

# ANNALES CATHOLIQUES

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### Short speech of Monseigneur the Archbishop of Carthage\* primate of Africa, at the festival of the Inauguration of the port of Sfax.

(pp116-120)

In the Holy Books there is a hymn in which all nature sings to its Creator.

Deprived of reason and feeling, the heart does not have anything to love, nor intelligence to understand it.

But not being able to adore him, it carries us there; and this God that it does not hear, it does not allow us to be ignorant of him; it is thus that imperfectly and in its way, it glorifies the celestial Father (Bossuet).

*Benedicat terra Dominum... Benedicite universa, germinantia... Domino* (Daniel, iii).

Praise which raises itself enthusiastically from this land named the 'land of Ears' (Pliny) and which was personified by the features of a young girl, her two hands loaded with heavy sheaves (Bysacène).

Transformed by our methods, sprinkled with our sweat, it finds its ancient fruitfulness.

Our work awakens the hills of Adrumète and fields of Ruspe from their sleep;

The shade, brought forth by the cultivation, descends again from the sky, on the deserted countryside;

Life, which was only mislaid, generates its offspring on all sides (Lacordaire).

Who has not admired, in the eastern Sahel, a long border that is always green?

This is the glory of our African domain: *Et erit quasi olives gloria ejus* (Hosea, xiv, 7.);

This is the fatherland of the olive-tree which stretches from Nabeul to the oasis of Gabès where the palm tree waits to provide, under its tops and beneficial shades, a royal and fraternal hospitality.

Liberal towards the land of Tunisia, Providence was no less generous towards water of the coast: *Benedicite Maria-Domino*.

If Africa remained impenetrable until the decline of our own age; if, in spite of marvelous progress multiplying our means of action, the black continent was the new world of the 19th century, would it not be necessary to blame for this surprising delay the organization of this abrupt multitude and the narrow extent of these shores.

However, in this general layout, it is a country which rests and delights the view.

To see its incomparable situation in the center of the Mediterranean, one recognizes the empire that it should exert on this sea, the highway of the nations.

Look, follow the curves of its shores: starting from the Algerian border, the coast advances towards Lake Bizerte, passes in front of the ruined of Utica, descends towards Carthage, in circumventing the famous gulf, it goes up as far as the most northerly headland of the continent and from this extreme point, continues, describing ravishing bays, as far as the beaches of Libya, as if going on ahead of the caravans, the fleets of the desert.

*Grace cete et omnia quoe moventur in aquis Domino.*

Let us bless the Lord who, into these waves, poured life and fruitfulness. This immense fish pond provides food for a large population and for the trade of the fisheries which export to far places the products of the coast.

In considering this fertile and nourishing layer, which covers inexhaustible treasures: *cujus divitioe mare* (Nahum, iii, 8);

In counting the harvests collected annually in these blue plains, I ask myself what is the importance of these two powers, sources of our wealth; and if the sea, exceeding its rival, does not manage to provide for more men than does the land.

Glory to the Almighty who unites them to ensure our well-being: it is He “who calls water from the sea, *qui vocat aquas maris*; lifts it into the clouds and pours it on the face of the land: *effundit eas super faciem terroe* (Amos, v, 8)!

And the hymn of nature continues: *Benedicite omnia quoe moventur in aquis*: everything that moves in these waves is a subject of praise to the Lord; all that is driven, including the sponge, which populates and carpets these waters (1).

Animated plants, joining together the two kingdoms in their organization:

Lucrative products that the ploughman of the sea tears off shelves transformed for him into inexhaustible fertile fields.

But in this element, Providence has left us a share of work; she has invited us to become her collaborators.

And the task we have to fulfill is truly beautiful.

Perilous from time immemorial, these shallow waters, sown with crops, were reported to sailors even as dangers from which they would run; the Syrtes or reefs.

Above these perfidious rocks, the galleys of the Carthaginians and the Romans, on the surface of the sea, could still float and even land at certain points of the shore; but our vessels, with deep hulls, and heavy cargoes, could not approach it.

To appreciate of the benefits of a port, in spite of the reputation of safety of the anchorage, it is necessary to have been constrained, by a strong swell, to moor out to sea and to have had the inconvenience, the peril of a transshipment in a frail wherry, a plaything in the violence of the breakers.

Let us conceive recognition for those who, having inspired this project, found the resources necessary for its complete execution;

Let us honor the thoughts that directed the work and the arms which performed them;

(1) The sea bed of the gulf is covered with sponges. Every year around 100,000kg is fished there. (Charles Lallemand.)

Let us can congratulate all those who put their influence, their talents, their strength, into the success of the enterprise:

This access channel, dug in the rocks; this broad and deep basin; this quiet shelter, in spite of the tides; these docks, these quays, these halls, the whole of the port of Sfax increases the size of the city and the prosperity of the area.

