

(Sermon delivered by the Reverend Theodore M. Hesburgh, C.S.C., President, University of Notre Dame, at the formal opening of the school year, Sacred Heart Church, Notre Dame, Indiana, Sunday, September 25, 1955.)

If you continue in my word, you shall be my disciples indeed. And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.

(John: 8:31-32)

At the beginning of each schoolyear, we pause for a solemn moment of prayer: that God may bless our common endeavor of the months to come, and that He may also confirm each of us in our dedication to this lofty endeavor that demands the best that is in each of us.

We also pause for a few moments this morning to consider some aspect of the work at hand, to glean, if possible, some added inspiration from the thought that ours is no common task, no ordinary calling.

This year, I shall try to review what might be termed the social challenge of the educative process. Social development is not the primary purpose of education, but neither is it an unimportant by-product. Education is primarily concerned with an individual person. We attempt as teachers to draw to some fulfillment the inner powers of the person: his capacity for discerning truth, his yearning for the inner freedom which is nurtured by the growing possession of truth, integrated knowledge and ultimately

wisdom which gives meaning and conscious order to all that is known. Education must further, and more indirectly, be a school of love, for truth and beauty and the good things of life are not merely to be known, but to be assimilated in the person who is made to possess by love as well as to see by knowledge.

Education and the work of educators could cease at this point, if the person educated could live his life in solitary contemplation and love. But the student, like ourselves, is living in an historic moment of time, in a real world with all its actual tensions and current crises. The university cannot abstract itself or its students from the realities of past history or the anguish of the present crisis. Even if the university accomplishes its primary mission in relative geographic seclusion from the intemperate cross currents of the forum and the market place, it cannot shelter itself or its students from the conflict of ideas that are the most real substratum of these cross currents.

These ideas are engaged today in mortal conflict, and at the center of the struggle what is really at stake is the soul of man, his dignity, the truth by which alone he can live, his freedom to be what he

was created to be. This man, whose soul and dignity and freedom are at stake, is the same man who is being educated. If in the process, he is not equipped to recognize the conflict of his times, to discern its basic issues, and to accept what part he must play to ~~and~~^{aid} in final victory, then the university is indeed a parasite in a society that looks to it for leadership, and knowledge, for wisdom and integrity, at least in the minds and hearts of its graduates.

The first pages of recorded human history tell the story of conflict: good against evil, truth against falsehood, order against anarchy, obedience against pride, spirit against matter. It was not a story of victory then, nor is it a story of victory today in the world-wide present-day version of the original episode in the Garden of Eden. There have been classical victories and classical defeats in the age-old struggle, ~~and~~ the battle lines have been extended and complicated in the intervening centuries.

What perhaps somewhat simplifies the picture today is that at least in the realm of basic ideology the battle line is clearly drawn. We can speak of the free world where the dominant social structures try to respect what is most sacred in Western Culture: the dignity of man, his

basic rights and freedoms, his inner aspirations for what is called the pursuit of happiness: the good life in a good society. And we can speak of the other half a world, where this concept of man does not obtain and is not respected.

Between these two worlds there is, and must be, real conflict. The terms of the conflict may change from year to year: now cold war, now lukewarm war, now again war disguised as peaceful co-existence. Yet, whatever the actual terms of the conflict, conflict it is, and conflict it will be as long as the soul of man is at stake, and the power of evil is at large.

There are many illusory solutions offered to end the present conflict: diplomatic moves and counter moves, the implied threat of more numerous and more destructive nuclear weapons, the full-fledged chicanery of every means of modern propaganda to strengthen one's position and to weaken that of the enemy. These and other solutions are illusory, because they fail to recognize that the conflict is not basically military, political, or economic. At heart, the conflict is both philosophical and theological. The actual battlefield is in the realm of ideas. No matter what the physical or material forces involved, ultimately it is ideas that will prevail, truth that will

gain or lose in this struggle for the souls of men.

How does all of this affect the university and its mission of educating students in this year which we officially begin today. Obviously, we must have true and good ideas ourselves if we are to teach our students with conviction and inspire them to hunger, to search for, to find and to embrace the truth. For it is only the truth ultimately that will make us truly free.

How is the truth represented today on our side of the crucial struggle? We are oratorically so often critical of the opposition that the obvious assumption is that he is all wrong and that we are all right. But in a more reflective mood, might we not ask how right we really are, or to put it another way, if we are right, are we right for the right reasons. Our assessment of this situation will affect mightily the attitudes that are reflected in our educational process.

