

(Address given by the Rev. Theodore M. Hesburgh, C.S.C., President, University of Notre Dame, at the Conference on Continuing Education and the University, Notre Dame, Indiana, Friday, January 8, 1971)

SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY AND CONTINUING EDUCATION

Social responsibility is a concept as old as Plato and as new as the latest student protest regarding local or national priorities. It is a concept particularly relevant to our age because never before in the history of mankind has man had such enormous potentials for social betterment or for social evil. We are today, more than ever before, responsible for the creation of great good for all mankind or, obversely, responsible for allowing an unprecedented inhumanity of man to man.

When one links the consideration of continuing education to that of social responsibility, one is obviously voting on the side of the angels and hoping that this education will be for man's greater good, the fruit of a greater sense of social responsibility rather than a source of irresponsible evil.

My main concern for this topic or theme is that it is too obvious, or so broad as to be meaningless to most people. One can only avoid these traps by trying to be either very practical or unusually original and wise. The former of these comes more easily to me, so may I begin on the surer ground.

I take it that somehow social responsibility is responsibility in the social context for something and must be geared to certain

social virtues and goals, mainly justice, equality of opportunity, social order as opposed to disorder -- but in a dynamic rather than static sense, the good life -- all that we encompass in America by the terms of life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness, peace -- again dynamically considered as the fruit of justice rather than the result of repression, and a whole host of other good and legitimate social goals for which man might be educated to be responsible. I also take it that we are speaking of the social responsibility of individual persons, although admittedly these individuals exist in a society, in fact, in a series of societies as so many concentric circles, and the totality of their perception or lack of perception of this sense of social responsibility as individuals will be reflected in the society as a whole or in a whole series of societies. While it is easier and more practical to grapple with the individual, in the matter of both responsibility and education, the ultimate judgment will fall heavily on societies, if they are both insensitive to social responsibility and also poorly educated in the majority of their members.

We might understand our present situation better if we could begin by looking backward. This look backward will also help us in the matter of perspective and be an antidote to the massive masochism and pessimism that affects so much of social criticism today.

If we go way back -- say to the golden age of Greek philosophy -- we find such an aberration as slavery accepted by the greatest

idealists, Plato and Aristotle, later spiritualized by St. Paul, coexisting with the good news of the Gospel throughout the exciting first four centuries of the Christian era. After that, slavery was out as a theory, but continued in practice, if you happened to be a serf or a captured pagan enemy. So that we do not feel too superior, let us shorten the past to the last two hundred years and suddenly realize that the father of our country, our first President, George Washington, and a later President and framer of our ^{Declaration of Independence} Constitution, Thomas Jefferson, while eloquent on the rights of man, still held slaves, in fact, the latter had children by slaves. How explain the inconsistency between this beautiful social theory and abominable social practice? The slaves happened to be black, and one's perception of humanity at that time was not impervious to color. Lest we feel too holy, let me say that just this week I had a scurrilous letter from a woman in Detroit enclosing a picture of a black man and a white woman together with the words printed underneath, "Is this what you want?" All this came about because somewhere I said something about open housing in the suburbs.

Returning to colonial times for a moment, we could also find such (today) socially unacceptable practices as indentured servants, child labor, lack of franchise for women or those without property, forced draft labor, widespread illiteracy, mob law through lynching or shooting (the later romance of the American West),

abominable housing, malnutrition, quack medicine, and a whole host of social evils too long to mention. Yet compared to Europe, America appeared a paradise and, compared to great parts of Asia and Africa, Europe a greater paradise.

What I am saying is that, even in the recent past, the world has been a terrible place for human beings if one had a scintilla of social consciousness by modern standards: a place of dismal brief life and early death, plagued by disease and ignorance, poor housing and awful food, ruled mainly by class distinctions enforced by violence and unjust power on the part of the rich, widespread poverty being equal to misery and hopelessness. There were the occasional Peter Clavers who had compassion for the slaves, Vincent de Pauls who worked for those at the oars of the Mediterranean galleys, or Bernardo de Casas who had pity on the Indians in the new world.

These few had a premature sense of social responsibility and were the crazies or kooks of their respective ages. Even the seemingly revolutionary cries of liberty, equality, and fraternity were orchestrated in France by the downward swish of the guillotine, the reign of terror, fear and sudden death, irrational and unrequited.

