

# How Popes Are Chosen

*and Other Essays*

*by*

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## Father Cheverus in Northampton

**I**N the days of the great revolution in France, the Church as well as the monarchy was the object of popular detestation. The noble and the priest, representative of the institutions against which the masses had a real or imaginary grievance, were sent to the guillotine together. The new rulers of France having dispensed with God, no longer needed His ministers. The logic of the mob is not always at fault. Many of the clergy fled to other lands, most of them to England, where they were well received and in some cases were given an allowance by the British government. Some found pleasant places as tutors in wealthy families, while others established schools for the children of their fellow-exiles, the French nobles.

Among the priests who found a temporary home in England was Rev. John Louis Lefebvre de Cheverus, some time afterwards bishop of Boston, Mass., and cardinal archbishop of Bordeaux, France. He was probably the first priest to visit Northampton, and because of that there has been always some local interest in his personality.

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After spending some years in England and having acquired a knowledge of the language, Rev. Fr. Cheverus came to America on the invitation of Bishop Carroll of Baltimore. He arrived in Boston in 1796, and there had the pleasure of meeting his dearest friend, Rev. Dr. Matignon. They had known each other for years in France and now joyfully resumed the intimacy of their early student days. Gladly they became associates in pastoral work with the whole of New England for a parish. Among their spiritual children were some Indian tribes in Maine, a small number of Catholics in Rhode Island, and a few in the farming districts as far west as New York.

Father Cheverus was anxious to visit the Indians in Maine, and took the first opportunity to make the long journey. With a staff, like an apostle of old, and a guide to point the way, he began a severe march through the wilderness. For a week he endured great hardships, and at last, on a Sunday morning, he drew near to one of the Indian camps. As he approached he heard in the distance many voices singing in concert, and soon discovered, to his great surprise, that the chant was the well-known royal mass of Dumont! Only on the most solemn celebrations was this grand mass sung in the great cathedrals of France, and

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to hear it now, amidst the Gothic arches of the forest, and by a savage people who had been destitute of a resident priest for 50 years, was truly an amazing circumstance.

Three months he lived among the Indians at Old Town, on the Penobscot River, and then, bidding them an affectionate farewell, returned to Boston.

Catholics were numerous enough in Boston at that time to provide plenty of pastoral work for the two priests, yet Rev. Father Cheverus found time to interest himself in public affairs. Both priests were well known figures in the life of the city. They lived together in a few rooms, very simply. They were happy in their renewed friendship and their love for each other was the subject of comment, even in the press. The *Boston Magazine* said of them: "Their friendship surpassed the attachments which delight us in classical story, and equaled the lovely union of the son of Saul and the minstrel of Israel." And again: "In contemplating them, who can doubt that human nature is permitted to approach perfection and assume a near and sweet resemblance to the Man Divine? The pagan world was full of instances of lofty and virtuous conduct which dignified and exalted human nature. The hero, the seer and the

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sage had existed before Christianity was known; but the saint is a character which has been added to the catalogue since. Socrates, the wise and the good, had not, like St. John, a master's bosom on which to lean his head where all was purity and love."

When the good people of Boston realized that the Catholics had a church and a growing congregation within the sacred precincts of the old Puritan town, their astonishment was great. But times were changed and the Revolution had developed the sense of religious as well as of civil liberty. The policy of excluding people of faiths other than the Puritan was no longer feasible in the Bay State. It has become the fashion to consider the Puritan as illiberal. Yet his conception of the right of the individual to religious freedom, inherent in the citizen and not conferred by government, seems today to be generally accepted. The Puritans believed that the state is incompetent to consider religious matters, because such are wholly outside its province. They left England and her church to get rid of the tyranny which the state exercised over conscience. They did not believe in toleration by the state, like the Baltimore colonists, because toleration is not true freedom. What they demanded was absolute independence

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of the state in religious affairs. In organizing our government the Puritan principle of state incompetency in spirituals was accepted by the founders. Religious liberty is the right of the citizen, and the state protects him in the enjoyment thereof. The state does not confer it, and cannot deprive the citizen of it. This was the Puritan idea, and it is also a very good Catholic doctrine.

