

(Address given by the Reverend Theodore M. Hesburgh, C.S.C., President, University of Notre Dame, at Commencement Exercises, The University of Wyoming, June 1, 1964)

### OUR STAKE IN AMERICA

The greatest shock of this past academic year was the assassination of President Kennedy. In the aftermath of the initial disbelief, most students recalled one statement of his, which more than any other, seems to characterize his life and their own aspirations: "Do not ask what your country can do for you, but ask what you can do for your country."

If this is something that every American should ask, I take it that, with much more reason, it is an appropriate question for those who have just completed their education in one of our country's fine universities.

This past month of May, I had the opportunity of spending some time in the Soviet Union, specifically in their present and past capitols of Moscow and Leningrad, formerly called St. Petersburg. More than ever before in my life, the blessing that is America became real for me in startling clarity. Words like "the free society", "democracy", "religious liberty", "government of the people", we have heard so often that their inner meaning becomes vague or even empty. Just as health is best appreciated when one is

sick, we can best appreciate our own country when seeing another one quite different from it, one which lacks many of the great realities we take for granted.

Winging home from there, and thinking of you and of this coming affair, it seemed to me that something we might best think about together, at least for a few moments, is our stake in America. Taking America for granted will not keep America what it already is, or help America become even greater as it must. Just enjoying what we have is a childish, immature, and selfish attitude when what we have has been won at the price of so much blood, sweat and tears. And so, President Kennedy's question returns: "What can you do for your country?"

Up to this point in your lives, everyone else has been working to help you to be someone worthwhile. But while others can do for you, no one can be for you. Now is the time for you to assess what has happened: what and who you are, and what in turn you can now do for yourself, your country, and your world. But, I stress again, before you can do something, you must be something.

What you are is largely determined by your values, your goals, what

you think is important, what you are determined to live for, and, if needs be, to die for. Your values make you someone worthwhile or, if you lack real values, someone not very much worthwhile. What should be the values of a good American today? It may be presumptuous of me to suggest some values to you. Ultimately, you have to choose your own, but since I have to give the speech, let me have my say and, in the best academic tradition, you may disagree if you have good reasons to do so.

It seems to me that your first value as a university graduate should be a respect for yourself as a person, endowed with a mind capable of knowing the truth and a will free to follow the truth. These two great human endowments are what make you a person instead of an animal or a thing. Respect for yourself as a person, means that you use your intelligence and your freedom to be worthwhile as a person.

All of this may sound much too philosophical to be real, so allow me to illustrate what I really mean. There are many Americans today who use their minds as passive blotters rather than as active, questioning agents. The blotter mentality yields only opinions based upon what others say, in

the newspapers or on television, not deep convictions born of your own thought and reflection. The blotter mentality is an easy prey to prejudice, to superficial attitudes, to purely sentimental reactions to the great realities of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

The blotter mentality takes its ideas on life and love from the Ladies Home Journal, the Saturday Evening Post, or, even worse, from Playboy Magazine. Its idea of responsible citizenship hardly gets beyond the Boy Scout oath -- great for teenagers, but a little thin for university graduates; its idea on what makes life worth living comes from Madison Avenue with all its shiny, cellophane packaged products which delight the eye, but hardly stimulate one to heroism. As President Johnson said recently, we should be more concerned with the quality of our goals than the quantity of our goods.

America was not created by the blotter mentality, but by those strong minds and wills that wrote the Constitution, the Bill of Rights, and the Federalist Papers. They had such strong convictions about this country that they were not afraid to pledge their lives, their possessions, and their sacred honor to proclaim what they believed to be true.

What was established in 1776 cannot be maintained and strengthened

in 1964 by anything less strong or less committed. When I suggest that you really respect yourself as a person when you use your freedom intelligently to learn what you stand for, and why, I am really saying that many of the goals held out to you today by what Galbraith calls our American affluent society are not really worthwhile or ultimately satisfying to you as a person.

If the sum of your desires as you graduate is simple material success: a lot of money, a comfortable life, a minimum of service to your local, national, and international community, pleasure, fun and games -- then at least you have clear values, easily defined, but not worthy of what is required of you to be a significant person, and certainly not adequate to what America and the world today requires for its well being and, indeed, for its survival as anything more than a jungle or a waste land.