It was a little over twenty years ago that the family of nations finally elaborated a declaration of human rights. I attended the twentieth anniversary of this United Nations triumph in Teheran as head of the Vatican Delegation and was sickened by the blatant

display of Arab hatred for Israeli, Hindu against Muslem, North against South African, Chinese against Russian, and practically everybody angry at Americans since Martin Luther King, a great apostle for equality, had just been senselessly shot.

I have been focusing my remarks thus far on one obvious facet of social responsibility, justice for all or equality of opportunity for each human being to be recognized as human and allowed to develop his human dignity and potential. One could outline an equally dismal picture in terms of war and peace, access to education, the rich and the poor, the hopeful and the hopeless, the haves and the have-nots, those with and without shoes, or houses, or food, or education, or dignity, or health, or, ultimately, hope. The details of the human history would not differ greatly. Whether or not the history of the human race has had to be this unjust, unfair, or unequal is a good question, but there is no question that this is the way it has been over countless centuries with excruciatingly slow upward progress.

What really differentiates our age is that many modern men and women and practically all young people today do not accept as a fact that all of these injustices, inequalities, and tragedies must continue in the future as they have in the past. We do have new and unusual scientific and technological resources at our disposal today. We do have a new and enlightened social consciousness, especially among the young. Degradation need not be the necessary lot of all the generations to come.

It is perhaps a sad thing to say that, while education has touched the young, there has been little continuing education to touch their parents, their elders. Much of what has been irreprehensible in the past continues to be irreprehensible today in the older generation. All the ancient myths about color, religion, and race continue to spark injustice, prejudice, and hatred among human beings all over the world and even in the most sophisticated societies.

One would hope that the age of Aquarius would be a new age of enlightenment. But instead we have the studied effort at prolonging and deepening polarization instead of unity, fostering prejudice instead of understanding, promoting hatred at the expense of potential love and peace among men of good will. While a good deal of this reprehensible endeavor is political in inspiration, it is real enough to be discouraging, both in our country and all around the world.

The best question that arises out of what I have already said is: Compared to the past history of mankind, why is there a greater sense of social responsibility among many adults and most young people today? I believe that there are several possible answers, all of which give us key clues for the future of society. I further believe that education is central to the explanation of a heightened social consciousness in our times. Who can calculate the effect of $8\frac{1}{2}$ million students in higher education in America

today compared to three million only twenty years ago, or $1\frac{1}{2}$ million in 1940, or 50,000 in 1900? If education does anything, it opens the mind, stimulates a questioning of the status quo, enlarges the vista of the possible as against the given.

Just yesterday a father shared with me these thoughts in a letter from his son:

"One of the biggest sources of dissatisfaction among young people today is, I think, the hypocrisy they perceive enveloping the institutions and members of the established order. The young by virtue of their education and material advantage are freed from the immediate, mundane concerns which rightly or wrongly occupied the generation stamped by the depression and the second World War. This freedom infuses their educational experience, so that their approach to problems like poverty, pollution, and discrimination is nearly always moral and rarely colored by pragmatism. The important consequence of this is not that the judgments of the young may often be naive or unrealistic, but rather that the young are vulnerable to cynicism, pessimism, and ultimately the use of violence. This vulnerability exists because the established order expresses little concern for the judgment of the young and seeks to impose upon the young conformity, with certain norms, which ironically the order itself does not abide."

If you accept this analysis as one young man's thinking, also reasonably typical of many young people today, I submit that it is indirectly a compliment to the education given them by their elders -- at least some of their elders -- that they have been educated to think this way. Moral concern is the basis for all sense of responsibility, social or individual. Once it has been aroused, it becomes further incumbent upon the established elder society to welcome it, to give it sources of legitimate outlet, and, especially, to see that, for lack of the above reactions, youthful idealism and generosity do not degenerate through frustration into cynicism, pessimism, and violence which are, each in its own way, the death of positive social responsibility.

To pursue the matter further, it would seem to me that we have here one of the strongest calls for continuing education, first, to keep the emerging generation from losing its dreams and goals, and, even more importantly, to influence the older generation to react better than most of them are reacting at present.

