

(Address given by the Reverend Theodore M. Hesburgh, C.S.C., President, University of Notre Dame, at the Commencement Exercises, Manchester College, North Manchester, Indiana, Monday, June 12, 1967)

SERVICE: THE GREAT MODERN PRAYER

I would like to begin this morning by quoting to you something that may sound familiar:

"What is happening to our young people? They disrespect their elders. They disobey their parents. They ignore the laws. They riot in the streets inflamed with wild notions. Their morals are decaying. What is to become of them?" Plato (427-347 B.C.)

Those words were written originally in Greek, by Plato, about 400 years before the birth of Christ. Some may say that the message never changes, that the older generation never understands the younger, and the younger generation never takes too kindly to the advice of its elders. Today we put all of this in sociological jargon and speak of a generational gap - an abyss of misunderstanding between the young and the old, or vice versa if you wish. I am not so sure that we cannot communicate to one another. I shall readily admit that the older generation (which is everyone over thirty they say at Berkeley) often fails to practice what it preaches, which makes its words often sound like nonsense, or worse,

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hypocrisy, to the young. We should also probably admit that the world is changing so rapidly today, that almost everyone, young and old, must admit to a certain confusion that does not make communication any easier.

All of this makes the task of the commencement address more than somewhat difficult this year. When you add present confusion to the generational gap, and stir into this mix the fact that I am a Catholic priest speaking to graduates of a Church of the Brethren College, you may wonder what to expect. Then when I propose to speak about service as prayer, you may wonder even more.

Well, I might best begin by quoting someone else, a great Protestant theologian and musician and doctor and humanitarian, Dr. Albert Schweitzer, who left several promising careers behind him in Europe to bury himself in Lambarene', an obscure spot on a turgid river in what was then French Equatorial Africa, so that he might serve the forgotten Africans there.

Dr. Schweitzer once spoke to a group such as yourselves. I've lost the text so that I shall paraphrase it as I remember his words:

"I do not know where you are going, or what you will do in life, but I do know this: that you will never fulfill your potential or be really happy as human persons until you have learned how to serve your fellow man, especially in his human needs, wherever you go, whatever you do."

Here is an older man who really says something he has practiced and that qualifies him to come through to you. His advice is not different than that of Our Lord's to pray always. When we serve, for Christian reasons, we pray by our very lives.

Let me illustrate this in a context that is of your generation. We have a group of students at Notre Dame who spend the Summer in Latin America doing a variety of tasks to help the unfortunate there. You may be surprised to learn that one of these students was the captain of this year's National Championship football team, Jim Lynch.

One of Jim's companions, whom I shall not name as this is a highly personal incident, had a real crisis of faith and a real moment of inspiration while working down there in Latin America - a kind

of personal prayer growing out of despair and anguish. He was walking to his duty station early one morning, along the shore of Lake Titicaca in the altiplano of Peru near Puna. The early morning mists were rising from the water and he was shivering in the high altitude chill which bites to the bone.

As he passed a miserable Indian hut, a little girl ran out to see him. He got down on one knee to talk to her, which was difficult because, like her Inca ancestors she spoke mostly Quechua and very little Spanish. He was shaken by what he saw, a small creature with only a rag of a dress against the cold, hungry, poor, running nose and bare feet, cut off from all the culture of the past and the promise of the future. Her lot was a miserably hard life and an early death.

How can there be a God, he thought, if she and millions like her are cut off from all the good things of life that I and so many others take for granted? How can we believe that the Lord Jesus came to save her if she will never know Him or His good message of salvation?

Then it came to him that God or Jesus had to come to her through others like himself, that his education and his profession - he

hopes to be a doctor - were both a personal service to humanity and a personal prayer to Our Lord who said: "Whatsoever you do for one of these, my least brethren, you did it to Me. For I was hungry and you gave Me to eat, thirsty and you gave Me to drink, naked and you clothed Me, in prison and you visited Me".

Education, profession, service, prayer - all become something infinitely more important to that young student that morning - and all because of a little Indian girl, a chance encounter, a compassionate heart, and, of course, the saving grace of God, the Spirit who breathes where He will, this time by the shore of a lake, again in the early morning, not Galilee but Titicaca, but again a young man who, like St. John, was able to say in deepest recognition: "It is the Lord".

Now let me back up and come around by a different direction. There are a lot of very learned professors today who are so much enamored of the secular world that they take a very dim view of your College of my University, insofar as they are Christian. One of them, Dr. Harvey Cox, has said that the very attempt to create Christian colleges in America was bankrupt before it began.

I can argue with his idea, but in the last analysis, only you can disprove it - because you, in your most secular generation are products of a Christian college. If there is nothing different or distinct about you or your lives, nothing of special value for this secular world that is given special witness because of what you have learned here, then people will believe that maybe he is right and Manchester College and Notre Dame ought to close their doors or change their whole approach to education.

