



Department of Justice

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REMARKS BY ATTORNEY GENERAL ROBERT F. KENNEDY
at the dedication of the
JOHN F. KENNEDY INTERFAITH CHAPEL
West Georgia College
Carrollton, Georgia, May 26, 1964

I come today to express the pride and the deeply felt appreciation of the Kennedy family for the honor you pay to President Kennedy by naming your chapel after him, and to join with you in expressing thanks to Our Lady of Perpetual Help Catholic Church for its creative generosity.

I thank you for I know that what you are doing here, at this growing and enlightened institution which has done so much for its community, would be a source of great satisfaction to President Kennedy. And I thank you for the many kindnesses Georgia extended to him, beginning in November, 1960.

His candidacy and election exemplify tolerance. This chapel is an expression of the same spirit of tolerance. And that is a spirit which is as old as Georgia.

The charitable groups in England which sponsored settlement of the colony of Georgia saw it as a haven for the persecuted and the poor. Contributions poured in from all classes of people. The clergy, for example, gave thousands of books. One of the notable titles was A Friendly Admonition to the Drinkers of Gin, Brandy and other Spirituous Liquors, a volume whose message, I am certain, is still being taken to heart.

Your first settlers were warmly received by the other colonies. South Carolina sent horses, cattle, hogs, rice, and 2,000 pounds in cash. Thomas Penn sent 100 pounds in cash. In my home state, however, the opponents of foreign aid prevailed; the Governor of Massachusetts sent his best wishes.

Georgia flourished nonetheless. Its promise for religious refugees was so great that before the colony was six years old, it had as varied a population as any, with Swiss, Salzburgers, Moravians, Germans, Jews, Piedmontese, Scotch Highlanders, Welsh, and English.

Yet not even in the New World, not even in Georgia, did all the early settlers find freedom of faith. Catholics, for example, were not admitted to Georgia for seventy years. In other colonies, they were harassed, Quakers were jailed and Protestant sects were hounded.

It was in the South, in Virginia, that resentment against these practices flowered into religious freedom. With Madison and Jefferson in the vanguard, the Virginia Bill of Religious Liberty was enacted, to be followed by the First Amendment, separating church and state.

Official intolerance thus ended. Religions were free to preach, to grow, and to multiply. If a group of Boston people thought the world was going to end in the mid-nineteenth century, they were free to congregate in a theater, clad in robes, ready to perish together.

If Mormons or Christian Scientists -- or followers of sects with more limited appeal, like that of the mystic Madame Blavatsky, have sought to express their faith in new ways, they have been free to do so. If Catholics have chosen to attend mass early Sunday and Jews to observe the Sabbath at sundown Friday, there has been none to forbid them.

And yet, as has been demonstrated repeatedly during our history, legal separation of church and state is not enough. It ended official intolerance; it could not end private intolerance.

And there have been those, throughout our history -- and particularly in times of crisis -- who have preached intolerance, who have sought to escape reality and responsibility with a slogan or a scapegoat. Religious groups have been the first targets but they have not been the only ones.

There are those who suspect their neighbors because they pray to a different God -- or because they pray to none at all. And there are those who bellow that a former President of the United States is a tool of the Communist conspiracy.

There are those who preach that desegregation of the schools will destroy our society. And there are others who believe that calamity will occur because of the way we may treat our drinking water.

There is freedom in this country to be extreme, to propose the most reactionary or the most utopian solutions to all the problems of the country or even the world. There is freedom here to believe and act with passion, whether for the cause of religion, or party, or personal welfare.

"If there be any among us," Jefferson said, "who would wish to dissolve this Union or to change its Republican form, let them stand undisturbed as monuments of the safety with which error of opinion may be tolerated where reason is left free to combat it."

What is objectionable, what is dangerous about extremists is not that they are extreme, but that they are intolerant. The evil is not what they say about their cause, but what they say about their opponents.

The intolerant man will not rely on persuasion, or on the worth of the idea. He would deny to others the very freedom of opinion or of dissent which he so stridently demands for himself. He cannot trust democracy.

Frustrated by rejection, he condemns the motives, the morals, or the patriotism of all who disagree. Whether he is inflamed by politics, or religion -- or drinking water, he still spreads selfish slogans and false fears.

America's answer to the intolerant man is diversity -- the very diversity which our heritage of religious freedom has inspired.

The largest Scandinavian nation in the world is the United States. The largest Irish nation in the world is the United States. The second largest German nation in the world is the United States. And like statements could be made about other American ethnic groups.

Many voices, many views all have combined into an American consensus, and it has been a consensus of good sense. "In the multitude of counselors, there is safety," says the Bible, and so it is with American democracy. Tolerance is an expression of trust in that consensus and each new enlargement of tolerance is an enlargement of democracy.

President Kennedy's election was such an enlargement. It expanded religious freedom to include the highest office in the land. President Kennedy's administration was such an enlargement. It advanced the day when the bars of intolerance against all minority groups will be lifted, not only for the Presidency, but for all aspects of our national life.

And this chapel is a warmly fitting tribute to President Kennedy not only because it bears his name but because it, too, expresses and advances the spirit of tolerance among religions and among men.

It was for this spirit that President Kennedy spoke, acted, lived, and led. "Let us go forth," he said, in the closing words of his Inaugural Address, "to lead the land we love, asking His blessing and His help, but knowing that here on earth, God's work must truly be our own."