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Letter to Clergy & Laity of the Diocese of Ohio

Charles Pettit McIlvaine

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Pastoral Letter
To the Clergy and Laity of the Diocese of Ohio.

Dear Brethren—

The President of the United States, in consideration of the grievous calamity with which our beloved country is afflicted, by the present awful war, has recommended the last Thursday of this month to be observed throughout the land as a day of Fasting, Humiliation, and Prayer.

We are most thankful for the recommendation from a source which it is our duty to honor, and more especially as it was at the instance of a joint committee of the two Houses of Congress. We trust the day will be observed with unprecedented unanimity, solemnity and prayerfulness.

However confident in the righteousness of our cause, none of us can doubt that, in the wise providence of our Heavenly Father, the war, with all its attendant sorrows, is a judgment upon the country for its sins; those sins, especially, which involve a practical denial of dependence upon God for all national as well as individual prosperity. Nor can any of us withhold our acknowledgment that the judgment is most justly deserved and most eminently needed. Hence, the duty of our self-humiliation, as a people, before God, in the confession of our sins, and in earnest prayer that a just and holy and merciful Father may remove from us his heavy hand, forgiving our sins and delivering us from the evils they have brought upon our country.

But let not our prayers be confined to deliverance from the affliction. It has an end to accomplish in us. Let us be earnest that it may not fail of that end; that it may be so sanctified to us as to prove the blessing for which it is designed; that under its chastening, the nation may reap “the peaceable fruit of righteousness,” becoming a more God-fearing people, and laying aside the sins which have so justly provoked God’s wrath against us.

The day set apart by our Chief Magistrate for a nation’s special prayers is a day especially to pray for him, and for all those who are associated with him, in the arduous duties which the perils and difficulties of these times have brought upon the government. It is no reflection upon them to say that most deeply do they need a wisdom from above. Let us remember their trials, and bear them in our hearts before God; praying that they may have a spirit of prayer for their strength; that divine guidance and support may be with them under their great burdens and cares; and that He who hath his way in the sea may enable them so prosperously to pilot the State in this fearful tempest that we may soon be at rest in the haven of an honorable and happy peace.

In the President’s proclamation, we are exhorted to pray “that our arms may be blessed and made effectual for the re-establishment of law, order and peace, throughout our country,”—and for “a speedy restoration of peace.” It is no contradiction to say that peace, such peace as comes by the establishment of law and order, is the object, on our side, of the present war. In the spirit of such peace, the war was found necessary, on the part of the Government. In the spirit of such peace, it is now vigorously prosecuted. In the same spirit, will we pray that it may speedily be terminated. We need not specify before God the terms of the peace we pray for. We need not be afraid to confide them to His wisdom and goodness. Peace such as the just honor of the nation and its true prosperity should not desire, we need not fear as an answer to our prayers.

Nor should our prayers for peace be hindered because, at present, the way of its attainment, consistently with the nation’s honor and welfare, does not appear to our feeble sight. “God’s thoughts are not as our thoughts.” He who created the Light out of darkness, can make “peace where there is no peace.” If the tempest seems only to thicken, let us remember “the clouds are the dust of His feet.” They are often darkest when just about to break away. The hearts of all men are in God’s hands.

Therefore, let me exhort you all, dear brethren, that with one mind you will observe the day set apart, according to its sacred and solemn purpose. Let every lover of his country unite with his brethren in the solemnities of that occasion. In private and family worship, as well as in our churches, let us fall down before God in humiliation and prayer. Unspeakably great and precious interests are at stake. God is our Refuge. In him is our hope. We will order our cause before him. That his most gracious protection and blessing may abide upon our beloved country, upon its government, and upon our Church and on all your families, dear brethren, is the constant prayer of

Your affectionate Bishop,

CHAS. P. MCILVAINE

Cincinnati, Sept. 10th, 1861,

Note.—The above Pastoral Letter is directed to be read in every Church in the Diocese on Sunday morning next before the day therein mentioned. A Form of Prayer for the day has been issued.

ministers have less to do in our church than Apostles—if they labor for Christ—if they riddle a land. Not —