So much then for a fundamental value: such respect for yourself as an individual, never to be repeated, human person that you determine to use responsibly that which makes you a person -- your intelligence and your freedom of choice: not to be pushed into this or that position without thinking it through, not a prey to the superficial values of the day, not

to be at the mercy even of your own innate prejudices or emotions, but a person who thinks and chooses intelligently, and a person who is concerned with the inner spiritual realities that give substance to life's meaning.

Another value vitally needed in our day is a passion for justice. America is in the midst of another great and basic revolution: to see, in Lincoln's stirring words, whether a nation conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal can survive.

The true thrust of this revolution may at times be blurred by the side shows that accompany it, but make no mistake about its vital importance, and the basic fact that you are involved, for better or for worse, in its eventual outcome. You will not be involved for better, unless one of your vital values is a passion for justice.

What does a passion for justice mean specifically for you? It means that your respect for yourself as a person created in the image and likeness of God, intelligent and free, must be matched by your respect for every other living human person, here and everywhere, whatever superficial differences may make him or her seem different than you. A passion for

justice means that you are willing to get involved to see that justice becomes a reality for everyone in our day, but especially for the poor and oppressed. Justice practically means equality of opportunity for everyone: to get educated to the fullness of one's talents and aspirations; to take part in the political order by free voting and office holding; to be employed according to one's competence and to be advanced according to one's accomplishments; to live where one's heart desires and one's means permit; to have access to the normal facilities of civilized human living; to be accorded the same treatment as everyone else by the instrumentalities of justice in our society. Anything less than this is not to be accepted as a human person, not to have the opportunity to develop one's personality to the full.

It is no secret that millions of Americans have less than this measure of justice accorded to them in our day. It is also no secret that unless many of us care enough to do something about it, to the fullest of our capabilities, this travesty of our Constitution and Bill of Rights will continue to our shame as a nation. No court pronouncement nor Congressional law nor State enactment will of itself balance the scales of justice in our

times. The problem is personal to each American who suffers injustice, the solution must also be personal, since it is persons who ultimately promote justice or inflict injustice.

You may be shocked when the oppressed cry: "Freedom now!" Just put yourself in their places. Would you settle for justice for your grandchildren, or do you want justice for yourself today? If you were caught in the web of poor education, lack of economic opportunity, the last hired and the first fired, even for menial jobs, poor housing and degrading neighborhoods, shamed a dozen times every day because whatever your quality as a person, you could not eat or rest or sleep where others can, if this were your lot, would you cry "Freedom now"? And would you consider this impatience if your cry came a hundred years after you had been declared free?

This is not happening on Mars. It is happening in your country, and so if you ask "What can I do for my country?", I answer, be filled with a passion for justice and a willingness to get involved to promote justice wherever it is lacking.

And this is not merely -- even though it is dramatically -- a question



of race. A whole block of New Yorkers recently stood by and watched a young woman get stabbed to death -- because they didn't want to get involved.

Justice, like charity, begins at home, in your own life. Lack of integrity, cheating, lying, grafting -- all of these are manifestations of personal injustice that erode the very personal roots of America's greatness. Again, one must cherish justice in one's own life as a sterling value before attempting to promote justice for others. The test remains. And all the long hot Summer ahead of us, above the noise of much tiresome and foolish debate in the Senate, above the turmoil of sit-ins, tear gas, cattle prods, and fire hoses, the burning question is asked of us by all the world: Is America really free, the true home of equality of opportunity for all? Each of us is involved, whether we like it or not, in the ultimate answering of that question.

Still another value that I would commend to you today is the capacity for personal commitment and dedication to a cause that transcends your own convenience or comfort. This value, too, has relevance to President Kennedy's question: "What can you do for your country?" Commitment and dedication are, of course, the heart and soul of the great professions -- law, medicine, the

priesthood or ministry, and teaching. In fact, a profession might best be defined as a dedication to the good of others -- rather than to one's own selfish convenience. Of course, there are selfish lawyers, doctors, priests, ministers, and teachers. But theirs is not the splendor of the profession. They use and grasp, rather than give of themselves.

Apart from the great professions, there are no dearth of other opportunities for service to mankind today. One thinks of social service, the vast range of private and public endeavors for doing good. One thinks, at your age, almost instinctively of the Peace Corps.

I recall with great inner satisfaction a young man from your State, James Dungan of Casper, who trained at Notre Dame for one of the first Peace Corps groups going to Chile. I visited Jim down there, in a Mapoche Indian reservation village named Chol-Chol where he worked for two years, very effectively bringing the wonders of modern agriculture and marketing to an ancient people who are immeasurably better off today because of his dedicated and valiant efforts. Jim introduced new cash crops and taught the Indians how to market them effectively. He instigated the planting of 300,000 Monterrey Pines to check erosion and provide firewood in a chilly climate.