Young people today are, I believe, fiercely honest, very sincere, and suspicious of empty double talk. At least, I take you to be such, so I shall lay out very explicitly what I think should especially characterize those who have studied all the secular subjects studied everywhere else, but in a Christian context here. I put the case in three words: Commitment, consecration, and compassion.

Commitment. In many ways, this is a bad word today. Young people are told to be cool, which I take to be a modern way of saying, uncommitted. But I cannot for the life of me see how the convinced Christian can be cool in the face of Our Lord's life and words and Passion and Death and Resurrection. He said, "You are either with Me or against Me".

He said: "I have compassion on the multitude". He said: "Take up your cross and follow Me".

We must, of course, do all of this in the modern context, meeting Him and serving Him wherever we find and serve our fellow man in material or spiritual needs. It may be in a classroom, in a sick room, on an airplane, on a battlefield, at a party, even on the shores of Lake Titicaca. But we will never meet Him or serve Him in any Christian sense unless we are committed deeply to Him as our Saviour, and to His words as our deepest inspiration, and to His grace as our deepest need, and, of course, to prayer as our living daily contact with Him, the prayer of thought, word, and deed.

Mankind is served today for a variety of other reasons ranging from secular humanism to material gain. But if there is to be a Christian presence in this world, it must be manifested quietly, efficiently, competently, and generously by educated persons who are committed to Christ Our Saviour, as well as to science, to medicine, to education, to all the secular forms of truth. This is a very special challenge to you - to serve better, more generously, more wholeheartedly, more humanely - because you

are committed, because you believe that in serving others you are serving Christ - and that is your prayer, too.

Compassion. This means that you have the capacity to suffer with those who suffer - whatever they suffer - physical pain, yes, but many other more difficult sufferings - injustice, loneliness, spiritual desolation, ignorance, blindness, passion, and all the rest. The compassionate do not condemn, do not patronize, do not look down from on high - they understand, they put out the helping hand, they bring Christ and they touch Christ in understanding and helping others. All the social service in the world is sterile and antiseptic and inhumane without compassion. All the education and professional service in the world is less effective if compassion does not enable it to get beyond the problem down to the person who is suffering. Even the homely realities, like marriage and family and neighborhoods, are somewhat empty without the personal component of compassion. And if one can study all the subjects that our Christian colleges and universities offer and emerge without compassion for all the personal suffering all around us in the world today, then we really have not lived up to the ideal that brought these institutions into



being. Here again, you are the truest test. You alone can make the greatest promise of your College true or false.

Consecration. This last test I put to you graduates today really summarizes everything else said thus far. Let us begin by admitting that the world as God made it is good, as He declared it to be. We need not be afraid of the world, or of ourselves, for we are God's creation. Consecration simply means that we recognize all that is true and good and beautiful in this world, and in ourselves, and that we consciously consecrate all this to Him. This is the opposite of secularization that, in a sense, consecrates the world to man instead of to God. Not that we Christians should cherish the world and man <sup>any</sup> ~~no~~ less than the secularist - we should cherish them and serve them even more in our act of consecrating ourselves and our world to God in prayer and service, which can be the same thing.

Now what does this mean to each of you? I return to Dr. Schweitzer and the Notre Dame student - no one, probably not even you, knows what life has in store for you after today. You cannot begin to guess all the places you will be, all the things you will do in the years ahead. All of this is really not too important in its specificity and

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particularity. What is ultimately important is the spirit and vitality that fill your life, wherever you are, whatever you do, the sense of consecration that inspires you and your life. Consecration means to make sacred. Whatever the claims of secularists in our day, I claim that there is nothing good, or true, or beautiful in your life, no human reality, no hour or day or year of yours that cannot be made sacred, a precious moment in the whole long history of the world's salvation, if you really want to make it so.

Someone wrote some time ago that you should cherish your college for you will never know what heartbreak, what sacrifice, what idealism, and what vision made it possible. I can think of no greater means of cherishing your College than to make of your whole life, from this day forward, a conscious act of commitment, compassion, and consecration. Nothing less will make the years that you have spent here worthwhile. Nothing more is needed to make of this graduation day a great reward to all those who rejoice with you today - your parents, your teachers, and yours truly who is so happy to have had the wonderfully ecumenical opportunity of joining your graduating class the easy way - by an honorary

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degree and these few moments of trying to say to you what to me makes life worthwhile - to any generation in any age, once Christ the Lord was born to be our Saviour, our Ideal, and our ever-present Inspiration along all the paths and byways of life. May the good Lord bless and keep you always in His care, and may your service to God and man, to God through man, be an inspiration to all who cross your path through life. This was my deepest prayer for all of you at Holy Mass this morning, and will continue to be my prayer for you, my classmates, across all the years yet to come.