No one in the West would seriously question the fundamental truth of the democratic charter. But too few of us question the present day vitality of its tap roots: the soul of Christianity and Western culture from which is laboriously grew. The opposition at least is clear about its

precedents: Communism is the product of naturalism and materialism full blown. The Communist clearly recognizes totalitarianism as an end in itself to be furthered by any means. Perhaps because of its more recent origin, the Communist sees more clearly the logical and vital connection between his philosophy and its conclusions in the practical order of social life.

But how many in the West would recognize that democracy, unlike the totalitarian scheme, is not an end in itself -- but a temporal means of preserving the ultimate human values of a spiritual order: the dignity of man, his rights and responsibilities to his fellow men under God, his inner spiritual freedom to seek a personal destiny that transcends temporal society. These spiritual values can be achieved by means of a democratic society. They may also exist, to some extent, without the precise political order that we have, but democracy, as we know it, cannot exist without these spiritual values. The inner contradiction of our day is simply this: that we have accepted the democratic charter, enjoyed a great and wonderful gift of ages past, a gift flowing from the inner dynamism of Christianity and from a deep dedication to the value of the spirit in man, and then, having accepted the fruit, we

have forgotten the root and branch. We have, in large measure, allowed the soul of our culture to die, while living on the rich, but rapidly diminishing, heritage of the past.

This is what Plato long ago condemned as "living by habit without fixed principle." Ours is the house now resting on sand about which Our Lord warned us. The fair day has passed; the winds and the rains are come. We must now look to the foundations of our social order. It is no longer enough to accept conclusions and to abdicate the principles which alone can validate the conclusions.

How popular, or even acceptable, in present day university circles are the vital philosophical principles, the living Christian faith that gave birth to the democratic charter after ages of tyranny and human oppression. Most universities teach everything but theology, the science of faith. The philosophy in vogue, is strangely akin to that naturalism and materialism that the opposition so logically pursues.

Glance for a moment at these philosophies. Naturalism denies outright man's relation both to an ultimate order of values and to God who is the source of these absolutes. Naturalism thus divorces man from

the spiritual and moral order to which he belongs and without which he will be destitute of any reasonable order or direction in life. Standing all alone, endowed with perfectibility by courtesy of Rousseau, ^{man} he is left without any norm or sanction beyond himself and his own desires, individual when he can press them, and collective when they are pressed upon him. The natural result is pride and egotism. All man has left to worship or serve is himself or his false gods of money, or power, nation or race.

At this point, try to see the logic of those educators in our day who, in practice try to preserve the dignity of man while intellectually subscribing to a basically materialistic philosophy that recognizes man as little more than a highly developed animal, of the earth earthy. And where is the logic of still enjoying a democratic charter, derived from belief in absolute spiritual and moral values, long after these same basic values have been discarded from the educational process as unsophisticated, or archaic, or what is most devastating today, unscientific.

We might have lingered longer in this sorry state of intellectual schizophrenia had not the present crisis developed. Perhaps in the Providence of God, Communism will do this service to the world, and especially to us of

the Western World, to demonstrate in its starkest reality the logical consequences in the social order of a fully conscious naturalistic and materialistic concept of man and his destiny.

We are concerned no longer in the West today with a more or less perfect democratic charter, but with the life or death of this idea and its reality in the face of a fiercely competitive idea and reality that will have all the world or nothing. This is no high school debate, but a life and death struggle with naturalism and materialism on the march, inflamed with pride and passion and zeal, armed with an apocalyptic drive, vast political power, clever propaganda, and the vision of world domination.

Against this force shall we oppose a democratic charter that is unsure of its presuppositions, robbed of the strength it once drew from vital dynamic principles. Shall we dare to hope for victory if we have thrown away our arms - the sword of the spirit, the might of the Lord of Hosts, the force of vital ideas, the courageous traditions of men who believed, and hoped and loved - that truth might prevail and that man, under God, might be truly free to live his life and to achieve his destiny in a social order based on absolute justice and law.

The basic social problem of the West would still be with us tomorrow if Communism were obliterated today. Without the pressure of Communism, we would not be more strong, only less harassed. The inner dynamism of the democratic charter would still need strengthening to survive, even if it were alone in this world. Death comes to a culture or a civilization, not solely from external pressures, but, even more often, from the inner withering of a vital principle, from a loss of faith, from moral anemia, and from the abdication of a basic commitment to truth and integrity. Yes, even without the threat of Communism, we would still be obliged to revitalize our faith, to revivify basic respect for our philosophical roots, not because they are useful or helpful to us in this conflict, but because they are true.

