



SERTUM LAETITIAE

Encyclical of His Holiness Pope Pius XII On the Hundred and Fiftieth Anniversary of the Establishment of the Hierarchy In the United States November 1, 1939

To Our Beloved Sons: William O'Connell, Cardinal Priest of the Holy Roman Church, Archbishop of Boston, Dennis Dougherty, Cardinal Priest of the Holy Roman Church, Archbishop of Philadelphia, and to all the Venerable Brethren, the Archbishops, Bishops and Ordinaries of the United States of America in Peace and Communion with the Apostolic See.

Venerable Brethren, Health and Apostolic Benediction:

In our desire to enrich the crown of your holy joy We cross in spirit the vast spaces of the seas and find Ourselves in your midst as you celebrate, in company with all your faithful people, the one hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the establishment of the Ecclesiastical Hierarchy in the United States of America. And this We do with great gladness, because an occasion is thus afforded Us, as gratifying as it is solemn, of giving public testimony of Our esteem and Our affection for the youthfully vigorous and illustrious American people.

2. To one who turns the pages of your history and reflects upon the causes of what has been accomplished it is apparent that the triumphal progress of Divine religion has contributed in no small degree to the glory and prosperity which your country

now enjoys. It is indeed true that religion has its laws and institutions for eternal happiness but It is also undeniable that it dowers life here below with so many benefits that it could do no more even if the principal reason for its existence were to make men happy during the brief span of their earthly life.

3. It is a pleasure for Us to recall the well remembered story.

When Pope Pius VI gave you your first Bishop in the person of the American John Carroll and set him over the See of Baltimore, small and of slight importance was the Catholic population of your land. At that time, too, the condition of the United States was so perilous that its structure and its very political unity were threatened by grave crisis. Because of the long and exhausting war the public treasury was burdened with debt, industry languished and the citizenry wearied by misfortunes was split into contending parties. This ruinous and critical state of affairs was put aright by the celebrated George Washington, famed for his courage and keen intelligence. He was a close friend of the Bishop of Baltimore. Thus the Father of His Country and the pioneer pastor of the Church in that land so dear to Us, bound together by the ties of friendship and clasping, so to speak, each the other's hand, form a picture for their descendants, a lesson to all future generations, and a proof that reverence for the Faith of Christ is a holy and established principle of the American people, seeing that it is the foundation of morality and decency, consequently the source of prosperity and progress.

4. Many are the causes to which must be ascribed the flowering of the Catholic Church in your country. One of them We wish to point out as worthy of attention. Numbers of priests, forced to flee to your shores from lands where persecution raged, brought welcome aid to Bishop Carroll and by their active collaboration in the sacred ministry sowed the precious seed which ripened to an abundant harvest of virtues. Some of them later became Bishops and thus had a more glorious share in the progress of the Catholic cause. And thus, as history teaches us again and again, the zeal of the apostle, provided that, nourished by unfeigned faith and sincere charity, it burns within the breast of valiant men, is not quenched by the storms of persecution but is carried farther across the earth.

5. On the centenary of the event which now fills your hearts with legitimate rejoicing, Pope Leo XIII of happy memory with his Letter *Longinqua Oceani* recalled and examined the progress that had been made by the Church in America and he accompanied his review with some admonitions and directions whose wisdom

equals their paternal benevolence.

6. What Our august predecessor then so well wrote is worthy of repeated consideration. During these past fifty years the Church has not faltered in her course but has extended her influence to wider fields and increased her members. For in your country there prevails a thriving life which the grace of the Holy Spirit has brought to flower in the inner sanctuary of your hearts; the faithful throng your churches; around the Sacred Table they gather to receive the Bread of Angels, the Food of the Strong; the spiritual exercises of St. Ignatius are followed with great devotion in your closed retreats; and many heeding the Divine Voice that calls them to the ideals of a higher life receive the priesthood or embrace the religious state.

