

(Address given by the Reverend Theodore M. Hesburgh, C.S.C., President, University of Notre Dame, at the Fall Term Commencement, Michigan State University, East Lansing, December 7, 1968)

IN DEFENSE OF THE YOUNGER GENERATION

I am grateful to President John Hannah, the faculty, students, administration, and Trustees of Michigan State University for the wonderful opportunity of being with you today and of becoming an alumnus of this great institution. I must add that you have treated me better than another segment of Notre Dame that visits here occasionally in the Fall of the year for the seasonal Donnybrook in the stadium. Despite the outcome, our institutions have had many wonderful associations across the years. I have especially grown to admire your President who is, and has been, for many years one of America's best educational leaders and one of our most dedicated public servants. His eleven year Chairmanship of the United States Commission on Civil Rights, by appointment of three United States Presidents, will rank high in the annals of America's drive towards equality of opportunity for all of its citizens.

I would like to address you today in defense of the younger generation. I would like to begin with a quotation from a famous author: "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?" These words were written more than 2,300 years ago, by Plato, the Greek philosopher.

Another equally famous Greek philosopher, Aristotle, took an almost equally dim view of the young: "Young people have exalted notions, because they have not yet been humbled by life or learned its necessary limitations; moreover, their hopeful disposition makes them think themselves equal to great things. They would always rather do noble deeds than useful ones: their lives are regulated more by moral feelings than by reasoning -- all their mistakes are in the direction of doing things excessively and vehemently. They overdo everything -- they love too much, hate too much, and the same with everything else."

I begin thus today just to assure the older generation that the generational gap looks much the same at a distance of twenty-four centuries, and likewise to remind this younger generation that they did not invent youth and all that makes it both attractive and difficult. I would like to say of the younger generation what Frenchmen are purported to say of women: vive le difference -- long live the difference between generations. We need it. They do, too.

This is not to say that the difference between generations is always exactly the same -- even though Plato and Aristotle may strike a few responsive chords. For one thing, there are not only many more people around today -- about half of them are young people. Twenty years ago, there were thirty million Americans under twenty years of age. Today there are over eighty million Americans under twenty, and, in a few years, half of the population will be aged under twenty-five. This makes the younger generation more visible, more omnipresent, and, let's face it, a very substantial part personally of what America is. There is no reason

to believe that they will be satisfied to be a silent or passive part of America either. Nor should they be.

If, as Aristotle says, they love too much and hate too much, that's a whale of a lot of vehement love and hate. But the real question is: What do they love and hate? I suspect that they do not love excessively the world we have created, or at least allow to exist, and I suspect that they hate some things that are well worth hating and difficult to hate excessively: like war, inequality for millions of human beings on earth, poverty in the midst of affluence, hypocrisy in stating one set of values and following another, rhetoric instead of action, promises without fulfillment, empty words, qualities they often find in the adult generation. Maybe the most discouraging thing about youth is that every day they are getting older and, on days like today, they come of age, with the great temptation to become like everyone else, like us, to compromise with the world as it is and ultimately, alas, to become the unwilling target of their own children's ire, as they, the youth of yesteryear, begin to do the useful rather than the noble deeds they once dreamed about in their youth.

Maybe the world of youth is too good to be true and lasting. Maybe instead of being so concerned about the idealism, the generosity, and the vehemence of youth, we should rather mourn the fact that youth passes all too quickly into the grim life of adulthood, when we find it so difficult to really love what is good and hate what is evil, and lose the simplicity of youth that can so easily repeat the prayer of the great Hindu poet,

Rabindranath Tagore: "Lord, God, only let me make my life simple and straight, like a flute of reed, for Thee to fill with music".

