

(Address given by the Reverend Theodore M. Hesburgh, C.S.C., President, University of Notre Dame, at the 79th Annual Commencement, Temple University, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, June 17, 1965)

Every life has its peaks and valleys. Today is a peak for all of you. And from this peak happily you may look in many directions, for, as you leave Temple University today, you pick a destination. I am not going to speak to you about what that destination is or might be. This is a matter of your choice. But I would like to say something of the present day world within which all of your destinations will be encompassed. Wherever you go after today, whatever you do, the meaningfulness of your destination, and your life indeed, will in large measure depend upon how you understand and relate to the great revolutionary currents that characterize our times.

Now obviously, one cannot enlarge on so broad a theme in the few moments available. I, too, must make my choice of currents. I have often been intrigued, especially after reading Arnold Toynbee, about the diversity of challenges that have faced man in the diverse ages of mankind. For untold centuries during prehistoric times, man's main challenge was to stay alive, to exist. In civilized ages, this challenge persisted, but the newer challenges were always of a higher, ascending order --

from the purely physical to the intellectual, the moral, and the spiritual. Behind all the great revolutionary challenges of modern times there is always an idea.

The central idea that most challenges our nation today, indeed the world, is the idea of human equality. As a people, we too stand on a peak and must choose a destination for all of our people. I have heard our three Presidents of the last decade say: This is our central moral problem, this is the greatest domestic issue facing our country today.

It seems strange at times that this should be so for us, after the beginning we made as a nation with our wondrous Declaration of Independence, the promise of our Constitution and Bill of Rights, the marvelous Federalist Papers of so long ago. Bruce Catton says that this was also the central issue of the Civil War, although many will still deny it. Thomas in his wonderfully readable Life of Lincoln tells how it dawned upon the President one day, when the City of Washington was beleaguered by the army of the Confederacy and the war seemed lost, that freedom for all Americans was indeed the moral issue at stake.

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Thomas says that Lincoln made a vow at that moment that if Washington might be spared, he would on the first possible occasion proclaim the emancipation of the slaves. When that moment came, Lincoln's whole Cabinet opposed the idea, saying that it would harden resistance in the South and prolong the war. But Lincoln, in the famous phrase of Thoreau, constituted himself a "majority of one" and issued the Emancipation Proclamation.

In the hundred years that followed, true human equality was enshrined in Lincoln's words, but not realized in America. During the centenary year of 1963, President Kennedy asked our Commission on Civil Rights to issue a history of those hundred years. In preparing the volume, we were mainly appalled at what did not happen during the century following the Emancipation Proclamation.

Now I think one may safely say that more has happened in the past ten years than in the ninety that preceded them. With the passage of this year's Civil Rights Bill, one may add that more has happened and will happen this year than in all the past ten years of progress. At least, in the four federal Civil Rights Acts since 1957, we have

proclaimed in modern context what our national ideal of human equality is. Some have said that law solves nothing. I do not agree. Law is fundamentally educative. If law is respected, the ideal gradually becomes real, but this is a longer process, creating what sociologists call "social expectancy" or what I would call a Moral Consensus.

We have come to our present situation through a tortured path, clouded over by national shame, surrounded by every kind of human anguish. All the human heights and depths were with us at once, heroism and brutality, honor and dishonor, courage and weakness. It was a classic case of God writing straight with crooked lines, right overcoming might, and a national conscience recognizing what it could and should do, only after long decades of vacillation, moral compromise, and tattered rationalizations embedded in myths.

The great temptation facing America today is, I believe, to heave a sigh of relief, to say now we have a law, now it is done. It has only begun, in fact, and you will now understand what I meant when I began by saying that wherever you go, whatever you do, the meaningfulness

of your destination, of your life indeed, will depend in large measure upon how you understand and relate to this great challenge of our times. In a sense, we must now descend from the national to the individual conscience.

It should be said that this second phase may require quite different methods than the first. Massive demonstrations, peaceful civil disobedience and all the do-ins may well inform the national conscience to act as it has. Informing individual consciences is quite another task. It requires far subtler methods, educative in general scope, hopefully religious in motivation, inspiration that is expressed most meaningfully by national and local leaders, mothers and fathers, friends and associates. Methods that begot the revolution of equality may hinder the evolution of civic friendship and accord.

Understanding must come first. There will be no true human equality, or equality of opportunity for all Americans, until we sense as individuals the true meaning of human dignity. This dignity does not originate in law. Law only recognizes what we all possess as creatures made in the image and likeness of God. God Himself respects

the intelligence and the freedom of each individual human person. We should not do less.

What does it mean to have an inalienable right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness? At the very least it means that our integrity as persons, not things, be recognized, that each of us have access to all we need to develop to our fullest as persons. It means in a homely way that a person should have access to the education that will best develop his talents, access to a job that befits his capabilities and legitimate ambition, access to decent housing in a wholesome neighborhood as his heart desires and his means permit. It means that every American should be free to participate in the democratic government that rules him. Negatively, it means that no American should be humiliated a dozen times a day and treated as an inferior kind of person just because he was not born with the color of the majority.

It is easy to enunciate these rights, but until every American is convinced in his heart that this is the true meaning of America, and lives accordingly, our national shame will continue. No one can escape this challenge. Like it or not, we are all involved. Your profession

is involved, your neighborhood is involved, your club is involved, your religion is involved, your schools -- all of them -- are involved, your intelligence, your freedom, your inner voices, your conscience, your country -- you are involved.

In this city, I would like to add that something else is involved -- brotherly love, or, if you prefer, compassion. It would be good for all of us if we could spend a few days of our lives as Negroes in America - North, South, East, and West. If we could only feel the weight of traditionally imposed inferiority, the frustration of every human aspiration, the infuriating sense of being humiliated or patronized in turn, the necessity of always having to be twice as good to be accepted at all, the insulting implications that nag and prejudice one's every action, being always the goat, if not the clown, the hopelessness of it all. Then perhaps we would know the meaning of compassion and the necessity of civic friendship, of brotherly love, if there is to be a final solution to this problem.

St. Augustine once said, "Love God and do what you will."  
One might paraphrase the answer to our problem the same way, "Love the Negro, man, woman and child, and justice will come."

Toynbee spoke not only of challenges. He also studied responses to challenges, and laid down the basic rule that no nation, no civilization can endure without meeting its challenges with proper responses. America will always have its share of bigots, of unjust zealots, of those who lack understanding and compassion, but one might hope that they will be few among the hundreds of thousands of you who graduate this year. As you set out from your peak today, America sets out too, to keep its long rendezvous with destiny, to respond at long last to this inner challenge of human equality and human opportunity. All of you can help America take a lengthy stride towards this goal in your lifetime. I trust and pray that you will.