7. At the present time there are in the United States 19 ecclesiastical provinces, 115 dioceses, almost 200 seminaries and innumerable houses of worship, elementary and high schools, colleges, hospitals, asylums for the poor and monasteries. It is with good reason then that visitors from other lands admire the organization and system under which your schools of various grades are conducted, the generosity of the faithful upon whom they depend, the vigilant care with which they are watched over by the directors. From these schools there comes forth a host of citizens, strong in heart and mind, who, by reason of their reverence for Divine and human laws, are justly considered to be the strength and the flower and the honor of Church and of country .

8. Missionary associations also, notably the Society for the Propagation of the Faith, are well established and active; they are outstanding examples in assisting, by prayer, almsgiving and other means, the heralds of the Gospel engaged in carrying the standard of the Cross of Salvation into the lands of the infidel. In this connection, We cannot refrain from a public expression of praise for those missionary enterprises proper to your own nation which devote themselves with zeal and energy to the wider diffusion of the Catholic Faith. They are: The Catholic Church Extension Society, an organization which has gained glorious distinction for its pious benefactions; The Catholic Near East Welfare Association, which furnishes a providential aid to the interests of Christianity in the Orient; The Indian and Negro Missions, an association approved by the Third Council of Baltimore (Cf. Acts of the same Council, Chapter II) which We confirm and recommend because it is imposed by a very particular charity towards your fellow citizens.

9. We confess that We feel a special paternal affection, which is certainly inspired of Heaven, for the Negro people dwelling among you; for in the field of religion and education We know that they need special care and comfort and are very deserving of it. We therefore invoke an abundance of heavenly blessing and We pray fruitful success for those whose generous zeal is devoted to their welfare.

10. Moreover, in order to render more fitting thanks to God for the inestimable gift of the true Faith, your countrymen, eager for arduous enterprise, are supplying to the ranks of the missionaries numerous recruits whose capacity for toil, whose indomitable patience and whose energy in noble initiative for the Kingdom of Christ, have gained merits which earth admires and which Heaven will crown with due reward.

11. No less vigorous among you are those works of zeal which are organized for the benefit of the children of the Church within the confines of your country: the diocesan charity offices, with their wise and practical organization, by means of the parish priests and through the labors of the religious institutes, bring to the poor, to the needy and to the sick the gifts of Christian mercy and relief from misery. In carrying on this most important ministry the sweet discerning eyes of faith see Christ present in the poor and afflicted who are the mystic suffering members of the Most Benign Redeemer.

12. Among the associations of the laity -- the list is too long to allow of a complete enumeration -- there are those which have won for themselves laurels of unfading glory -- Catholic Action, the Marian Congregation, the Confraternity of Christian Doctrine; their fruits are the cause of joy and they bear the promise of still more joyful harvest in the future. Likewise the Holy Name Society, an excellent leader in the promotion of Christian worship and piety.

13. Over a manifold activity of the laity, carried on in various localities according to the needs of the times, is placed the National Catholic Welfare Conference, an organization which supplies a ready and well-adapted instrument for your Episcopal ministry.

14. The more important of these institutions We were able to view briefly during the month of October, 1936, when We journeyed across the ocean and had the joy

of knowing personally you

and the field of your activities. The memory of what We then admired with Our own eyes will always remain indelible and a source of joy in Our heart.

15. It is proper then that, with sentiments of adoration, We offer with you thanks to God and that We raise to Him a canticle of thanksgiving: "Give glory to the God of heaven; for his mercy endureth for ever" (Psalms cxxxv: 26). The Lord Whose goodness knows no limits, having filled your land with the bounty of His gifts, has likewise granted to your churches energy and power and has brought to fruition the results of their tireless labors. Having paid the tribute of Our gratitude to God, from Whom every good thing takes its origin, We recognize, dearly beloved, that this rich harvest which We joyfully admire with you today is due also to the spirit of initiative and to the persistent activity of the pastors and of the faithful; We recognize that it is due also to your clergy who are inclined to decisive action and who execute your orders with zeal; to the members of all the religious Orders and congregations of men who, distinguished in virtue, vie with each other in cultivating the vineyard of the Lord: to the innumerable religious women who, often in silence and unknown to men, consecrate themselves with exemplary devotion to the cause of the Gospel, veritable lilies in the Garden of Christ and delight of the Saints.

