

**PRINCIPLES OF  
SACRED  
ELOQUENCE**

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Principles of sacred eloquence by John Placid Conway

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**JOHN PLACID CONWAY**

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OF  
SACRED ELOQUENCE

BY

JOHN PLACID CONWAY, O.P.,  
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*Strip me of everything else in the world, but leave me Eloquence.*

—St. Gregory Nazianzen.

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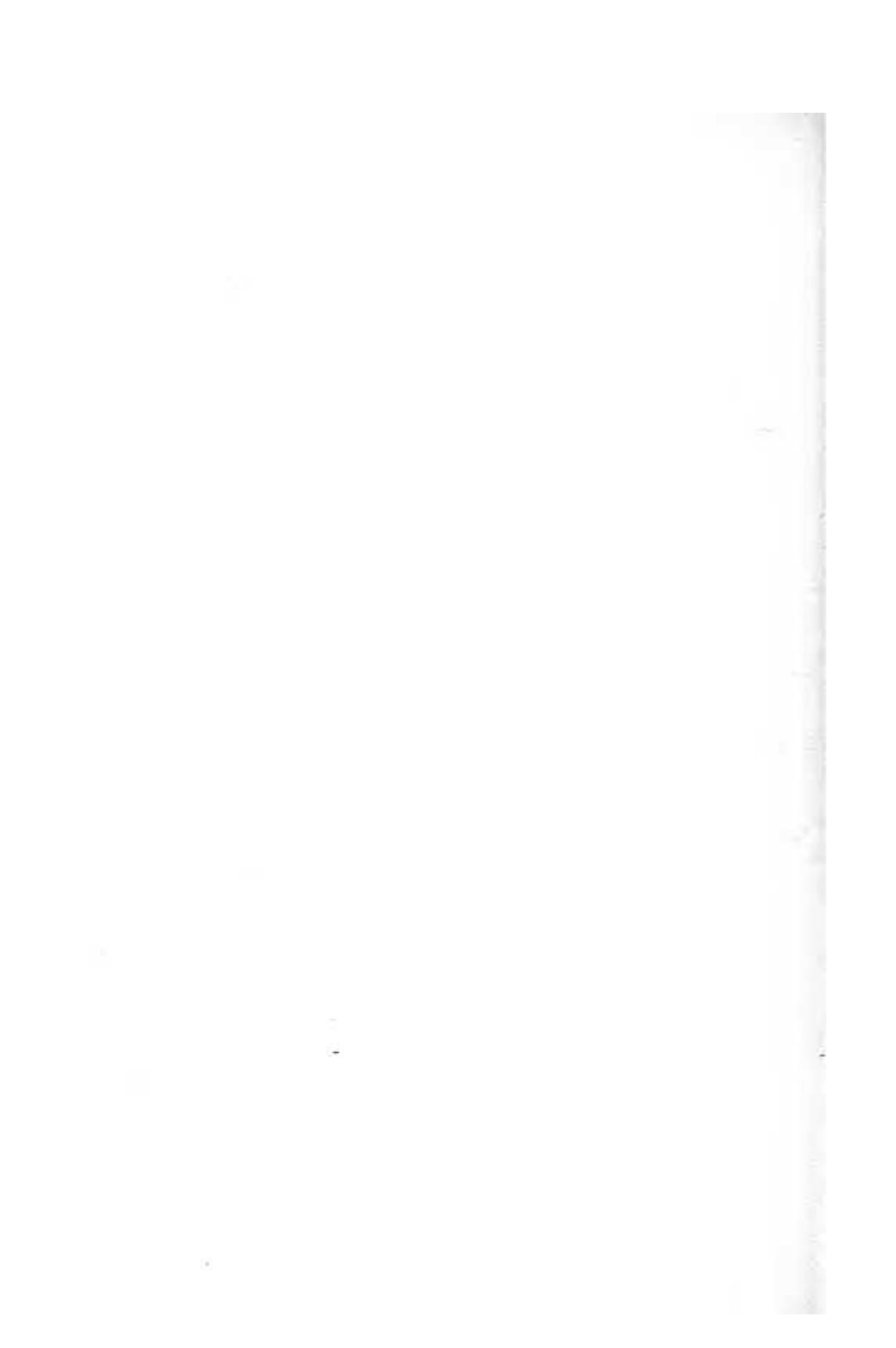
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# SACRED ELOQUENCE.

## First Part.

### I.—ORATORY: ITS NATURE AND CAUSES.

*"Strip me of everything else in the world, but leave me eloquence."*—St. Gregory Nazianzen.

Oratory, as an Art, was first mooted by Empedocles (B. C. 450), but the oldest existing treatise on the subject is Aristotle's "Rhetoric." Cicero, at a later date, dealt more comprehensively with it in his Essays, as in "The Invention of the Topics," "The Orator, or Brutus," "The Divisions of Oratory," "Of Famous Orators," and "The Orator." In this last work the author, in three books, enters minutely into all the details of the art. "The Institutions" of Quintilian, in twelve books, is the fullest work of the kind in the classical age. Modern writers have added little to the art; their task has been the application of given principles. These pages, in dealing with the second part, or Practical Oratory, are mainly an epitome of Cicero and Quintilian, supplemented by details according to modern usage.

