

## The Last Speech of Archbishop Oliver Plunkett

*St. Oliver wrote the speech during his final days in Newgate Prison, London, with the endorsement of Fr. Corker a fellow prisoner. He delivered it from the scaffold at Tyburn, immediately before his execution and it was printed shortly afterwards for distribution. The original manuscript, which is written in St. Oliver's own hand, is preserved in Downside Abbey, along with his final letters to Fr. Corker. The speech was apparently well received, as the large crowd listened to him deliver it to its very conclusion and it is probable that many people may have already sensed an injustice was taking place. It is a well-structured speech and was obviously crafted with the benefit of a trained legal mind. It answered his detractors on a point for point basis, showing forgiveness even to his enemies and it must have convinced many more people of his innocence. Indeed, the tide of the wicked Popish Plot turned immediately and Lord Shaftesbury its principle promoter was arrested on the following day. St. Oliver thus became the last of the one hundred and five Catholic martyrs of Tyburn who had given their lives over the previous one hundred and fifty years and also the very last of the Catholic martyr's who were condemned by the state in these islands. Deo Gratias.*

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I have, some few days past, abided my trial at the King's Bench and now very soon, I must hold up my hand at the King of Kings' bench, and appear before a Judge who cannot be deceived by false witnesses or corrupted allegations, for he knoweth the secrets of hearts. Neither can he deceive any or give an unjust sentence, or be misled by respect of persons; he being all goodness, and a most just Judge, will infallibly decree an eternal reward for all good works, and condign punishment for the smallest transgression against his commandments. Which being a most certain and an undoubted truth, it would be a wicked act and contrary to my perpetual welfare, that I should now, by declaring anything contrary to truth commit a detestable sin, for which, within a very short time I must receive sentence of everlasting damnation after which, there is no reprieve, or hope of pardon. I will therefore confess the truth, without any equivocation, and make use of the words according to their accustomed signification. Assuring you, moreover that I am of that certain persuasion, that no power not only upon earth, but also in heaven, can dispense with me, or give me leave to make a false protestation. And I protest upon the word of a dying man, and as I hope for salvation, at the hands of the Supreme Judge, that I will declare the naked truth, with all candour and sincerity and that my affairs may be the better known to all the world.

It is to be observed that I have been accused in Ireland of treason and premunire and that there, I was arraigned and brought to my trial but the prosecutors men of flagitious and infamous lives perceiving that I had records and witnesses, who would evidently convince them and clearly show my innocence and their wickedness. They voluntarily absented themselves and came to this city to procure that I should be brought

hither to my trial, where the crimes objected were not committed, where the jury did not know me, or the qualities of my accusers, and were not informed of several other circumstances conducive to a fair trial. Here, after six months close imprisonment, or thereabouts, I was brought to the bar, the third of May and arraigned for a crime, for which I was before arraigned in Ireland. A strange resolution, a rare fact, of which you will hardly find a precedent these five-hundred years past. But whereas my witnesses and records were in Ireland, the Lord Chief Justice gave me five weeks time, to get them brought hither. But by reason of the uncertainty of the seas, of wind and weather and of the difficulty of getting copies of records and bringing many witnesses from several counties in Ireland and for many other impediments of which affidavit was made, I could not at the end of the five weeks, get the records and witnesses brought hither. I therefore begged for twelve days more, that I might be in a readiness for my trial, which the Lord Chief Justice denied and so I was brought to my trial and exposed, as it were with my hands tied, to those merciless perjurers, who did aim at my life, by accusing me of these following points:

**First,** That I have sent letters by one Nial O'Neale, who was my page, to Monsieur Baldeschi, the pope's secretary; to the Bishop of Aix, and to Principe Colonna, that they might solicit foreign powers to invade Ireland; and also to have sent letters to Cardinal Bullion to the same effect.

**Secondly,** To have employed Captain Con O'Neale, to the French King, for succour.

**Thirdly,** To have levied and exacted monies from the clergy of Ireland, to bring in the French and to maintain seventy-thousand men.

**Fourthly,** To have had in a readiness seventy-thousand men, and lists made of them and to have given directions to one friar Duffy to make a list of two-hundred and fifty men, in the parish of Faughart, in the County of Louth.

**Fifthly,** To have surrounded all the forts and harbours of Ireland, and to have fixed upon Carlingford, as a fit harbour, for the French's landing.

**Sixthly,** To have had several councils and meetings, where there was money allotted for introducing the French.

**Seventhly,** That I had a meeting, in the County of Monaghan, some ten or twelve years past, where there were three-hundred gentlemen of three counties; to wit, Monaghan, Cavan, and Armagh; whom I did exhort to take arms to recover their estates.