16. We desire, however, that this Our praise be salutary. The consideration of the good which has been done must not lead to slackening which might degenerate into sluggishness; it must not issue in a vainglorious pleasure which flatters the mind; it should stimulate renewed energies so that evils may be avoided and those enterprises which are useful, prudent and worthy of praise may more surely and more solidly mature. The Christian, if he does honor to the name he bears, is always an apostle; it is not permitted to the Soldier of Christ that he quit the battlefield, because only death puts an end to his military service.

17. You well know where it is necessary that you exercise a more discerning vigilance and what program of action should be marked out for priests and faithful in order that the religion of Christ may overcome the obstacles in its path and be a luminous guide to the minds of men, govern their morals and, for the sole purpose of salvation, permeate the marrow and the arteries of human society. The progress of exterior and material possessions, even though it is to be considered of no little account, because of the manifold and appreciable utility which it gives to life, is

nonetheless not enough for man who is born for higher and brighter destinies. Created indeed to the image and likeness of God, he seeks God with a yearning that will not be repressed and always groans and weeps if he places the object of his love where Supreme Truth and the Infinite Good cannot be found.

18. Not with the conquest of material space does one approach to God, separation from Whom is death, conversion to Whom is life, to be established in Whom is glory; but under the guidance of Christ with the fullness of sincere faith, with unsullied conscience and upright will, with holy works, with the achievement and the employment of that genuine liberty whose sacred rules are found proclaimed in the Gospel. If, instead, the Commandments of God are spurned, not only is it impossible to attain that happiness which has place beyond the brief span of time which is allotted to earthly existence, but the very basis upon which rests true civilization is shaken and naught is to be expected but ruins over which belated tears must be shed. How, in fact, can the public weal and the glory of civilized life have any guarantee of stability when right is subverted and virtue despised and decried? Is not God the Source and the Giver of law? Is He not the inspiration and the reward of virtue with none like unto Him among lawgivers (Cf. Job xxxvi:22)? This, according to the admission of all reasonable men, is everywhere the bitter and prolific root of evils: the refusal to recognize the Divine Majesty, the neglect of the moral law, the origin of which is from Heaven, or that regrettable inconstancy which makes its victims waver between the lawful and the forbidden, between justice and iniquity.

19. Thence arise immoderate and blind egoists, that thirst for pleasure, the vice of drunkenness, immodest and costly styles in dress, the prevalence of crime even among minors, the lust for power, neglect of the poor, base craving for ill-gotten wealth, the flight from the land, levity in entering into marriage, divorce, the break-up of the family, the cooling of mutual affection between parents and children, birth control, the enfeeblement of the race, the weakening of respect for authority, or obsequiousness, or rebellion, neglect of duty towards one's country and towards mankind.

20. We raise Our voice in strong, albeit paternal, complaint that in so many schools of your land Christ often is despised or ignored, the explanation of the universe and mankind is forced within the narrow limits of materialism or of rationalism, and new educational systems are sought after which cannot but produce a sorrowful harvest in the intellectual and moral life of the nation.

21. Likewise, just as home life, when the law of Christ is observed, flowers in true felicity, so, when the Gospel is cast aside, does it perish miserably and become desolated by vice: "He that seeketh the law, shall be filled with it: and he that dealeth deceitfully, shall meet with a stumbling block therein" (Ecclesiasticus xxxii: 19). What can there be on earth more serene and joyful than the Christian family? Taking its origin at the Altar of the Lord, where love has been proclaimed a holy and indissoluble bond, the Christian family in the same love nourished by supernal grace is consolidated and receives increase.