Here then, in the realm of truth, is the mission of the university manifest. If our graduates are to have a vital part in the struggle for men's souls, they must begin by achieving true wisdom and freedom in their own souls. This inner development may seem distant from the dramatic issues of Washington, Moscow, and Geneva. But the action that takes place in those distant scenes is the result of ideas that began their existence

in the minds of men like Machiavelli, Kant, Rousseau, Hegel, Hobbes, Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Stalin on the one hand, and, on the other, ideas that burgeoned in the minds of Plato, Aristotle, Augustine and Aquinas, Madison and Jefferson, Washington and Lincoln. Throughout the ideas of the latter, there is the ever present leaven of the divine ideas of Christ, and the accumulated wisdom of Western thought on the dignity of man, his inalienable rights, his responsibilities to God and his fellow men, justice, law, and equity.

A University today will have an impact on the progress of man and human society, in direct proportion to the truth of the heritage it imparts to its students.

I would only like to signalize today two of these basic truths that highlight the current conflict of ideas in the social order. They are likewise truths that traditionally have formed the cornerstone at Notre Dame, for an education productive of responsible leadership in the social order.

The first and most fundamental truth is the existence of one supreme, personal God, above and beyond history, infinite in knowledge and

power, the Creator and Preserver of all that is, the Reality upon Whom all that is, including man, depends, the beginning and the end. One God in Three Divine Persons, Father of Whom we are called to be sons, Son Incarnate of Whom we are brothers, Holy Spirit, the source of our highest inspiration for truth and love. The antithesis of this idea is atheism - the cornerstone of the opposition, the one basic reason that Communism is evil. No God, no creation, no providence, no spiritual reality, no freedom for good or evil, no ultimate beyond time, no higher norm for law, no eternal sanction for justice, no real basis for charity, no glimmer of immortality, no rights that are inalienable, no dedication that is divine, no order beyond nature, no meaning beyond matter. Here is opposition of ideas that brooks no compromise. You are for God or against Him, He is the center of human life or man is his own center. If God has spoken, if He has established an economy of salvation, then this is the all important truth. Man can deny reality, truth, the good - but then he must create his own substitutes for these realities. And ~~then~~ he must live with his substitutes - and ultimately reality, truth, and the good will emerge to answer the anguished cry of a miserable humanity that pays the awful price of this denial.

Secondly, there is the truth of man, made in the image and likeness of God, made to glory in truth, made to love what is good and to enjoy beauty. Not the self sufficient man of the naturalists, not the earthbound man of the materialists, but man who possesses dignity and immortality as a son of God and brother of Christ, man with all the inalienable rights he needs to act humanly, man fallen and yet redeemed, man endowed with divine life in his spirit through the grace of Christ, man who is a microcosm of the whole created universe, man whose spirit is free to range the universe, to love God and all else in God, man who shares the passion of Christ and the triumph of the Risen Christ. And then there is the man of the Communists: akin only to the animals in his body, slave of the state, knowing only what can be seen and felt and sensed, determined by blind economic force, made to believe that anarchy is order, force is freedom, error is truth and slavery is liberation. Man with no hope beyond bread and the reign of the proletariat under the Commissars, man not a little less than the angels, but just a little above the beasts.

Here again is an uncompromising conflict of ideas. We are

either on one side, or on the other. Armies may wage war, diplomats may parlay, boundaries may be shifted, but in the end it is the idea that will win or lose. And it is only the truth that will set men free.

We might have lived in a different age, or not at all. We might have engaged ourselves in work of less significance or importance than education. But, in the Providence of God, we live today. We are engaged in this work, and the only important question to ask ourselves is this: are we equal to the historical moment we face. Can we find within ourselves that burning commitment to the truth of God and His revelation, the consecration to the truth of man as we know him, and can we engender in a new generation of students a love of these basic truths, a commitment to what is good for man in the sight of God, a generosity to serve God and men for a resolution of the present conflict in modern society. We do not pray today that somehow all crises will miraculously cease, for crisis is the pattern of history and always will be. We only ask, humbly and confidently, that we may be worthy of the truth that is ours, for those on the side of truth are on the side of God, and, ultimately, of victory. May Mary, Seat of Wisdom, guide us on our way this year.