grand Jury had they been summoned for that purpose. For ourselves, we await the public trials, in which we hope to see the testimonies weighed, the facts placed beyond question, the guilty punished, and the innocent discharged. [8]

In the meantime we would observe that we are credibly informed, and firmly believe, that Irish Catholics did not go to the meeting of the 6th of May, which unfortunately- adjourned to the market-house, where the first collision took place, and that the first death occurred at the time when the houses were being sacked, the second when the schoolhouse was being put on fire. The conflict of the following day was not sought for. The Catholics remained at their homes, until the arrival of the immense crowd which had illegally met at the State House Square, "armed for defence," and had adjourned to the scene of the preceding conflict. We however disclaim all sympathy for the men, whoever they may have been, who rudely disturbed any public meeting, we detest, with all our hearts, the crime of murder by whomsoever perpetrated; we deeply regret the loss of human life, in whatever way it occurred; and we leave to the public tribunals to visit with the just severity of the law, all who have been guilty of shedding human blood wantonly and maliciously. We care not to dispute the allegations at the present time, but await the calm action of public justice. [9]

That no man may be sacrificed to passion or prejudice, it is wisely provided, that he shall only be condemned, after a full and fair trial, on the verdict of twelve citizens.

For ourselves, and the Catholic community at large, we deprecate all violence, intimidation, and other illegal means of checking the expression of public sentiment, and the exercise of political privileges. We wish the right of assembling peaceably to be guarded with jealousy, but we confess our alarm for the safety of our civil institutions, when public meetings are called, and invited to come "armed for defence."

We forbear, fellow-citizens, entering into further details. We complain not of the soft tones and delicate phrases in which the Grand Jury have hinted at the burning of two churches, one of them within the city, and far removed from the scene of riot; the residence of the clergy, and a house of education; a Presbytery, that, when pestilence overspread the land, received within its walls the afflicted, without regard to their creed;

of a library of great value ; of ancient paintings, which had existed through ages in the old world, to become models of art in the new world; of the threats uttered and the attempts made to burn all our churches: we will even repress our indignation of the conduct of those who burned the letters and papers, and picture of George Washington, preserved with religious care in the Church of St. Augustine, of which he was one of the earliest benefactors.—The Grand Jury complaisantly allude to all these as "acts of retaliation." Retaliation against whom? Is any one reckless enough to deny that the Bishop, the Clergy, and the immense majority of the Catholics of the city and county were no parties to the disturbance of any meeting, or any acts of lawless violence? And yet acts of unprovoked and unprecedented outrage inflicted on them are called—RETALIATION! [10]

We are Philadelphians, and we love our city. Many of us can say, it is the home of our childhood, the habitation of our wives and children—it contains the talus of our fathers. Willingly would we bury in oblivion those awful scenes, which (though painful and injurious to us,) we deeply deplore on higher grounds than any selfish personal feelings.

It had been our pride and our glory that religious freedom was here enjoyed in its plenitude, and that any attempt to diminish it would meet with the reprobation and successful opposition of all classes of citizens.

Here we fondly hoped the shrines of religion were safe; here the seminaries of learning were fostered; here the ministers of religion were respected. Alas! after the scenes through which we have passed, when even the resting place of the dead was invaded, can we speak the same language of exultation? We trust still in the good sense and feeling of our fellow-citizens, that they will unite with us in maintaining that liberty of conscience, for which our fathers and theirs bled, and the supremacy of the law, and that the sympathies of life will be renewed and increased among us; so that united by the bonds of our social compact and common interests, and common country in peace and harmony, we shall continue to enjoy the blessings of which we have hitherto been proud; and in the day of danger we shall all remember, that life is well sacrificed, if sacrificed for our country.

We desire not to proscribe any one; we ask for no peculiar privileges; we make no merit of the purity of our Pennsylvania descent, but WE DEMAND that the exclamation, "I AM AN AMERICAN CITIZEN," shall continue to be the protection of our rights, and the guarantee of our freedom.

ARCH. RANDALL, Chairman.

WILLIAM A. STOKES, Secretary.