22. There is "marriage honorable in all, and the [nuptial] bed undefiled" (Cf. Hebrews xiii: 4). Tranquil walls resound with no quarreling voices nor do they witness the secret martyrdom which comes when hidden infidelity is laid bare; unquestioning trust turns aside the slings of suspicion; sorrow is assuaged and joy is heightened by mutual affection. Within those sacred precincts children are considered not heavy burdens but sweet pledges of love; no reprehensible motive of convenience, no seeking after sterile pleasure, brings about the frustration of the gift of life nor causes to fall into disuse the sweet names of brother and sister. With what solicitude do the parents take care that the children not only grow in physical vigor but also that, following in the footsteps of their forbears whose memory is often recalled to them, they may shine with the light which profession of the pure faith and moral goodness impart to them. Moved by the numerous benefits received, such children consider it their paramount duty to honor their parents, to be attentive to their desires, to be the staff of their old age, to rejoice their gray hairs with an affection which, unquenched by death, will be made more glorious and more complete in the mansion of Heaven. The members of the Christian family, neither querulous in adversity nor ungrateful in prosperity, are ever filled with confidence in God to Whose sway they yield willing obedience, in Whose will they acquiesce and upon Whose help they wait not in vain.

23. That the family may be established and maintained according to the wise teachings of the Gospel, therefore, the faithful should be frequently exhorted by those who have the directive and teaching functions in the churches, and these are to strive with unremitting care to present to the Lord a perfect people. For the same reason it is also supremely necessary to see to it that the dogma of the unity and indissolubility of matrimony is known in all its religious importance and sacredly respected by those who are to marry.

24. That this capital point of Catholic doctrine is of great value for the solidity of the family structure, for the progress and prosperity of civil society for the healthy life of the people and for civilization that its light may not be false, is a fact

recognized even by no small number of men who, though estranged from the Faith, are entitled to respect for their political acumen. Oh! If only your country had come to know from the experience of others rather than from examples at home of the accumulation of ills which derive from the plague of divorce; let reverence for religion, let fidelity towards the great American people counsel energetic action that this disease, alas so widespread, may be cured by extirpation.

25. The consequences of this evil have been thus described by Pope Leo XIII, in words whose truth is incisive: "Because of divorce, the nuptial contract becomes subject to fickle whim; affection is weakened; pernicious incentives are given to conjugal infidelity; the care and education of offspring are harmed; easy opportunity is afforded for the breaking up of homes; the seeds of discord are sown among families; the dignity of woman is lessened and brought down and she runs the risk of being deserted after she has served her husband as an instrument of pleasure. And since it is true that for the ruination of the family and the undermining of the State nothing is so powerful as the corruption of morals, it is easy to see that divorce is of the greatest harm to the prosperity of families and of states" (Encyclical Letter Arcanum).

26. With regard to those marriages in which one or the other party does not accept the Catholic teaching or has not been baptized, We are certain that you observe exactly the prescriptions of the Code of Canon Law. Such marriages, in fact, as is clear to you from wide experience, are rarely happy and usually occasion grave loss to the Catholic Church. A very efficacious means for driving out such grave evils is that individual Catholics receive a thorough training in the Divine truths and that the people be shown clearly the road which leads to salvation.

27. Therefore, We exhort the priests to provide that their own knowledge of things Divine and human be wide and deep; that they be not content with the intellectual knowledge acquired in youth; that they examine with careful scrutiny the Law of the Lord, Whose oracles are purer than silver; that they continually relish and enjoy the chaste charms of Sacred Scripture; that with the passing of the years they study more deeply the history of the Church, its dogmas, its Sacraments, its laws, its scriptures, its liturgy, its language, so that they may advance in grace, in culture and wisdom.

28. Let them cultivate also the study of letters and of the profane sciences, especially those which are more closely connected with religion, in order that they

may be able to impart with clarity and eloquence the teaching of grace and salvation which is capable of bending even learned intellects to the light burden and yoke of the Gospel of Christ.

