

(Sermon given by the Reverend Theodore M. Hesburgh, C.S.C., President, University of Notre Dame, on CBS "Church of the Air" Sunday, January 30, 1955)

NOTRE DAME MEN -- FATHER AND SON

My dear Friends:

I would like to speak to you this morning about two Notre Dame men: the one, a graduate of more than twenty-five years; and the other, his son who was this past year a junior in the College of Liberal Arts at the University. Neither of them is living today. You may have been one of their friends who were shocked at their sudden deaths in an airplane accident in Milwaukee shortly before Christmas. I shall speak mainly of the last day of their lives, because it holds for all of us an important message, whether we are closer in age to the father or to the son.

There will be a final day in all of our lives. What will it be like? Largely, I think, like the rest of our lives. Our final day on earth will probably reflect the values we hold today, the strength of our character today, the closeness of our union with God today. In reflecting these, our last day will indicate to God and to ourselves the kind of eternity that awaits us. That is why I want to tell you about the day that, unknown

to them as they began it, was the last day on earth for these two Notre Dame men, Fred Miller, Jr. and Fred Miller, Sr.

I wish that I could tell you that Friday, last December 17, dawned bright and clear at the University of Notre Dame. On the contrary, it was overcast and sleety, but the weather did not matter that day. All our students were happy to see the day come, because it was the joyful day of going home for the Christmas holidays. Of all the boys at Notre Dame, young Freddy Miller of Dillon Hall had special reasons to be happy on that day and other days. As the world judges means of happiness in money, he had plenty, for his father was a millionaire. On a more personal scale, he had ample reason, too: He was a handsome, personable lad, with a fine body that made him a good athlete. His mind was of equal measure. He was an honor student with about a 95% average in a difficult course. He had a wonderful family and home: a successful, likeable father, a charming and vivacious mother, six sisters and a brother. He had just about everything a young man could desire, a host of friends, Summer vacations in Europe, a German sports car at home, and a wonderful future ahead of him. But none of these things

were all-important to him, because, in addition to everything else, he had a good sense of values, of what is really important and unimportant in life.

I had met young Freddy Miller on an airplane several weeks before this day. After asking him about his family, whom I knew, and his classes (since he had a volume of the Greek philosopher, Plato, along with him on the trip), I asked him the really important question: How was he doing in the chapel department at Notre Dame. He answered rather modestly, "Okay, Father." I pressed him a little: "What does okay mean?" "Well, I go to Mass and Holy Communion every day, Father."

So December 17 was the same as every other day in his young life. I suppose it was more hurried, since he was rushing to get off on a hunting trip to Canada with his father. But the last thing he did before leaving Notre Dame was to attend Mass and receive Holy Communion in his hall chapel. As he and some of his friends were driving to Milwaukee, one of them warned the boy driving to take it easy as the road was becoming slippery. "I'm not really worried," said young Fred, "after all, I'm in the state of grace." It was a way of saying that with God within him, he was not afraid of meeting God.

As the sun went down on December 17, Fred's body was charred inside a crashed and burning plane, but I'm sure that his soul was glorious in the sight of God, and that he really knew then, as he certainly knows now, how right he was on his values. His looks and personality and brains and money and sports car seem very unimportant beside the fact that he began his last day with God, lived it with God in the state of grace, and ended it with God to begin an eternity of sharing God's glorious happiness. And, as a kind of memento to his friends, his prayerbook was thrown clear of the plane. It opened where the marker was, at the prayers for the dead.

Last September, when the schoolyear began at Notre Dame, we had a retreat for all of the students. Each class offered up their Mass and Holy Communion on the last day of their retreat for the next Notre Dame student to die, that he might be prepared to die in the grace of God. We are grateful that all of those prayers were answered so graciously. Freddy Miller went home to an early and eternal Christmas this year. The first Sunday that our students were back from Christmas vacation, they offered up their Mass and Holy Communion for the repose of the soul of Fred Miller and also for the next

Notre Dame student to die. Whoever he is, may he live and die as valiant a Christian as young Fred Miller was.

