

(Address given by the Reverend Theodore M. Hesburgh, C.S.C., President, University of Notre Dame, at the Illinois Rally for Civil Rights, Soldier Field, Sunday, June 21, 1964)

For the past six and a half years, the United States Commission on Civil Rights has made extensive studies on the matter of equal opportunity all across the United States, North and South, East and West. Our findings fill more than twenty volumes. With the passage of the Civil Rights legislation by the United States Senate this past week, over eighty per cent of our proposed recommendations have been written into law. Senator Dirksen of Illinois put it well when he said in the final speech before the vote on cloture: "Stronger than all the armies is an idea whose time has come. This is an idea whose time has come. It will not be denied nor stayed."

This is not to say that an idea is automatically accepted or realized once it is written into law. Never in the history of our country did a law take so much time to pass through the tangled web of Senate debate. For the fifth time in the history of our country, cloture was invoked, this time to end the longest filibuster in the Senate's history, the first time that cloture has ended a debate on civil rights. Yes, the end is in sight where this law is concerned. In September of 1957, the Congress, which established our Commission on Civil Rights, passed the first Civil Rights law in more

than eighty years. Now, six and a half years later, we have a third Civil Rights law -- the most comprehensive one yet, one unimaginable in 1957, hardly possible even a year or so ago.

What has made the difference, what has accelerated the legislative process? One simple but very important fact: people have become concerned about equal opportunity in America. What happened during the long years -- over a century of time -- since the Emancipation Proclamation? Not very much, because people generally were unconcerned, blind to the inhuman and unchristian and immoral implications of inequality.

Then there came an avalanche of new interest in human freedom after the war. More than a billion people, about a third of the earth's population, became members of new sovereign nations. The world became a vast new ideological battlefield, called the cold war in which democracy and its opposite, totalitarianism, had to contend for the allegiance of these new free nations -- mostly colored people. We in America found ourselves the leader of democracy -- government of the people, for the people, by the people. In this new role of world leadership, we found ourselves living a lie. Our Declaration of Independence proclaimed a profound truth, fundamental to all

democratic government, that all men, under God, are created equal and have equal rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

During more than fifty meetings of the United States Commission on Civil Rights, I have learned that millions of our people do not, in fact, enjoy these equal rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. It was for this reason that we have, as a Commission, declared what was lacking in the laws of our land to insure equality of opportunity for all. Now we shall have such a law -- not perfect -- but a large step forward.

Let us realize today that while the law establishes a clear new ideal of what must be done to realize the ^{desired} ideal of our Constitution and Bill of Rights, law of itself is only half an answer. The head establishes the law, but the heart must respond to the ideal that law proclaims. A long road is still ahead of us, and each of us must walk this road, to the fullest of our ability, if America is to be in reality the land of the free and the home of the brave.

No one can proclaim ultimate wisdom in pointing to the road ahead. But I do have two suggestions, one generally addressed to Whites, and another generally addressed to Negroes -- both addressed to Americans who want in their lifetime to build America together, as only we can build it in our times.

My first suggestion will appear too simple to many Whites who might be disturbed by the explosiveness of the present situation. The suggestion is simply this: All we cherish at the base of the great dream of America today demands a dedication to the dignity of man, the God-given dignity of every human being. And what is the meaning of human dignity in our times? This, at the very least, that every human being be given equal opportunity to develop all those human qualities bound up in the wonderful expression of enjoying equal rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. This means at the very least that all Americans, whatever their race, religion, color, or national origin, be given equal opportunity to participate in the political life of our nation by voting freely or holding political office; that every American have the equal opportunity of developing his human talents through all levels of education; that every American have equal opportunity of working where his capabilities qualify him or her, that he be advanced as his performance indicates he should; that every American be able to live where his means permit and his heart desires; that every American be free to partake of whatever public accommodations are common to civilized living in America; that every American be equal before

the bar of justice; and that every American participate in the instrumentalities that administer justice in our land. Whites cannot grant less than this, in their hearts, without condemning other Americans to second class citizenship. And, if we need further motivation, let us ponder the words of Our Lord: "Whatsoever you do to one of these, my least brethren, you do to Me. Do unto others, as you would have others do unto you." If we claim life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness for ourselves, we must grant it to others. Our best and ultimate goal, heaven, is unsegregated. Why then claim segregation during the few years of our passage through time? God is not mocked.

My second suggestion is generally directed towards Negro Americans, and I concede that it might come with better grace from Dr. Martin Luther King than from me. In any case, I am not saying anything that he has not already said many times over.

Equal opportunity is coming more and more -- even in the citadels of greatest resistance. It will be meaningless unless Negro Americans use these new opportunities with great persistence and effort and pride. Every Negro who does not prize his human dignity, who does not respond to opportunity,

is a traitor to his race. Be proud to be a Negro in this hour of decision. Ask for nothing that you have not deserved. Accept nothing that you have not earned. Demand respect most of all by being worthy of respect, because you have done everything possible to be a good human being, by voting intelligently, by getting all the education available, by being good fathers and mothers, and good neighbors too, by working hard, and diligently and responsibly, by being not only as good as White Americans, but better. We can learn from you. Human dignity is yours. God gave it to you. Respect it and cultivate it and be proud that in this decisive hour it is yours to proclaim by your lives. You have every right to resent inequality and patronizing indulgence. But you move forward so much more quickly by proving that you are on all counts worthy of respect and loyal to all that makes America great.

President Kennedy had a message for all of us in his Inaugural Address. While the occasion is different, and he is gone, there is a spirit to his words which is no less relevant today, at this time and in this place.

"Now the trumpet summons us again -- not as a call to bear arms, though arms we need -- not as a call to battle, though embattled we are --

but a call to bear the burden of a long twilight struggle, year in and year out, 'rejoicing in hope, patient in tribulation'.....

"In the long history of the world, only a few generations have been granted the role of defending freedom in its hour of maximum danger I do not believe that any of us would exchange places with any other people or any other generation. The energy, the faith, the devotion which we bring to this endeavor will light our country and all who serve it -- and the glow from that fire can truly light the world.....

"Let the word go forth from this time and place ... that the torch has been passed to a new generation of Americans unwilling to witness or permit the slow undoing of those human rights to which this nation has always been committed and to which we are committed (let us say anew) today, at home and around the world.

"With a good conscience our only sure reward, with history the final judge of our deeds, let us go forth 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."