In a world changing as rapidly and profoundly as ours is, the older generation, even more than the younger, needs continual re-education to understand what is happening, what it means, what good and what evil it might portend. The younger generation by nature is supple, changeable, even at times mercurial. They sway with change, absorb it almost by instant osmosis, and need a few

changeless points of reference -- in principle, in virtue, and in faith -- to live with change and still move forward with meaning and direction to their lives. The problem of the older generation is quite the opposite. They face the temptation of the comfortable status quo, the inertia that resists adapting continually to new situations, no matter how promising or exciting. Somehow continuing education of this elder generation must have the same kind of exponential growth in the years ahead as college education has had for the youth in the years just past, if the two generations are going to be prepared to live together in fruitful tension rather than in senseless confrontation.

The very nature of the crisis and the opportunity that face us today would argue for the new assumption that, just as most young people will experience higher education of some kind or other, so education for them and for all who have completed formal higher education will be a continuing process. Just how this process will take place is a matter for further discussion, but there is little room for discussion of the necessity of continuing education to undergird positive and constructive social responsibility on the part of the older and younger generations in our society.

Social responsibility must have positive avenues of expression that can be shared equally, if differently, by the young and older members of the society. This positive cooperation is hardly likely to happen unless both the young and the old share some reasonably

common convictions about the just and reasonable goals of modern society. Some communality of continuing educational experience must be at the heart of this growing sense of social responsibility, shared and sought by young and old alike, and in concert, and, hopefully, with some of the same measure of hopefulness, optimism, and energy that characterize the best of both generations today.

What should be the substance of this continuing education for social responsibility? First, there must be a moral base, broad enough to be inspiring and acceptable to all members of our pluralistic society. It would seem to me that the key element of this moral base should be the innate dignity of the human person, of all and every human person, whatever his or her age, sex, color, nationality, religion, or race. Concomitantly or even antecedently, there should be an acceptance of the sacredness of human life. Growing out of this dual moral base of the dignity of the human person and the sacredness of human life would be a recognition of the broad spectrum of human rights that follow in the social, cultural, economic, and political aspects of human life.

There is a foundation for all of these aspects of a moral base in our fundamental political documents: Our Declaration of Independence, our Constitution, and our Bill of Rights. The various segments of our pluralistic society will have different philosophical and theological ways of justifying this basic moral **consensus**, but I think it unlikely that anyone committed to our

form of government can justify their commitment unless they are likewise committed to the dignity of the human person, the sacredness of human life, and the wide spectrum of human rights that follow from these two moral concerns.

You may ask how there can be continuing education in or for such a moral context. I would suggest that every leader, on every level of societal life, from President to parent, is a teacher, and that leadership will be moral if all its important actions and words somehow reflect a concern for this basic moral consensus. The ambiguities or hypocrisies that lie today beneath our national tensions, our generational gaps, our national disgraces, our miserable priorities, our crass materialism, our insensitive pragmatism -- all reflect a lack of this basic moral concern for human dignity, human rights, and the sacredness of human life. Unless we re-establish this moral consensus on a national basis, with national concern, any additional substance of continuing, or even formal, education will be ultimately more of the same and meaningless.

What is really at stake here is our quality of life, our quality of leadership, our quality of humanity. I would submit to you that all three of them are in a rather miserable state today because of our moral ambiguity and our feeble commitment to these most fundamental moral aspects of our humanity.

If you will grant this, my most fundamental point, then I would like to indicate several other aspects of our common continuing

education that should give greater meaning and direction to social responsibility. My first suggestion here is more process or style than substance. It has been said that one generation's renaissance is another's dark age -- that our nation vacillates between wild optimism and deep disillusionment. Recall the beginning and the ending of that day in Dallas when President Kennedy was shot. The mood of the nation is important to the establishment and achievement of national goals and priorities.

The style of continuing education, if we accept the discipline of moral principle, can and should be admittedly optimistic. This age of Aquarius has every reason for optimism because, more than any previous age in the history of mankind, it has the means of solving its problems, of raising the quality of its life, of achieving human rights and maximizing human potential as never before.