Other work, no less important is being prepared, activated: soon chariots of fire, connecting the Ocean of sand dunes to the blue floods of the Mediterranean, will come to pour, on the exporting ships, the fruits of the Djerib and the mines of 'white oil' [electricity, or, more probably, steam power, or even phosphates?], which are for agriculture what coal is for industry (1); inexhaustible mines, as recently as yesterday ignored in their ancient deposits, today entrusted to extensive and rapid exploitation.

(1); Comparison of M. Pauliat.

Of these peaceful conquests, I rejoice with all my heart as an African and as bishop.

In the presence of various Christian nationalities sheltered under the folds of our flag;  
In the presence of Moslems accustomed to placing their deeds under the invocation of God;

In the presence of the responsibilities that impose on France its civilizing mission, it was right and salutary to seek the blessings of heaven on these ships, these buildings, these crews, this port, this happily accomplished work.

In festivals of inauguration, the Church must have its place.

Far from being hostile, we repeat papal teaching (1), far from being hostile to research, to discoveries which add to the satisfaction and wellbeing of life, it wishes to see the genius of man, cultivated more and more, to produce abundant fruits.

(1) Cyclical letter on the Christian constitution of states. 1 Nov. 1895.

She encourages, she blesses all the arts, all industries: at the same time, she lifts the soul towards the Author of any perfect gift, showing them the true benefits to always have;

Who can be astonished by such a solicitude? astonished that the Church, with all this interest in our terrestrial prosperity, reminds us that this sphere is not the final time limit of our career, that we are created for good, or rather for the Sovereign good that it is critically important to know, to appreciate, to deserve?

But it seems that of all the spheres where human activity is exerted and developed, nothing is more favorable to elevate the soul and for the recollection of its destiny.

The sea! The horizon without limits! the expanse of the waves under the expanse of the firmament! and, when the shadows of night descend, the infinity of the constellations of myriads of worlds which revolve harmoniously in immeasurable space!

And this imposing spectacle, which nothing restricts and which nothing distracts in the solitude and silence of the great waters, the navigator who contemplates it, carried on a board above the abyss, feels like a point lost in the middle of these expanses; and the feeling of his smallness multiplies, when this calm and splendid spectacle is succeeded by another, one of terrifying beauty: the clouds mass together, the wind howls, the foaming waves are furious, the sky is only visible with the clarity of the lightning, the storm breaks out; the storm heard from the edges of this sea by the divinely inspired poet: *Mirabiles elationes mari, mirabilis in altis Dominus!* (Ps.viii, 6).

Then, in passionate faith and enthusiasm, the heart hurls ardent prayers; anxious of danger, it begins to hope for its safety in the power and blessing of the One who commands the Ocean and contains it in immovable barriers: "You will go this far, you will not pass beyond; and at this grain of sand, you will break the fury of your waves." (Job. v, 11.)

Don't we feel this intensity of the religious feeling? It is translated in us by a thought more present and active of the Creator, of his power, of his majesty, of his own nature, the infinite!

It is translated in us by a more reflective image, more of a grasp of human life, of its brittleness, of its agitation, of its dangers; because the world that it is necessary for us to cross, has, like this sea, its drives and its currents, its traps and its shelves, its dark days and its storms, its misfortunes and its shipwrecks.

Navigation, whether it is slow or fast, peaceful or turbulent, has same goal; it tends towards port. Our existence has no destination: it tends towards

"The invisible port which all must approach" (Lamartine).

A hope of rest, stability, happiness, belongs to us, pursues us, torments us, without our being meeting anything which can fully satisfy it: a natural and mysterious hope, irresistible and pitiless, which presses us on to lift on high our thoughts, our desires, our sights, our affections, our hopes: *Sursum corda!*

Passengers of time, we sail towards shores where there is known neither pain, nor tears, nor mournings, nor moanings;

We sail towards the shores where nothing deteriorates and where immortality is breathed (Lacordâirè), as here we breathe the breezes of the evening;

We sail towards a port, which has its name, in the Christian language, "the port of eternal salvation, *aeternae salutis portum*" (1).

And during the crossing let us call upon powerful Protector; regarded by the sailors as "the star of the sea." That its soft

gleam would lighten our race, preserve us from obstacles of the night, dissipate the fogs of error, save us from the misleading syrtes:

Amica stella naufragis,  
Tuere our has fraudibus,  
Tuaque luce directs.  
Erroris will umbras discuté,  
Syrtes dolosas amove (2)!

(1) Et ad æternæ salutis portum  
feliciter pervenire valèamus.  
Oraison.

(2) Hymn of the immaculate  
conception of the B.V. Mary

*Sfax, April 25, 1897*