29. Fortunate the Church, indeed, if thus it will lay its "foundations with sapphires" (Cf. Isaias liv: 11). The needs of our times then require that the laity, too, and especially those who collaborate with the Hierarchy of the Church, procure for themselves a treasure of religious knowledge, not a poor and meager knowledge, but one that will have solidity and richness through the medium of libraries, discussions and study clubs; in this way they will derive great benefit for themselves and at the same time be able to instruct the ignorant, confute stubborn adversaries and be of assistance to good friends.

30. We have learned with not little joy that your press is a sturdy champion of Catholic principles, that the Marconi Radio, whose voice is heard in an instant round the world -- marvelous invention and eloquent image of the Apostolic Faith that embraces all mankind -- is frequently and advantageously put to use in order to insure the widest possible promulgation of all that concerns the Church, and We commend the good accomplished. But let those who fulfill this ministry be careful to adhere to the directives of the teaching Church even when they explain and promote what pertains to the social problem; forgetful of personal gain, despising popularity, impartial, let them speak "as from God, before God, in Christ" (II Corinthians ii: 17).

31. Because of Our constant desire that scientific progress in all its branches be ever more universally affirmed, We gladly take this opportune occasion to signify to you Our cordial interest in the University at Washington. You remember well with what ardent wishes Pope Leo XIII greeted this noble temple of learning when it came into being and on how many occasions testimonies of particular affection were bestowed upon it by Our immediate predecessor. He was intimately persuaded that if this great school, however blessed already with success, should become still stronger and gain even greater renown, not only would the growth of the Church be aided but also the civil glory and prosperity of your fellow citizens.

32. Sharing this hope, We ask you to do your very best, leaving nothing untried, that this University, protected by your benevolence, may overcome its difficulties and, with ever more gratifying increase, abundantly fulfill the high hopes that have been placed in it. We greatly appreciate, too, your desire to erect in Rome a more

worthy and suitable building for the Pontifical College which receives for their ecclesiastical education students from the United States.

33. It is indeed true that the elite of our youth with profit travel abroad to complete their education, a long and happy experience shows that candidates for the priesthood derive very great profit when they are educated here close to the See of Peter, where the source of faith is purest, where so many monuments of Christian antiquity and so many traces of the Saints incite generous hearts to magnanimous enterprises.

34. We desire to touch upon another question of weighty importance, the social question, which, remaining unsolved, has been agitating States for a long time and sowing amongst the classes the seeds of hatred and mutual hostility. You know full well what aspect it assumes in America, what acrimonies, what disorders it produces. It is not necessary therefore that We dwell on these points. The fundamental point of the social question is this, that the goods created by God for all men should in the same way reach all, justice guiding and charity helping. The history of every age teaches that there were always rich and poor; that it will always be so we may gather from the unchanging tenor of human destinies. Worthy of honor are the poor who fear God because theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven and because they readily abound in spiritual graces. But the rich, if they are upright and honest, are God's dispensers and providers of this world's goods; as ministers of Divine Providence they assist the indigent through whom they often receive gifts for the soul and whose hand -- so they may hope -- will lead them into the eternal tabernacles.

35. God, Who provides for all with counsels of supreme bounty, has ordained that for the exercise of virtues and for the testing of one's worth there be in the world rich and poor; but He does not wish that some have exaggerated riches while others are in such straits that they lack the bare necessities of life. But a kindly mother of virtue is honest poverty which gains its living by daily labor in accordance with the scriptural saying: "Give me neither beggary, nor riches: give me only the necessaries of life" (Proverbs xxx: 8).

36. Now if the rich and the prosperous are obliged out of ordinary motives of pity to act generously towards the poor their obligation is all the greater to do them justice. The salaries of the workers, as is just, are to be such that they are sufficient to maintain them and their families. Solemn are the words of Our

predecessor, Pius XI, on this question: "Every effort must therefore be made that fathers of families receive a wage sufficient to meet adequately normal domestic needs. If under present circumstances this is not always feasible, social justice demands that reforms be introduced without delay which will guarantee such a wage to every adult working man. In this connection We praise those who have most prudently and usefully attempted various methods by which an increased wage is paid in view of increased family burdens and special provision made for special needs." (Encyclical Letter *Quadragesimo Anno*.)

