

(Address given by the Rev. Theodore M. Hesburgh, C.S.C., President, University of Notre Dame, at the Annual Convention of the National Federation of Priests' Councils, Baltimore, Maryland, March 15, 1971)

Dear Fellow Priests:

I come to you today with a minimum of official credentials.

I am not even a Monsignor, thank God, and salva reverentia. My proudest boast is that for the better part of the past 28 years I have been a practicing priest, one who loves to celebrate Mass every day as the greatest act of priesthood for the salvation of the whole world. I have celebrated Mass in all the holy places, St. Peter's, the catacombs, Lourdes, Fatima, Canterbury, Westminster, Geneva, Istanbul, Athens, Jerusalem, and all the rest. But I have perhaps taken greater pleasure celebrating Mass at the University of Moscow, on the operating table at the South Pole, on the campus of a host of secular universities, in scores of humble missions in Asia, Africa, South America, and Australia.

Wherever Mass was offered, it was for everywhere and everybody, with the kind of divine largesse that made me feel very humble and yet very important because I was doing what I loved to do and what was, all the same, very important to be done, far beyond my human capabilities, answering my wildest dreams. In a way, it made up for what seemed lacking in the direct and satisfying work of more personal pastoral contributions to the salvation of the world. I loved the offering so much that I have only missed offering once in all these years -- because of a night in a hospital -- and while I may have stretched the rules at times, I have always felt in rhythm with the prophecy of Malachi: "From the rising

of the sun to the going down thereof, there will be offered among the gentiles a clean oblation", or in the words of the new Canon:

"From age to age You gather a people to Yourself, so that from East to West, a perfect oblation may be made to the glory of Your name -- to advance the peace and salvation of all the world".

I admit to you that my life has truly been spent among the gentiles. I keep hoping that, like St. Paul, my ideal patron, it has been the life of an apostle to the gentiles. Also like St. Paul, I am embarrassed to speak so frankly of myself, but I trust that the good Lord will forgive me since so many other priests today are speaking so frankly of their distaste for the priesthood and their reasons for leaving the priesthood for presumably greener pastures or better identities.

So often they speak of an identity crisis, an ambiguous role as priests, a crushing weight of loneliness, a need for human love, a feeling of uselessness. At the risk of appearing square, simplistic, insensitive, or out-of-touch, may I confess that I have never felt any of these disabilities. Maybe my life has been untypical, but, if so, it has been untypical in that, for much of it, my companions and surroundings have been largely secular, non-Catholic, pagan, and public. I have spent as many nights in hotels as in the monastery, prayed my Breviary more often on airplanes than in the chapel, and have spent a large proportion of my days wrestling with secular problems like the peaceful uses of atomic energy and science generally; civil rights in the fields of voting, education, employment, housing, public accommodations,

and the administration of justice; international educational and cultural exchange; space exploration; human development around the world through economic programs <sup>and</sup> Peace Corps; university development and food programs; urban studies; volunteer Armed Forces instead of the draft; and a whole host of other largely secular endeavors.

There have been all too few excursions into fields more congenial to my priesthood in the classical sense, like Christian higher education at Notre Dame and around the world, my main task; ecumenism in a Christian and world religion context; renewal and aggiornamento in a wide Christian setting; theology pursued almost surreptitiously in odd moments as my first love. But, in large measure, my life has been lived among the gentiles, largely in gentile endeavors, but with apostolic overtones. Strangely, I have known more Popes and Cardinals than Bishops and Archbishops, whatever this might mean. Part of the strange life I have lived perhaps. I could just as well say I've known Presidents and Senators better than Governors or Mayors. This is not said to indicate anything other than that if it is possible to live such a life among the gentiles, even the top gentiles, and still practice and cherish the ideal of priesthood, it should be possible to practice and cherish it among Catholics in the closer Christian community of parishes and neighborhoods.

Maybe that is a monumental non sequitur, but I do still love to preach and counsel, to baptize and officiate at marriages, to console, absolve, and instruct whenever the occasion permits or invites me to do so.

These opportunities occur less frequently "on the road" than they do in parishes, but if one is always a priest, they do occur and they do brighten each day, whenever they do occur. I might say parenthetically that many of these priestly opportunities would not have occurred if I had not been dressed so as to be discernible as a priest.

I have turned down high government positions and high Church offices when I believed that they might interfere with my being a good priest. I admit this with no special modesty or humility since my over-riding concern in each case was not to diminish that which I, perhaps selfishly, cherished most: the freedom to be an apostle to the gentiles, a priest where no other priest could normally be, a Christian presence where one was generally absent, and not to compromise myself or my priesthood in the process.