**To the first,** I answer, that Nial O'Neale was never my servant or page; and that I never sent letter or letters by him either to Monsieur Baldeschi, or to the Bishop of Aix, or to Principe Colonna. And I say that the English translation of that pretended letter, produced by the Friar MacMoyer, is a mere invention of his and never penned by me, or its original, either in English, Latin, Italian, or any other language. I affirm moreover, that I never wrote letter or letters to Cardinal Bullion, or any of the French King's ministers. Neither did any, who was in that court, either speak or write to me, directly or indirectly, of any plot or conspiracy against my King or my country. Further, I vow that I never sent agent or agents to Rome, or to any other court, about any civil or temporal affair. And it is well known, for it is a precept publicly printed, that clergymen living in countries, where the government is not of Roman-Catholics are commanded by Rome, not to write to Rome, concerning any civil or temporal affair. And I do aver, that I never received letter or letters from the Pope, or from any other of his ministers, making the least mention of any such matters: so that the Friar MacMoyer and Duffy swore most falsely, as to such letter or letters, agent or agents.

**To the second,** I say, that I never employed Captain Con O'Neale to the French King or to any of his ministers, and that I never wrote to him or received letters from him, and that I never saw him but once, nor ever spoke to him, to the best of my remembrance ten words; and as for his being at Dungannon or Charlemount, I never saw him in those towns or knew of his being in those places. So that as to Con O'Neale, Friar MacMoyer's depositions, they are most false.

**To the third,** I say, that I never levied any money for a plot or conspiracy, for bringing in French or Spaniards. Neither did I ever receive any, upon that account, from priest or friar; as Priest MacClave and Friar Duffy most untruly asserted. I assure you that I never received from any clergyman in Ireland, but what was due to me by ancient custom for my maintenance, and what my predecessors these hundred years past, were used to receive. Nay, I received less than many of them and if all that the Catholic clergy of Ireland get

in the year, were put in one purse, it would signify little or nothing to introduce the French, or to raise an army of seventy-thousand men, which I had enlisted and ready as Friar MacMoyer most falsely deposed. Neither is it less untrue, **(fourth)** what Friar Duffy attested, viz that I directed him to make a list of two-hundred and fifty men in the parish of Faughart, in the County of Louth.

**To the fifth,** I answer, that I never surrounded all the forts and harbours of Ireland and that I was never at Kinsale, Cork, Bantry, Youghal, Dungarvan, Youghal or Knockfergus, these thirty-six years past, I was not at Limerick, Duncannon, or Wexford. As for Carlingford I was never in it but once and stayed not in it, above half an hour. Neither did I consider the fort or haven. Neither had I it in my thoughts or imagination to fix upon it, or upon any other fort or haven, for landing of the French or Spaniards. And whilst I was at Carlingford by mere chance, passing that way, Friar Duffy was not in my company as he most falsely swore.

**To the sixth,** I answer, that I was never at any meeting or council, where there was mention made of allotting or collecting of monies, for a plot or conspiracy. And it is well known that the Catholic clergy of Ireland, who have neither lands nor revenues, and hardly are able to keep decent clothes upon their backs, and life and soul together, can raise no considerable sum; nay cannot spare as much as would maintain half a regiment.

**To the seventh,** I answer, that I was never at any meeting of three-hundred gentlemen in the county of Monaghan, Armagh, Cavan, nor of one county nor of one Barony. And that I never exhorted gentleman or gentlemen either there, or in any other part of Ireland to take arms for the recovering their estates. And it is well known that there are not even in all the Province of Ulster, three hundred Irish Roman Catholics, who had estates, or lost estates by the late rebellion and it is as well known, all my endeavours were for the quiet of my country, and especially of that province.