37. May it also be brought about that each and every able-bodied man may receive an equal opportunity for work in order to earn the daily bread for himself and his own. We deeply lament the lot of those -- and their number in the United States is large indeed -- who though robust, capable and willing, cannot have the work for which they are anxiously searching.

38. May the wisdom of the governing powers, a far-seeing generosity on the part of the employers, together with the speedy re-establishment of more favorable conditions, effect the realization of these reasonable hopes to the advantage of all.

39. Because sociability is one of man's natural requirements and since it is legitimate to promote by common effort decent livelihood, it is not possible without injustice to deny or to limit either to the producers or to the laboring and farming classes the free faculty of uniting in associations by means of which they may defend their proper rights and secure the betterment of the goods of soul and of body, as well as the honest comforts of life. But to unions of this kind, which in past centuries have procured immortal glory for Christianity and for the professions an untarnishable splendor, one can not everywhere impose an identical discipline and structure, which therefore can be varied to meet the different temperament of the people and the diverse circumstances of time.

40. But let the unions in question draw their vital force from principles of wholesome liberty; let them take their form from them, take their form from the lofty rules of justice and of honesty and, conforming themselves to those norms, let them act in such a manner that in their care for the interests of their class they violate no one's rights; let them continue to strive for harmony and respect the common weal of civil society.

41. It is a source of joy to Us to know that the above cited Encyclical, *Quadragesimo Anno*, as well as that of the Sovereign Pontiff Leo XIII, *Rerum Novarum*, in which is indicated the solution of the social question in accordance with the postulates of the Gospel and of the eternal philosophy, are the object in the United States of careful and prolonged consideration on the part of some men of keener intellect whose generous wish pushes them on towards social restoration and the restrengthening of the bonds of love amongst men, and that some employers themselves have desired to settle the ever recurring controversies with the working man in accordance with the norms of these Encyclicals, respecting always the common good and the dignity of the human person.

42. What a proud vaunt it will be for the American people, by nature inclined to grandiose undertakings and to liberality, if they untie the knotty and difficult social question by following the sure paths illuminated by the light of the Gospel and thus lay the basis of a happier age! If this is to come to pass power must not be dissipated through disunion but rather strengthened through harmony. To this salutary union of thought and policy, whence flow mighty deeds, in all charity We invite them, too, whom Mother Church laments as separated brethren. Many of these, when Our glorious predecessor reposed in the sleep of the just and when We, shortly after his death, through the mysterious disposition of Divine Mercy ascended the throne of St. Peter; many of these -- and this did not escape Our attention -- expressed by word of mouth and by letter sentiments full of homage and noble respect. This attitude -- We openly confess -- has encouraged a hope which time does not take from Us, which a sanguine mind cherishes and which remains a consolation to Us in hard and troublous times.

43. May the enormity of the labors which it will be necessary fervently to undertake for the glory of the Most Benign Redeemer and for the salvation of souls not daunt you, Dearly Beloved, but may it rather stimulate you, whose confidence is in the Divine Help, since great works generate more robust virtues and achieve more resplendent merits.

44. May the attempts with which the enemies secretly banded together seek to pull down the Scepter of Christ be a spur to us to work in union for the establishment and advancement of His reign. No greater fortune can come to individuals, families, and nations than to obey the Author of human salvation, execute His commands, accept His reign, in which we are made free and rich in good works: ". . . a kingdom of truth and of life; a kingdom of holiness and of grace; a kingdom of justice, love and peace" (Preface of the Mass of Christ the King).

45. Wishing from Our heart that you and the spiritual flock for whose welfare you, as diligent shepherds, provide, may advance always towards better and higher goals and that also from the present solemn celebration you may gather a rich harvest of virtue, We impart to you as a pledge of Our benevolence the Apostolic Benediction.

Given at the Vatican, on the Feast of All Saints, in the Year of Our Lord 1939, the first of Our Pontificate.