The Puritans, to whom we owe this splendid conception of a "free church in a free state," scarcely deserve the name of persecutors so often applied to them. Such people could not be illiberal in principle. Perhaps their actions did not always conform to their ideals. This has been true of other sects. As an isolated community in the old days, they had a right to admit whom they pleased into their colony. They welcomed those whom they thought would prove compatible. "When others came uninvited, they warned them off; if these returned they punished them, not for any religious belief or lack of it, but for trespass against the law." They loved Catholics and Quakers as little perhaps as Christian charity would permit, and the affection was doubtless reciprocated. Yet they could put aside their dislike when occasion required. Eliot, the apostle to the Indians, proved a most delightful host to the

Jesuit Druillets, and they had a very pleasant time together in the old house in Roxbury. In Boston the Jesuit was also charmed with his reception (this was in 1650). His host, a retired army officer, set apart a room that the good father might perform his religious duties undisturbed. The same Jesuit went down to Plymouth to visit the governor, and in his diary mentions Bradford's kindness. The day being Friday, his thoughtful host gave him an excellent dinner of fish.

Very likely there were many similar instances of kindly intercourse in those old days. The Revolution also must have done much to destroy the barriers that bigotry had built up. Certain it is that Father Cheverus always met with kindness in Boston, and had much honor conferred upon him by the citizens. And in return he loved the old town and the American people, whom he thoroughly understood. Rev. Father Cheverus was probably the first priest to visit Northampton, and because the occasion of that visit was connected with one of those awful tragedies that are long remembered in a community, and an account of it may be of interest to the older residents, I may be permitted to dwell on the affair at some length.

On November 9, 1805, a horse with saddle and bridle, but without a rider, was found grazing in the yard of John Bliss in Wilbraham. Suspicion of accident or worse to the late rider led to a searching party being formed, and on the following day the dead body of a man was found in the Chicopee River. The forehead was bruised, the back of the skull fractured, and there was a bullet wound in the side. Two pistols were found near by. In a valise attached to the saddle were papers proving that the murdered man was Marcus Lyon, and that he had left Cazenovia, N. Y., six days before, bearing letters to people in Monson and other towns.

It was soon recalled that two strangers had been seen in the vicinity on the day before (which was the day of the murder). A party was formed to pursue the supposed murderers, and the two men were captured on Tuesday following the murder, within thirty miles of New York. An old pamphlet says: "It appears they had no mistrust of being pursued before they were apprehended, and when they were taken they made no kind of resistance, but professed innocence and willingness to be searched and brought back to this state for trial. Their names were Dominic Daly and James Halligan, both Irishmen of foreign birth.



Halligan has lived in Hartford, and was a young man of good report there. His fall is quite unexpected, his honesty and integrity was unblemished. Daly was of riper years, and appeared like a subtle man. He had been but a short time in this country, was married, and his wife, mother and brother lived in the eastern part of the state."

From all the valley, and beyond, the people came to the trial at Northampton. It took place on April 24, 1806, in the old meeting-house. The town was never so crowded. Press and pulpit and village gossip had already judged the prisoners. They had no friends. Strangers in a strange land, and of a race and faith little understood and generally vilified, their guilt was presumed to be certain. The presiding judges at the trial were Theodore Sedgwick and Samuel Sewall. James Sullivan was attorney-general, and the prisoners had counsel assigned them.

The plea was not guilty. Witnesses for the government testified to the presence of Daly and Halligan near the place where the crime was committed on the day that Marcus Lyon was killed. They were on the turnpike road near the bank of the Chicopee river, going toward Springfield, and when seen by two of the witnesses, were within 70 rods of the place where the body was

found. The prisoners had already admitted passing over the road on the fatal Saturday. As to the pistols and their purchase in Boston, and the bank bills found on Halligan (testimony introduced by the government), the court decided that the evidence was so remote it ought to have no influence on the jury.