WHAT IS ORATORY?—It may be defined as the "Art of swaying minds by conviction of the truth through speech." It is something beyond mere knowledge, yet less than a science, since science is the result of demonstration from strictly first principles. Oratory also uses demonstration, but of a secondary order. Its true status is that it is an Art, because of the artificial



structure of its parts. Hence the Roman Orator speaks of it as "Ars bene disserendi"—"The Art of discoursing well." Being above the mechanical order, its place is among the Fine Arts.

There are two classes of the Fine Arts: (1) Those which build in time; (2) those which build in space. The former is of a subtler order: its branches, the Arts themselves—of oratory, music, and poetry, are of a higher quality: the second class is in touch with the crafts, and its branches are architecture, painting, and sculpture. The Greek Rhetors, Poets, and Dramatists, were as truly artists as the painters, sculptors, or architects: Sophocles and Demosthenes were as truly filled with the artistic sense as Phidias or Apelles. If we consider the end of each art in detail, we find that Oratory holds the first place in the foremost rank, since its end is not to gratify sense, but to sway the mind and heart. To Poetry belongs the domain of the imagination, but Oratory claims for its own the highest faculty, the intellect, using the imagination as its handmaid, and having for its end or aim "the conviction of truth" that is, the bringing home of truth to the mind in such fashion as to secure conviction. Passionate it may be, reasonable it must be.

WHAT IT IS NOT.—It is no mere declamation; that is acting, or reciting: nor is it the heaping up of fancies in a studied speech; the mere weaving of fancies in the loom of prose is poetry *en déshabillé*. Oratory to be an Art must be inborn, that is, it ought to be the child of our inner self, of our own brain in the concept, of our heart in the fervor, and of our lips in the utterance. He is no Orator who declaims another's speech; he is a reciter, but never an artist, since he lacks the creative faculty. There are others again who conceive the thought excellently and fashion the language admirably, which when listened to borders on failure, when read is a positive treat. These are not Orators but writers, their sphere of action is the press, not the pulpit. The best sermon, if merely read, can never carry away an audience by storm nor fire it with enthusiasm, as results with words poured

direct from the heart. It is commendable, nay a necessity in some cases, but it is not Oratory.

Good articulation and gestures belong to Rhetoric, which is the basis of Oratory; sound periods of English idioms, a good style, an easy manner, are also parts of Rhetoric: sound doctrine is Theology, acute reasoning is Logic, the wholesome application of a point or choice of a subject belong to common sense: but while all of them are the organic parts of a living whole, none of them singly is Oratory. Budding Chrysostoms delude themselves by mistaking talent in a branch for excellence in the whole. Oratory is no one of all these things, but their happy unison from out our own brain.

## II.—ITS FOURFOLD CAUSE IN GENERAL.

SACRED ORATORY is that noble branch of the foremost Art which has Divine Truth for its subject matter, and is the burden of a holy embassy. It is advisable to catch one's hare before devising how to cook it, and when in hand it is equally profitable to bear in mind that bad cooking spoils good meat. So is it with Sacred Oratory. Poor stuff will glare out in spite of the most taking delivery, and a bad delivery takes the heart out of the soundest discourse. Cicero and St. Augustine assign the same three ends of all Oratory: "Docere, Movere, Placere," "To Instruct, to Stir, to Please." These are secured by the matter, the spirit, and the art.

The exalted character of the preacher lies in this that he images Him who is First Truth both in nature and word, since God's word is the faint manifestation of Himself. The office of the preacher is to spread the word of God which he first possesses, for the servant should be like his Lord in the fulness of grace and of truth.

Oratory as an Art is made up of the harmonious blending of chief causes, and these are four: First, there is the "Efficient Cause," which in the subject matter tutors and makes the preacher. Secondly, there is the "Final,"

which comprises the motives of action, being "ambassadors for Christ's sake." Thirdly, comes the "Formal," which gives the notes and impress of character, thereby revealing the preacher; and, lastly, the "Material Cause," which is the basis of sound doctrine. Every effect is the result of causality: in proportion to the elevated standard of the causes will be the dignity or worth of the effects. The Holy Ghost who teaches the souls of men through our ministry has given four gifts to fashion divine minds; if found in "the church taught," *a fortiori* they ought to be found in "the Church teaching." Such gifts are illuminations of fixed character, and each has its subject matter: they are *Wisdom, Understanding, Counsel, and Knowledge*, given either directly from Himself, or indirectly through others. It is written, "They shall hear my voice" (John x. 16); and again, "Who hears you hears Me" (Luke x. 16). A man may be an Orator without them, but never can be a Preacher.

### III.—THE EFFICIENT CAUSE.

First in order comes the *Efficient Cause*, which fashions the true preacher. St. Thomas assigns three notes to it. (1) The preacher should be ripe in virtue. "No one ought to undertake the duty of preaching who has not first been chastened and perfected in virtue, as we read of Christ—"Jesus began to do and to teach." (*Summa Theol.*, III., xli., art. 3, ad 1 m.) (2) The preacher ought to be free from worldly cares and pursuits. "It was befitting Christ that He should have lived a life of poverty, because this befits the preacher's office, since the preachers of God's word ought to be free from this world's cares in order to be at leisure for their ministry." (III., xl., 3.) (3) He ought to cultivate the spirit of retirement. "Christ's conduct was for our instruction, and hence to give an example to preachers not to be seen constantly in public, our Lord withdrew Himself at times from the people." (III., xl., ad 3 m.) St. Thomas furthermore notes the