During the past few months, I have visited over twenty large American cities, from Boston to Seattle, from Miami to San Francisco and Los Angeles, from Chicago and St. Louis to New Orleans and Dallas, attempting to raise money for higher education in general and Notre Dame in particular. A dismal task. Everywhere, the newsmen from press, television, and radio have asked me: "What's happening to this generation? Why the unrest, the protest, the revolt? Why pour so much effort and money into the education of a bunch of kooks?" I admit to a certain amount of unpriestly impatience at this line of questioning. Once in a New York press conference, I let myself go. "What you're really saying is that unless students are nice fellows like you, we shouldn't be interested in trying to educate them." "I didn't say that", the reporter countered. "Then what are you saying?", I asked. This drew a large silence. I started over again - on the offensive, Notre Dame-like, I confess. "What is so good about you or your world?", I asked this reporter. "Is there nothing to be uneasy about, nothing to protest, nothing to revolt against?" Another silence, with the unspoken question in his eyes: "What set him off?" I tried to explain it. We might begin by trying to understand what causes the unrest, the protest, the revolt of the young people today, as in so many past generations, but even more so today.

I think there are several immediate causes. First, the young people of today have grown up in an affluent society that prizes intelligence, that provides the best schooling that this country has ever seen. The affluence

of many of their parents has freed many of them from the grimy business of worrying where the next dollar is coming from. They have had more time to think, to discuss, to criticize, to read, to travel, to compare, to judge -- this is the stuff of which good education is made. And it does have consequences.

In their earlier years, these young people probably took the American dream seriously and uncritically to heart: One nation, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all. How often they recited it in grammar school, without thinking what it really means. Then, for many of them, as they began to think critically, the dream seemed to acquire some of the aspects of a nightmare: they learned that thirty million Americans, Negro, Mexican, Indian, poor white, but mostly black Americans, unlike them, attended inferior schools where twelve years of segregated education equaled only eight or nine years of the white school standard achievement. Partially because of this, much of the best of higher education was foreclosed for these deprived Americans. Then, they found that these thirty million represented twice as many unemployed and unemployable as whites, with the young non-white, four times as much. Black Americans, they found, generally live in the worst houses, in the worst section of our cities, and so were fated to continue to attend the worst schools which are located there, so that their frustration and lack of social mobility upward seem ever circular and inevitable.

Thus, the American nation they discovered is not indivisible, but clearly divisible into two nations: black and white, poor and affluent,

hopeful and hopeless. Liberty means one thing to the whites, the affluent, and the hopeful, another to the black, the poor, and the hopeless. Justice likewise.

And so this generation of the young began to doubt the sincerity of the slogan they had repeated so often. It was the dawn of disillusionment, a coming of age even in youth. What I say here of the white youngster is, of course, even more poignantly true of the black youngster. For a while, they marched together in the South, together sensed new confidence in the rightness of their cause, new power in what they were able to achieve by protest and organized action against what they knew to be wrong, much less un-American.

Then the blacks, at least many of the new leaders of the new power structure, called Black Power, decided to go it alone and the great majority of active, protesting white young people felt momentarily alienated again, with the loss of their newly-found cause of civil rights and their active participation in social change.

A new target was quickly found. Escalation gave greater visibility to the war in Vietnam, the draft bit more deeply into the company of the youth, the issues involved were more hotly debated nationally and internationally, and again the young found a new outlet for their newly-learned tactics and their yearning for personal involvement in a cause. They aimed indiscriminately at the obvious targets: draft cards, ROTC, Dow and napalm, induction centers, troop trains, and military recruiters. Even the flag took a beating at times, unfortunately, and patriotism, old style, almost became suspect in certain quarters.

Perhaps distracted or possibly annoyed by the noise of it all, too few of the elders really debated the issues or drew back from the mounting cost in lives and dollars. Few really asked about the morality of our national course in spending thirty billion dollars a year tearing up a plot of land and people, nowhere near the size and population of the State of California, while the whole wide world of dire human need and misery merited only two billion dollars annually in critical assistance, with the bulk of our technical assistance manpower concentrated in the same small plot of land that absorbed over a half million of our troops at war.

I have somewhat oversimplified and possibly overstated the problem, as do the young, but this was and is a real question of justice and morality that has many of our youth hung up as never before. This issue has poisoned the atmosphere of our campuses, has vitiated many other good and noble endeavors, has rocked our national political scene, complicated our foreign relations, and has more than anything else led to a deep and abiding frustration on the part of our youth.