How did December 17 begin for Fred Miller, Sr.? As was their custom, he and his wife, Adele, were up before the dawn, driving down the tree-lined road around Lake Oconomoc to the parish church in the town where they attended the 6:30 Mass and both received Holy Communion. Here was an unusual man. Fred, Sr. was more famous than his son at Notre Dame, an all-American tackle and captain of one of Knute Rockne's last teams. He was widely known as a sportsman, a director of the Green Bay Packers, and influential in bringing the Braves to Milwaukee. He could still beat his athletic son at handball, his daughters at tennis, and enjoyed being a volunteer coach with Frank Leahy during the ten years that Frank was coach at Notre Dame. He was a good business man, too, having quadrupled his business in the past six years and having invested forty millions in new plant.

I suppose he had the usual ups and downs since his graduation from Notre Dame in 1929. But as the Gospel says, "He who perseveres to the end, he shall be saved." The story I like best about him was the fact that

he had adopted the habit of making a retreat once a year to check up on his spiritual life. This year, he took a dozen men with him, two of them being his pilots who were making the first and last retreat of their lives, the weekend before they died, getting prepared with Fred to meet God, although none of them knew it at the time. I had a letter from Fred that last week, too, telling me that he would like to serve on the Advisory Council for the College of Liberal Arts. Yes, this man had a full life, but like his son, he knew what really mattered. He began his last day with God. And, as they pulled him away from the burning plane that afternoon, the thoughtfulness of Christ, whom he had received in Holy Communion that morning, was still with him. "Don't worry about me," he said, "there are three others in there." Not just, my son, but three others. The pilots were in there, too.

At the hospital before he died, Fred wanted to see only the priest to receive the Last Sacraments of the Church, and his wife, to console her.

And the wife, she made faith in God and in eternity a reality for everyone who visited their home for the wake. Charred bodies meant nothing to her, for the body is to rise glorious from the earth at the resurrection.

As for the separation from loved ones at death, so difficult for all families, so impossible to bear courageously without faith, this was her thought: "When a soul dies in the grace of God it becomes united knowingly and willingly to God for all eternity, and shares the glory, the happiness, the wisdom, and the power of God. And since God is everywhere," she said, "I'm sure that my Freds are with me now, bringing me the courage and the strength I need. And they shall be with me until I die and am with them again, together with God forever." When someone tried to console her by saying that she had been a good wife and mother, her simple answer spoke more than volumes on the purposes of Catholic marriage and family life, "I'm glad that they saved their souls." She wanted no eulogy at their funeral, for as she said: "Only God should be praised in Church."

Since this is the "Church of the Air", and not that church of stone, or brick, or frame that you attend on Sunday, I trust that I am within her wishes to say these few things about her two Notre Dame men, the Fred Millers, father and son.

Some of you good listeners are fathers or mothers, all of you belong to a family, some of you are young sons and daughters. You may

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not be wealthy, or even healthy, you may not be handsome, or beautiful, or brilliant, you may not have a high position in this world or a fascinating future before you. From an eternal point of view, none of these things are really important when your life is finished and your last day on earth begins. All that matters then is how you stand with God, how well you have used whatever talents or position in life that God did give you. And the important lesson from today's stories of these two Notre Dame men is that we should live every day of our lives as though it might be our last. If you live every day close to God, it does not matter how or when or where you die - for the person who lives with God has nothing to fear in time or in eternity. Ask yourself then this morning - am I living today in such a way that I could meet God tonight and not be ashamed of <sup>how I am living</sup> the life God gave me?

Someone might say that this has not been much of a sermon, but only the account of a day in the life of two Notre Dame men. But are not the greatest sermons of all, not those of spoken word, but the very lives of good men and women.



May all of your lives, today and every day, be living sermons to those with whom you live. And may all of you, with God's grace, persevere unto the end in doing good.