I should just as frankly confess that many others could have performed much better than I in these various apostolates -- because others are more learned, certainly holier, more capable in many ways. But all of us are what we are, and we must do what we have, for some providential reasons, the opportunity of doing. If we can only open a few doors, lower a few barriers, dissolve a few misunderstandings and prejudices, others more capable or more apostolic will certainly follow in our wake, however messy it might be, and make greater contributions to the Kingdom of God among men.

Having said all of this by way of commentary on my lack of official credentials to address you, may I suggest that at least the

kind of life I have lived does give me a special kind of perspective on the Church and the world today and the role of the priesthood in both the modern Church and the modern world.

Lest I seem too taken up with modernity, may I say that I am fully in agreement with the wonderful biblical and traditional perceptions of the priesthood outlined in Raymond Brown's recent booklet on "Priest and Bishop" (Paulist Press, 1970). He shows both the richness and the difficulty of the priesthood today, which must encompass the functions of Old Testament priest, prophet, and scribe. Our priesthood must encompass as well the New Testament notions of disciple, apostle, and minister of the sacrifice and sacrament.

As disciples, we must in our total life style both follow and portray Jesus Christ whose unique priesthood we share, by permanent, full-time commitment, by our special vocation which demands more of us than other Christians, by ~~ce~~libacy for the sake of Christ and in total service to Christians as a witness existing almost alone in Roman Catholicism today among the many Christian Communions.

As Raymond Brown puts it:

"As one reflects on the challenges offered to the priesthood by the NT portrait of discipleship, one cannot but judge that these ideals have often been poorly met. If our present crisis about the priesthood underlines this, it will have been worth all the anguish. However, it is permissible to wonder whether we are now engaged

in simply another of the priestly reform movements that have brought the Gospel ideals to the fore over and over again. To some, at least, it seems that more is being questioned than the success with which priests meet the ideals and that the ideals themselves are being doubted. In other words, the name of the game may be the relevancy of the Gospels -- does a 1st-century ideal of discipleship have anything to say to a 20th-century man? I, for one, think that the Gospel challenge to discipleship is just as relevant today as it was in the 1st century because it touches on the very essence of the generosity demanded of men if they are to be open to God's rule or kingdom. If some of the Gospel demands, such as permanent commitment, seem very difficult to us today, I find no proof that they were not very difficult in the 1st century. Others may disagree about the continuing relevance of the specific Gospel ideals of discipleship. So be it -- my main goal is to try to clarify what values are at stake."

The New Testament concept of apostle demands of the priest that he be first a servant of Jesus Christ and then a servant to all His people -- who are all people -- by the special services of hard work of all kinds, prayer, suffering, correction, and even raising

money for good causes -- something I loathe, though St. Paul's epistles are full of it. In the modern context, we are especially poor at prayer for and with God's people, and alone. We are poor, too, at courageous correction of ourselves and God's people, even when the fullness of the Christian message in faith and morals, when the complete acceptance of God's Word, in both public and private life, are at stake. It is easier to be popular than prophetic, more convenient to be with it than against it, "it" being the latest current trend. We are likewise poor at the service of suffering, although as apostles we serve the "suffering servant" of Isaiah. Each priest has his own suffering to bear: loneliness for some, misunderstanding or even abuse for others; for some, human inadequacy in the face of enormous human challenges, even difficult with God's own help; for others, the unsettling need to rethink one's specific service, not to be shaken by the departure of dear friends from the priesthood, not to be discouraged when so much effort seems to bear so little fruit. But all of this is redemptive, part of our service of suffering as priests.

Lastly, we are ministers of the altar and the sacraments, ministers who must, in the words of our ordination: "understand what we do; imitate what we handle". It all comes down to a daily following and a daily professing and a daily commitment to Jesus Christ and His priesthood. At our best, we will be poor servants, but again as Raymond Brown says in face of a priesthood comprising so much grandeur and so much weakness: "On a deeper level I would think that the only identity crisis truly worthy of the name (for a priest) occurs when,

amidst the legitimate differences in priestly work, the priest begins to forget that it is Jesus Christ to whom he is bearing witness.