He opened up isolated villages by building new roads in an ingenious manner paying the Indian workmen with surplus American food for themselves and their hungry families. He left his mark where few Americans had been before, just as the first settlers left their mark on Wyoming in the early days. Jim has returned to Chile this past year to continue his efforts and, incidentally, to promote international understanding by marrying a lovely Chilean girl who visited your beautiful State this year.

Jim's companion in Chol-Chol, a Notre Dame graduate named Jim Fitzgerald from Chicago, married their other Peace Corps co-worker, Nurse Terry Atwood of Indianapolis. Jim and Terry have now bought a farm out here in Riverton where Jim is teaching school on another reservation -- American Indians this time -- while Terry continues to nurse the needy. And so the romance of dedication and service goes on, adding new dimensions to the American dream that it might become a new and shining reality in our day. These young people have found out what they can do for their country and they are doing it.

I would like to summarize my remarks today by recalling to you an historical incident that somehow unifies much that I have been saying: A

hundred years ago last year, in 1863, President Lincoln signed two great documents: the Emancipation Proclamation and the Morrill Act creating land-grant universities in all the States of the Union. While Wyoming was not yet a State, your university was to be chartered twenty-three years later anticipating Statehood by four years.

These two significant acts of President Lincoln, justice for those in bondage and higher educational opportunity at the heart of America, are still seeking for their deep and ultimate meaning. Emancipation today has a broader meaning, applying to a worldwide community of mankind, much of which still endures the bondage of ignorance, sickness, hunger, homelessness, and grinding poverty that strikes hopelessness into the heart of man. What universities have meant to the growth and development of America, they now must begin to mean to all a world that aspires to a better life, a new emancipation from the ills that have oppressed mankind since his advent on this earth.

The path from Lincoln to Kennedy, while stretching over a century in time and increasingly across a whole world in space, is always upward and in the same true direction of hope, opportunity, and justice. It may have occurred to you that the two American Presidents whose words I have

quoted today were both cut down by an assassin's bullet in the midst of their work. Their stake in America was their very life. They gave all they had to give. While their murder seems senseless to us, does it not stand forever as a reminder that while our lives are before us, enriched by all that America and these great men have made possible, we must in our days continue the work that they began. We are America and America cannot be more or less than we are. Each generation faces anew the task of commitment and dedication to what is true and good in our blessed land, as we know and love it. Each new generation must find its own path of service and sacrifice. Each class of graduates from our many universities must justify again the faith that made their education possible.

We need no demonstration that we have, through no merit of our own, inherited something of great value in America. We must, however, demonstrate that these values we enjoy here do indeed exist in our own lives and that we cherish them enough to share them with the world.

By a strange paradox, I believe that the quality of life in America is largely dependent upon our ability to share our blessings with others less fortunate. Our Lord highlights this by saying that we must lose our life to

gain it, that it is more blessed to give than to receive. I cringe when our President proposes a minimal three and half billion dollars in foreign aid, and the leaders of Congress propose to chop a billion from it, leaving little more than a billion in non-military assistance to a world in want. How does this reflect the quality of generosity in America -- little more than a billion to help others while we spend six billion on cigarettes, twelve billion on liquor, twenty billion on gambling, and Lord knows how much more entertaining ourselves.

The good society must be good to others as well as to itself. Even more than money, the world today needs our personal help, to educate, to feed, to house, to cure, to emancipate. You who have been blessed will bless others or will hoard for yourselves what you have received. The quality of America is the quality of your lives, your generosity, your idealism, your capacity for dedication and service, here and abroad.

It is especially you, who share the enlightened heritage of the university and its learning, who must now take up the torch that will bring the light of hope into the surrounding darkness. This is the real challenge of our times, your challenge, your stake in our beloved America: Your

respect for what you have to give as a person, the service of your intelligence by freely choosing to serve, the respect you grant others, not as beggars, but as brothers needing your help to achieve true freedom and justice, the hope that you make possible for those who have almost forgotten how to hope, the splendor of America that you do not just enjoy, but bring to all who lack it, here and abroad. Many are the paths that lead to greatness, for individuals and nations. You must choose your own, realizing that you yourself and America will be enriched or cheapened by your choice. Wherever your path leads you, may it bring you to the true happiness that comes only to those who have learned that the measure of love is to love God and men without measure.