Now, to be brief, as I hope for salvation, I never sent letter or letters, agent or agents, to Pope, King, Prince, or Prelate, concerning any plot or conspiracy against my King or country: I never raised sum or sums of money, great or small, to maintain a soldier or soldiers, all the days of my life. I never knew nor heard, neither did it come to my thoughts or imagination, that the French were to land at Carlingford, and I believe there is none who saw Ireland even in a map, but will think it a mere romance. I never knew of any plotters or conspirators in Ireland but such as were notorious and proclaimed, commonly called Tories, whom I did endeavour to suppress; and as I hope for salvation, I am and I was all the days of my life, wholly and entirely innocent of the treasons laid to my charge, and of any other whatsoever. And though I be not guilty of the crimes, deposed against me, yet I believe no man ever came to this place, who is in such a condition as I am; for if I should even acknowledge (which in conscience I cannot do, because I should belie myself,) the chief crimes of which I am accused, no wise or prudent man who knows Ireland, would believe me. If I should confess that I was able to raise seventy-thousand men, in the districts of which I had care; to wit, in Ulster; nay, even in all Ireland, and to have levied and exacted monies for the maintenance of the said army, from the Roman Catholic clergy and to have prepared Carlingford, for the landing of the French; all would but laugh, laugh at me. It being well known, that all the revenues spiritual and temporal of Ireland possessed by his Majesty's subjects are scarce able to raise and maintain an army of seventy-thousand men. If I will deny all those crimes, (as I did, and do,) yet it may be, that some, who are not acquainted with the affairs of Ireland, will not believe, that my denial is grounded upon truth, though I assert it, with my last breath. I dare venture further and affirm, that if these points of seventy-thousand men, etc. had been sworn before any protestant jury in Ireland, and had been even acknowledged by me at the bar, they would not believe me, no more than if it had been deposed, and confessed by me, that I had flown in the air from Dublin to Holyhead.

You see, therefore, what a condition I am in, and you have heard what protestations I have made of my innocence, and I hope you believe the words of a dying man and that you may be the more induced to give me credit. I assure you that a great peer sent me notice, that he would save my life, if I would accuse others. But I answered, that I never knew of any conspirators in Ireland but such as I said before, were notoriously known and proclaimed outlaws, and that to save my life, I would not falsely accuse any and thereby prejudice my one soul. *Quid prodest homini...etc (note 1)* To take away any man's life or goods wrongfully, ill becometh any Christian and especially a person of my calling; being a clergyman of the Roman Catholic Church, and an unworthy prelate. Neither will I deny, to have exercised, in Ireland, the

functions of a Roman Catholic prelate, as long as there was any kind of toleration, and by preaching, teaching, and statutes, to have endeavoured to bring the clergy, of which I had a care, to a due comportment, according to their calling; but some of them would not amend and had a prejudice for me, and especially my accusers, to whom I did endeavour to do good; I mean the clergymen: who did accuse me, (as for the four laymen, viz. Florence Mac-Mover, the two Neals, and Hanlon, I was never acquainted with them). But you see how I am requited, and how by false oaths they brought me to this untimely death: which wicked act, being a defect of persons, ought not to reflect upon the order of St. Francis, or upon the Roman Catholic clergy. It being well known, that there was a Judas among the twelve Apostles, and that among the deacons there was a wicked man called Nicholas. And even, as one of the said deacons to wit, holy Stephen did pray for those who stoned him to death; so do I, for those who, with false oaths spill my blood; saying, as St. Stephen did, "O Lord! lay not this sin to them." And I beg of my Saviour to grant them true repentance and the grace never to sin any more. I do forgive them with all my heart, and also the judges, who by denying me sufficient time to bring my records and witnesses from Ireland, did expose my life to evident danger. I moreover forgive all those who had a hand in bringing me from Ireland, to be tried here, where it was morally impossible for me to have a fair trial. I do finally forgive all who did directly or indirectly concur, to take away my life, and I ask forgiveness of all those whom I ever offended by thought, word, or deed.

I beseech the All-powerful, that his Divine Majesty grant our King, Queen, and the Duke of York, and all the Royal family, health, long life, and all prosperity in this world and in the next, everlasting happiness. Now, that I have (as I think) showed sufficiently how innocent I am of any plot or conspiracy. I would I were able, with the like truth, to clear myself of high crimes committed against the Divine Majesty's commandments, often transgressed by me, for which, I am sorry from the bottom of my heart; and if I should or could live a thousand years, I have a firm resolution, and a strong purpose, by your grace, My God, never to offend you; and I beseech your Divine Majesty, by the merits of Christ, and by the intercession of his Blessed Mother, and all the holy Angels and Saints, to forgive me my sins, and to grant my soul eternal rest. *Miserere mei Deus... etc. Parce animae peccatrici meae; In manus tuas Domine commendo spiritum meum.* (note 2)

For a final satisfaction of all persons, that have the charity to believe the words of a dying man, I again declare before God, as I hope for salvation, what is contained in this paper, is the plain and naked truth, without any equivocation, mental reservation, or secret evasion whatsoever, taking the words in their usual sense and meaning, as Protestants do, when they discourse with all candour and sincerity. To all which, I have here subscribed my hand the first of July. *Oliver Plunkett*

*Note 1: What does it profit a man ...*

*Note 2: Have mercy on me, God, etc. Spare my sinful soul, Lord. Into your hands, O Lord, I commend my spirit.*