Whatever other claim he may make about what he does, in order to know who he is, a priest must be able to join with Paul in issuing the challenge, 'Become imitators of me as I am of Christ'". (ibid., p. 45)

This priesthood of ours, so enriched in content and meaning over the years, is confronted today with a situation that requires even more understanding, commitment, and enrichment. Part of our present problem is the enormous change and rate of change in both the Church and the world. Another complicating factor today is the different understanding of the relationship between the temporal (I greatly dislike the usual word, profane) and the sacred. Personally, I believe that the new understanding of the relationship between the temporal and the sacred, an understanding more Eastern than Western, is much more meaningful than the older schizoid notion for an appreciation that every human activity may be both priestly and sanctified, as well as sanctifying. The new notion, which avoids the usual artificial dichotomy between the natural and supernatural, temporal and sacred, follows the Eastern tradition that everything human was sanctified at the moment of Christ's conception, that nothing human or natural is profane once the Word was made flesh and the divine entered human history to elevate and sanctify and make redemptive all that is human and natural. What does this have to say to the world today, with all its hopes, anguishes, and challenges? At the very least, it says that there can be a priestly response to every human hope, anguish, and challenge.



It takes a lot of presuming to presume to give a priestly assessment of the Church and the world today. May I brashly begin by eliminating some of the common causes of dissension and frustration. I realize that one cannot simply eliminate them verbally, but again this is just my own personal assessment of the value or worthlessness of these particular and popular problems. I claim no special wisdom, only the insights that come from one priest's experiences and convictions.

First, the Pope, or as I would prefer to call him, our Holy Father. I speak of him in friendship and love that I wish all of you could share. Like each of us, he has his own personality, his own graces -- quite special in his case -- his own hopes and fears for the Kingdom of God on earth, his own educational background, categories of thought, inner lights, and instinctive impressions. From all the world, he was picked for the task he has, by the action of the Holy Spirit, I believe, and has assumed one of the most difficult of all tasks because of the times in which we live today. I am sure that each day, under enormous pressures unknown to us, he does the very best he can -- as each of us would, were we in his place. His infallibility is limited indeed, however you view it theologically. His anguish and suffering must be great, considering the magnitude of his daily problems and the paucity of really efficacious answers in a world of real and pervasive evil.

With the bark of Peter rocking from side to side as never before, somehow he has to keep it moving forward towards its eternal goal, which is also ours. One need not believe that his performance is perfect, nor would ours be perfect were we in his place. We can be Christianly critical at times, but equally loyal and understanding when we view the magnitude of his task and the limitations of his

humanity, even granting his special divine guidance. Again, my response is simple, but I trust loyal and friendly: I remember him first of all at the Offertory of my Mass each day, for all the light and strength he needs. And, when I disagree with him, I do so privately and honestly and with affection.

Lest I seem too simplistic, may I say that it is possible to criticize the system, for example the Curia, without by that action criticizing our Holy Father. And, while on this subject, may I say that Pope Paul VI has more radically changed the system of the Curia than any dozen of his predecessors since the Curia began. One recent action of his accomplished what our own Congress does not have the courage or wisdom to do, namely place an age limit that totally changes the leverage of decision and election in the Church.

You may say that some other Pope might have done more. I only say that all the others in recent history have done less. Also, there will still be others, with their special graces and charisma, but each Holy Father must be himself and we must believe that the Holy Spirit will guide both the election and action of each Holy Father in each successive age of the Church's long history through darkness into light.

Then there is the hierarchy, another great cause of contention in today's Church. I suppose that all of us are somewhat unhappy today about the technicalities and criteria that govern the selection of Bishops. Everything seems to lead to the selection of men who are safe, uncontroversial, favorably disposed to Rome and preferably Roman-educated, seminary rectors or canon lawyers or episcopal secretaries, in a word, generally those who will not make waves.

It is objected that a majority of such men will give us a bland leadership in a Church that was founded to cast fire on the earth. Put in the opposite focus, it will assure that those priests who have manifested dynamic leadership, who, therefore, are controversial or liberal, or especially intellectual and committed to a broader sense of academic freedom, stand almost no chance of ever assuming leadership in a Church that is lead by those chosen to be Bishops.

This is, of course, an oversimplification which, unfortunately, is more true than false. However, there are those who were selected because of their pastoral concern, which is safe, if spiritual, and not too enmeshed in the controversial problems of the day. There are also those who almost by mistake get appointed and then disappointed if they act against the system and incur the displeasure of the powerful within the hierarchy.

What is the solution to this problem? You and I know the answers that have been unavailingly offered: Choice of bishops by the priests and people of a diocese according to a more ancient Christian pattern that gave us, for example, a St. Ambrose. Of course, this method is not infallible either and could degenerate into a popularity contest which generally delivers mediocrity rather than a person demanding quality. However, this is self-corrective after people are made to live with their own bad choices, as we do in the democratic political process. At least, such a method of more popular choice, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, would avoid the horrible human anomaly that exists in some dioceses in the world today where the vast

majority of the priests and people simply reject the ecclesiastical leader imposed upon them by the system. How can a Bishop possibly lead those who seriously reject him for very serious and very Christian reasons?