We can grant the neutrality of the technetronic revolution in the face of good and evil. It is potentially constructive or destructive as we will to use it. This underlines the importance of the moral base discussed above. Only deep moral commitment will lead education to goals that transcend convenience, profit, pleasure, pollution -- both physical and human -- destruction and inhuman depravity as characterized by bestializing man, destroying beauty, brutalizing life, mechanizing freedom, robotizing man.

The technetronic age can be a blessing or a nightmare, depending upon whether we humanly use technology, harness it to

our human and spiritual goals, or let it dehumanize us in the abuse of war, ^{the} devastation of our planet, and the materialization of our highest spiritual and human concerns.

Here social responsibility and social concern stand at the crossroad. One can write a very optimistic or a very pessimistic scenario for the year 2000. Perhaps one of the greatest achievements of continuing education for both the younger and older generation would be to confront us continually with the stark alternatives of a wonderful or an ugly world, a nation united with the liberty and justice for all that our school children proclaim each morning, or a nation divided into the comfortable affluent and the miserable poor, blacks and whites, the educated and the ignorant, the hopeful and the hopeless, those enjoying justice and those suffering injustice, bleak inner cities and bright suburbs, the righteous and the damned.

I should add that whatever the modern growth in a new sense of social concern, we are presently heading towards the latter nightmare of a divided America, rather than the Constitutional promise of a nation with liberty, equality, and justice for all.

It would be a great travesty if at the one unique point in human history, our age, when finally human dignity might become a reality after long centuries and millenia of human degradation, we used the new powers at our disposal for evil rather than for good.

Continuing education of itself cannot turn the tide. The issue is only joined if we are clear about what kind of continuing education can be helpful. It must be honest education which is words joined to deeds, leadership linked to ideals, teachers who teach best by what they are and what faith their very lives proclaim.

I take heart from what I have recently read again in the Acts of the Apostles and the Epistles of St. Paul. Here was a vast, highly organized pagan world. As a leaven within it here were a few weak men with only their voices to proclaim the good news to anyone within the sound of their voices, wherever their tired feet or their often shipwrecked vessels might slowly carry them. Yet they turned the established order upside down and re-established it in a new, demanding view of human life that transcended time and deeply affects us centuries later. Our present vision owes much to the good news they ~~so feebly and yet~~ so powerfully proclaimed *with such feeble means.*

Our educational means today are as far beyond theirs as the jet airplane surpasses the ox cart. One teacher or leader today can address more people in an instant than St. Paul addressed in a lifetime. Neil Armstrong speaking from the moon talked to the majority of mankind, many of whom saw him step down into lunar dust as he talked.

We still need the big step for humanity that he talked about. It may be that continuing education will be an important

element in making that big step possible. Taking education in its largest and most inspiring sense, it would be difficult to imagine any other element in modern life that would lead us more effectively towards a new sense of social responsibility, freighted with the task of creating a new world in our times conceived in justice and committed to equality.

I have further ideas as to how technically this might be done, using the full panoply of means that have become available to us in recent years. But again these considerations are technical rather than substantive. They involve synchronous satellites, computers, miniturized atomic power packs, electronic memory banks, television, and all the rest. This technetronic bonanza has given us a potential for instantaneous worldwide communication and, therefore, education. But the therefore must be qualified. All communication is not education and there would be no greater travesty than to use this marvelous new potential to communicate nonsense, non-culture, empty ideas, chauvinistic cant, materialistic obsessions, the cult of violence, the prolongation of prejudice, the polarizations born of fear and hatred, and all the rest that so often passes for education, but is, in reality, degradation of the human spirit.

There is only one sure antidote against all of this happening worldwide -- as indeed it has happened and is still happening within our own nation -- that we renew our basic commitment to the education of man within a moral context that transcends geography and time,

that we are clear about the goals of social responsibility and that we view continuing education as the heritage of every human being who wants, every day of his or her life, to be more consciously, more exhilaratingly human so that the good life that the good Lord gave us might be truly good and not a counterfeit that is at base sub-human, uninspiring, frustrating, and going nowhere.

I conclude as I began. Social responsibility is as old as Plato and as new as the latest student protest regarding local or national priorities. Can we, through continuing education for all today, give a new thrust and a deeper meaning to social responsibility and social concern? I can only conclude with a more important question: Can we afford not to *do so?*