It is one thing to disagree with compulsory military service, or to be disillusioned by the course of a particular war. But this generation is really hung up at the thought of having to take life and face death in a war that they not only do not like, but often abhor as alien to all that they think America should be doing in the world.

Some simply cop out, as the saying goes. They become conscientious objectors, or move to Canada or to the local equivalent of Haight-Asbury, taking refuge in drugs, or bizarre hairdoes, or love-ins, or the other

appurtenances of hippiedom. It should be said a very small number take this road which is, for the few that take it, the worst kind of blind alley and dead end. The great majority suffer in quiet frustration or erupt in occasional violence, or worry along hoping that somehow they will find a personal escape hatch in the walls that continue to close in around them.

It was all of this malaise over Vietnam that really triggered what I believe to be the final and probably most important act in the drama of the younger generation today: the campus revolt. Having been forced out of meaningful civil rights action, feeling themselves more or less helpless in the face of the Vietnam action which seemed to worsen despite all their protests, the students finally decided that maybe they should seek involvement and reform where they were -- in the colleges and universities. After thinking about it for awhile, some even found here the root cause of their alienation from an establishment or a society that they judged to be impersonal, often irrelevant, sometimes immoral, and generally more difficult to move than a cemetery. Again, one must avoid oversimplifications, for the targets for youthful criticism are many: their parents, neighborhoods, and cities, their church if they have not already disassociated themselves from it, their adult leadership from the President to their father, anyone exercising authority over them, even those faculty members or deans they judge as really disinterested in them and their lives and, especially, their hopes. You may ask at this juncture, how did it all get mixed up so quickly, how did the apathetic, disinterested generation of a decade ago suddenly get so critical, so ready to revolt against law and authority in any form, so quick to protest, to sit-in, to lie-in, to tear-up-in, to raise-hell-in?

How does a whole generation get so exercised, so suddenly, about the general state of society and humanity that they begin waving signs in Berkeley and end by tearing Columbia apart, bringing down the government in Belgium and closing 23 of the 27 Italian universities, immobilizing France and the all-powerful De Gaulle, and telling their elders all over the world that everything is going to change or else. However it happened, it is happening and the phenomenon is no longer local, but national and international. Pick up a newspaper in London, Berlin, Tokyo, New York, or Caracas this week and you will find that half of the news is related to the student revolt.

While all of this is explosive, it need not be judged as all bad, unless you begin by assuming that all is presently good in the world, and that is a very difficult assumption to make in this city on this day. An atomic bomb is bad if it destroys people, their homes, and their cities. But it is possible to control atomic energy and use it to accomplish a whole series of useful tasks.

This, it seems to me, is the opportunity that presently faces us today as we regard the revolt of the younger generation in the university. The world needs energy, imagination, concern, idealism, dedication, commitment, service. The world, with all its problems, gets all too little of these great human qualities from the older generation. The world also needs reasonable criticism and peaceful protest as a constant spur to progress and for the redress of many horrible inequities and injustices that perdure in the world at its best. The world needs to change its structures too, because, obviously, many of them are not producing the

climate in which justice is available to all, not to mention opportunity, which is even more important to the young.

The problem is that we have stimulated the young to hope for the best. Twenty years ago, the United Nations proclaimed the Universal Declaration on Human Rights, but it is still only a Declaration, not a fact for millions of human beings here and around the world.

Somehow, somewhere, we have to get the young back into the human family, as a working part of the establishment, if you will. The price for this may well be a different kind of establishment, but that may not be a bad idea either. Perhaps because I have spent all of my adult life in the world of the university it seems to me that here is a good place to begin for this is where the action presently is. After all, we in the universities have stimulated most of the ideas that set off this youthful explosion. We, better than any other part of the total establishment, should be able to devise the ways and means of involving the young in fruitful rather than destructive uses of their energy and their concern, their idealism and their generosity.