One might say that in a monarchical system, priests and laymen have no other choice, but a simple reading of the Gospel, the Epistles, and the Acts of the Apostles would convince any reader that such a monarchical system, at least in its worst aspects, is hardly essential to the good news of salvation as proclaimed by our humble Saviour and as practiced in the early centuries of the Church.

If one were to err today in any direction, it would seem to me that the system less open to error is to let the Holy Spirit inspire those most concerned in the local Church to choose their own leadership on the basis of the charismatic qualities displayed by the most outstanding local Christians. St. Anselm was chosen as a layman, and did quite well after being consecrated Archbishop of Milan.

A knowledgeable cleric told me the other day that he was happy about what he called the undistinguished quality of the American hierarchy because this made it easier for leadership to come from other sources in the Church. I am not sure that I agree with him. In the early Church of St. Paul, Corinth may have been able to get along without a Bishop, with considerable prodding from St. Paul, but we happen to be a hierarchical Church and, given that fact, however it has developed under the impetus of Our Lord and the Holy Spirit, it seems to me that we had better do everything possible to get great

leaders as Bishops. If the present system of selection is not working, then we had better put our greatest efforts into the inauguration of a different and better system.

In the meanwhile, we had better not expect great theological leadership from <sup>those</sup> Bishops who are not theologians, or great social leadership from <sup>those</sup> persons who showed no signs of great social leadership before becoming Bishops. Other resources in the Church can provide this, laymen and priests, and they should. The Holy Spirit will not fail us. Let us also admit at this point that there are few positions in the world today less envious and more troublesome than that of the Bishop, with the possible exception of the university president. At least, presidents may quit, as many of them have, but the Bishop must endure until age 75 before being provided this escape. Here, too, there might be more flexibility. University presidents quit because they feel they are no longer acceptable to their constituency and, therefore, disqualified as leaders of that constituency. Should Bishops feel less free? They, like us priests, are married to the Church, but not necessarily to a particular role in a particular place which can become impossible of true accomplishment in very troubled times.

After all, St. Paul lived his whole apostolic life without ever becoming the Bishop of a particular community. If there were more possibilities of functional rather than residential bishoprics, we might solve many problems. At least, this is done for the military, although there are specialized needs and problems just as urgent among other classes of Christians -- such as university faculties and students,

youth generally, professional people such as lawyers and doctors, and others such as the inner city and rural poor. All of these need specialized attention, represent a functionally different apostolate, and number, as individual groups, far more people than the military -- which now alone has its specialized Bishops and priests.

We should not get hung up about a hierarchy that argues for hours and by the gimmick of a two-thirds vote thwarts the will of the majority for a method of Holy Communion described and accepted in the Didache, the earliest description of the practice of the early Christian community -- after the New Testament, which is fairly silent on the subject. Rather than griping about this, we should insist that there are far greater problems facing the Christian community at the moment and we should press for Christian answers to them: war and peace; racial justice; the realistic recognition of and contribution to human dignity and human development across the world; the human and humane uses of science and technology; the responsibilities of wealthy and affluent nations and people; the sanctity of human life as abused by a growing cult and legalization of abortion; Christian liberty and the draft for military service; Christian conscience and its obligations; Christian education and a better understanding of the young who, if lost, signalize the loss of untold millions in succeeding generations.

*Koval*  
We were told in/<sup>the</sup> a recent/<sup>Koval</sup> study that the main reason for one out of four Catholic priests in America considering leaving the priesthood is their disillusionment with the leadership of those in authority in the Church.

I would say to them, and to all of you, that if our perception of the priesthood of Christ is as shallow as this, we should never have been ordained priests in the first place. We are priests of Christ, not of the hierarchy; we are committed to the apostolate of Christ, our best leader, and if we do not get leadership from our other leaders, we can pray to the Holy Spirit to get it from Him, together with the courage to exercise personal leadership on our own level, whatever the cost to our personal feelings, convenience, or ambition.

Military and political history is filled with examples of inept generals and kings with brilliant lieutenants and governors who carried the day despite them, and they did not have the promise of the Holy Spirit for all days as we have. At the risk of seeming insensitive, may I say that the priest who quits because of the lack of leadership is himself a non-leader, which no priest should be.