The conviction of the prisoners was secured by the testimony of Laertes Fuller, a boy of 13 years of age. Counsel for the defense argued at some length against the admission of the boy's evidence because of his youth. The court considered the boy competent. Fuller testified: "On the 9th of November I saw two men on the turnpike road near my father's house traveling westward. By a turn in the road they left my sight for a time, but in a few moments afterwards I met the same two men, with a horse, coming east. The horse was the one belonging to Marcus Lyon, as I have already proved. I followed the men. One of them soon rode away upon the horse, the other turned and looked sharply at me. He was Daly, the prisoner at the bar." In reference to this testimony, in his charge to the jury near the close of the trial, the judge said, "If you believe the witness, Fuller, you must convict."

There was no witness for the defense, but their

counsel, Francis Blake of Worcester, made a "lengthy, learned and elegant plea." Mr. Blake argued that presumptive evidence, upon which the government relied, must always prove insufficient for conviction in capital cases. In regard to the positive testimony of the boy Fuller, it was hinted by Mr. Blake that perhaps the boy had been "seduced to transfer the guilt from the real murderer to these unfortunate Irishmen." He warned the jury of race prejudice—the inveterate hostility against the people of that wretched country from which the prisoners have emigrated, for which the people of New England are peculiarly distinguished. "How far this hostility is the result of narrow and illiberal opinion, or how far justified by the character and conduct of those who have come among us, it is not my province, nor yours at present, to decide. Do not, therefore, believe them guilty because they are Irishmen." As an example of Mr. Blake's rhetorical style, the following will do: "Tell Irishmen that although they were driven into the ocean by the tempest which sweeps over their land, which lays waste their dwellings and deluged their fields; though they float on its billows, upon the broken fragments of their liberty and independence, yet our inhospitable coast presents no Ararat upon

which they can rest in safety; that although we are not cannibals, and do not feast upon human flesh, yet with all our boasted philanthropy, which embraces every circle on the habitable globe, we have yet no mercy for a wandering and expatriated fugitive from Ireland."

The trial began in the morning, and just before midnight the jury, having been absent but a short time, brought in a verdict of guilty. The prisoners were sentenced to be hanged June 5, 1806.

Rev. Father Cheverus was much surprised and touched, his biographer tells us, by a letter which he received from the two young men in Northampton who were under sentence of death. Their letter, long afterward found among the cardinal's papers, begged him to come and prepare them for their awful end. They wrote: "We adore in the judgment of men liable to be deceived, the decree of Providence. If we are not guilty of the crime imputed to us, we have committed other sins, and to expiate them we accept death with resignation. We are solicitous only about our salvation!" Promptly did Father Cheverus accede to their wishes. When he arrived in Northampton his reception, to say the least, was not cordial. He could get no accommodation at the taverns, and the good people of the town did not proffer him

hospitality. Yet we know he was a man of good presence, and a gentleman of such good repute as to be a welcome guest at the best houses in Boston. Perhaps he failed to bring letters of introduction, but whatever the reason, he was obliged to seek shelter in the prison, and "for many days he lived with the prisoners."

When the day arrived for the execution of the prisoners, they made a request that a razor be given them in order to shave. It was at first refused, but Father Cheverus pledged his word that they would not attempt their lives, and then it was given them. He accompanied the prisoners to the church, where on such occasions in those days it was customary for a minister to deliver a funeral discourse. One was at hand to perform the duty, but the priest declared that it was the wish of the prisoners that he alone should speak to them, and he immediately ascended the pulpit.

A very large audience had assembled and noticing that there was a "great multitude of women," he said in a stern voice: "Orators are usually flattered by having a numerous audience, but I am ashamed of the one now before me. Are there men to whom the death of their fellow-beings is a spectacle of pleasure, an object of curiosity! But especially you women, what has induced you to

come to this place? Is it to wipe away the cold damps of death? Is it to experience the painful emotions which this scene ought to inspire in every feeling heart? No, it is to behold the prisoners' anguish, to look upon it with tearless, eager and longing eyes. I blush for you, your eyes are full of murder. You boast of sensibility, and you say it is the highest virtue in women; but if the sufferings of others afford you pleasure, and the death of a man is entertainment for your curiosity, then I can no longer believe in your virtue. You forget your sex, you are a dishonor and reproach to it."