We might begin by devising new structures in the university for the active and meaningful participation of the students in their university life and education. We do this by creating on campus a real community in which students have a real and not a phony role. If they are dissatisfied with the education they are now getting, there ought to be ways for them to be heard and to have their ideas seriously considered by the faculty and administration. This does not mean that all their ideas are good or that their desires should always be compelling, and it certainly does not mean that their ideas should be forced through under threat of violence. Rather,

there should be a real dialogue which in itself is educative. One bit of advice our most active students need to hear from faculty today is that action is most fruitful when it is backed up, not by emotion, or mass hysteria, or noise, or violence, but by intelligent and competent leadership which is the fruit of a good education that is taken seriously during the years when it is available. Students need to hear that what seems most relevant to them today may be quite irrelevant ten years from now. Students need to hear that action without good ideas and real goals and true values is empty posturing, a truly juvenile distraction from doing what is most important to the young: getting a first-rate education.

The President of Yale University, Kingman Brewster, put this well:

"The tragedy of the highly-motivated, impatient young activist is that he runs the serious risk of disqualifying himself from true usefulness by being too impatient to arm himself with the intellectual equipment required for the solution of the problems of war and poverty and indignity. You and I have seen too many among our students of high promise squander their talent for a lifetime of constructive work at a high level, for the cheaper and transient satisfaction of throwing himself on some immediate barricade in the name of involvement. Posturing in the name of a good cause is too often the substitute for thorough thought or the patient doggedness it takes to build something The chance to make a constructive difference in the lives of others, not the full dinner pail, is the highest reward of a higher education. If the impatient, anti-intellectualism

of the radical left is not to seduce many of our best brains away from true usefulness, we and our faculties have to reassert again and again that emotional oversimplification of the world's problems is not the path to their solution."

I am in complete agreement with President Brewster, but, in defense of youth, we must see their side, too. They can buy this scheme of things if at least we elders really share their concerns, which should also be our concerns, and do something about them ourselves. We have to face head on and to discuss with students their concern for the relevancy of their education, and how we can improve our university structures to make them a more vital part of the learning community -- both inside and outside the classroom. We have to give them an alternative to violent and destructive protest by sharing their concern for meaning in life, and by creating with them right now a meaningful community in the university, with all of us working together to establish and maintain worthwhile goals, and values, and a vital expression of these in many university activities that are consonant with the university's role as a critic of society and an institution dedicated to the path of wisdom, and the achievement of justice for all, not just the favored few.

I am confident that this can be done if the elders have time for the young and if they both can learn to respect each other, and have greater tolerance for each other, and for the complementary rather than competitive roles that each can play in the university community. Students who like to learn by doing should give their elders credit for having learned something by what they have done, and it is not all bad. The Peace Corps, the Poverty

Program, the Teacher Corps, VISTA, new Civil Rights legislation, the disarmament treaty, tutoring programs in the inner city, the conquest of hunger -- all these were devised and launched by the elders, even though most of these programs were given new life and brighter spirit by the young. There can be many more such developments, and they will all make for better education and better community of life in the university. It is always better to revitalize a basically good system than to destroy it violently while having nothing with which to replace it. And, if that is true of our universities, it is even more true of our families, of our cities, of our nation and our world.

The whole point of my remarks today is that the young can and should contribute to man's perennial task of remaking the world, especially since they are half of the world that needs remaking. Neither half, young or old, can do it alone. We elders may at times grow restive at their prodding, protest, and revolt, and they may find us impossibly slow when we do not think we can remake anything by tomorrow morning, with or without their help. It is likely that history will repeat itself and the gap between the generations will never be completely bridged by understanding, but I like to believe that there are other workable bridges, at least more workable than anything in common use today, and their names are laughter and love. Indeed, I can think of no better way of redeeming this tragic world today than by love and laughter. Too many of the young have forgotten how to laugh, and too many of the elders have forgotten how to love. Would not the dark tragedy of our life be lightened if only we could all learn

to laugh more easily at ourselves and to love one another. It may sound quixotic, but I think this says a lot about the generation gap -- how to understand it and how to cure it while we still have time.