After the services in the church the prisoners were taken to Hospital Hill, and in the presence of 10,000 people were executed. Scarcely a woman was present, so terrible had been the denunciation of morbid curiosity by Father Cheverus, says the biographer. Daly read on the gallows and gave in writing to General Mattoon the following statement: "At this awful moment of appearing before the tribunal of the Almighty, and knowing that telling a falsehood would be eternal perdition to our poor souls, we solemnly declare we are perfectly innocent of the crime for which we suffer or of any other murder or robbery; we never saw, to our knowledge, Marcus Lyon in our lives; and as unaccountable as it may



appear, the boy never saw one of us looking at him at or near a fence, or any of us either leading, driving or riding a horse, and we never went off the highroad. We blame no one, we forgive everyone; we submit to our fate as being the will of the Almighty, and beg of Him to be merciful to us through the merits of his Divine Son, our blessed Saviour, Jesus Christ."

In the "History of the Connecticut Valley," vol. I, may be seen the following: "As an interesting fact connected with this (the murder of Marcus Lyon) it may be added that years afterward, on his deathbed, the real murderer of the mail carrier acknowledged his guilt, and vindicated—too late—the innocence of the lads who were executed for the crime."

Father Cheverus remained some weeks in Northampton after the execution, to the mutual delight of the people and himself. He preached several times in the meeting house by invitation, mingled in society and endeared himself to all whom he met. Many were surprised at the courage with which Daly and Halligan met death, and belief in their innocence had become widespread. Father Cheverus was approached and asked to tell, since from confession he must surely know, whether they were guilty. He said he would give

in his next discourse the only reply possible to the question. Before a crowded church he explained the Catholic doctrine of confession, and dwelt especially upon the secrecy imposed on the priest, which he may not break even to save a kingdom. When his duties at last called him back to Boston and he prepared to say farewell, the people begged him to remain. He was wont to say that he found as much difficulty in parting from the people of Northampton as he had in procuring shelter on his first arrival. Two years after his visit to Northampton, Father Cheverus was appointed bishop of Boston by Pope Pius VII. The promotion made no change in his simple manner of living. Showing his one small room to strangers, he would say with a smile, "Here is my episcopal palace—open to everybody." He was still the curate of his friend Dr. Matignon. Willingly would the Doctor give him precedence in house and church, but the distinction was kindly refused.

With the Adamses, Shaws and others he was more than ever the genial friend and honored guest, while to his ardent admirer, Dr. Channing, whom Bunsen styled the "Man of God," he was always fraternally lovable. The great heart of the "father of Unitarianism" went out to his dear "Brother Cheverus," as he was wont to call him,

in a splendid tribute to the worth of the good bishop: "Who among our religious teachers would solicit a comparison between himself and the devoted Cheverus? This good man lived in the midst of us, devoting his days and nights and his whole heart to the service of a poor and uneducated congregation. We saw him declining in a great degree the society of the cultivated and refined that he might be a friend of the ignorant and friendless, leaving a circle of polished life, which he would have graced, for the meanest hovels; bearing with a father's sympathy the burdens and sorrows of his large spiritual family; charging himself alike with their temporal and spiritual concerns, and never discovering by the faintest indication that he felt his fine mind degraded by his seemingly humble office. This good man, bent on his errands of mercy, was seen in our streets under the most burning sun of summer, and the fiercest storms of winter, as if armed against the elements by the power of charity. He has left us, but not to be forgotten. He enjoys among us what to such a man must be dearer than fame. His name is pronounced with blessings, with grateful tears, with sighs for his return, in many an abode of sorrow and want."

In 1823 Boston lost the good Bishop. Louis

XVIII begged him to return to France, and the king's request was urged by the bishop's physicians. The severity of our climate touched him. At last he consented and in tears bade farewell to America. After a brilliant and distinguished career in his native land, full of honors, as peer of France, prince of the Church and cardinal-archbishop of Bordeaux, he entered the life beyond in July, 1836.