He who quits because Vatican II is not coming into reality quickly enough simply admits that he lacks the subsidiary leadership and imagination to make it come to pass in the little world of his own activity. In a word, he is blaming others for his own lack of dedication to the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of truth, love, courage, and vision. And if, as the same <sup>level</sup> survey tells us, half of the priests under thirty are wavering because of their "desire to marry", let them marry and leave to a small, but totally dedicated remnant, the main and central work of the Kingdom of God. There are many things that I do not know, but I do know this: that celibacy is important to the totally dedicated

apostolate, even though there may be less totally dedicated apostolates in the Church. I also know this -- that one must say "yes" or "no" to celibacy -- but never "maybe". He who says "maybe" has already conceded the day. Unfortunately, too many of the younger clergy are not saying "yes" or "no", but "maybe". There must be a better term for them than optional celibacy -- like optional salad or optional power steering -- a better ideal than "maybe yes", "maybe no" to the question of total dedication.

This will seem unduly harsh, and I speak from the lifelong perspective of a priest who is also a member of a religious community, but the present crisis is such that we will not be able to do what must be done if we cannot count on total dedication in the evangelical tradition for some numbers of priests, both religious and diocesan. I do not discount the possible contribution of married priests, particularly in certain areas of contemporary life, but they will not be the shock troops that will carry the day against the monumental powers of darkness that presently threaten the people of God. If I must call a spade a spade in the matter of the hierarchy, I should be equally honest in speaking to my fellow priests. We have indulged ourselves in too much nonsense which has cheapened both ourselves and our perception of our priesthood.

I would remind you that the Hindu Ghandi, when faced with the monumental problem of liberating India from colonialism, vowed and observed celibacy for the last 25 years of his life, even though he was married. The fact that millions of Hindus followed him as their



spiritual leader was not unrelated to this symbolism of his total dedication to the cause. Does our cause call for less dedication?

It is often alleged today that we are suffering in the Church a crisis of authority or a crisis of leadership. Wrong on both counts. What we are really suffering is a crisis of vision. It is the vision of Christ and His good news, His salvific message, that vivifies the Christian community, age after age, and gives new life and continual inspiration to every priest in every age. It is the lack of this vision, as it applies to any particular age, that stultifies the Christian community, that deprives it of leadership, or degrades the exercise of authority within it, and empties the priesthood of its splendor. And we are all most fundamentally priests, the Holy Father, the Cardinals, Archbishops, Bishops, and all of us.

After years of a codified, formalized, and dissicated Christianity, that allowed and suffered every form of social injustice and uncharity -- I spare you the details -- Vatican II gave us a new and truly evangelical charter. You may say it was inchoate, incomplete, and even embryonic. But it was a breath of fresh air in a stale scene, a new vision of Christlike splendor that we, and the world, badly needed. It came fundamentally because of the vision of a man called John, and it was committed to a man called Paul. This new charter was also committed to all and each of us, to every Christian.

The Pilgrim Church is still on its pilgrim way, as we pray in the Canon of the Mass each day that it may be strengthened in faith and love. We still have trouble shucking off the dead trappings of a past triumphalistic way, all the false and fastidious trappings of a dead monarchical past, but at least, thanks to Vatican II, a beginning has been made. We have seen more change for constructive good in the Church during the past 10 years than during the past 400. We are on the way. This is not time to lose heart, or to leave the Church in its most exciting and exhilarating period in centuries. We may not generally have superb leadership or may not even give great leadership ourselves, but there are some superb leaders in our midst. Let us follow them and the lead of the Holy Spirit who inspires them and, hopefully, us too.

I should say at this point that no hierarchy in the world has a better or more forthright and courageous leader than John Cardinal Dearden. Baltimore's Archbishop, Lawrence Cardinal Shehan, was the first pastor I worked for in Washington as a newly-ordained priest.

No one could have been more helpful, more understanding, more compassionate to a young and inexperienced priest than he was, and he has, in his recent night-time, immediate visit to his jailed priests, shown the same compassion and understanding that I enjoyed and needed 28 years ago in St. Patrick's Parish on 10th and G Streets in Washington. There are other Bishops, too, who have known and understood the good yearnings of this association and its members. May the Holy Spirit increase their number and our fidelity to the Church's high mission, the vision we share with them.

This leads me to my final observation. The important question before the house today is not the purpose or effectiveness of your organization or the frustration of your membership. It is the Kingdom of God and the condition of the people of God that is important. This transcends your <sup>federation</sup>~~association~~, your personal problems, even your ecclesiastical leaders. The present and future <sup>spiritual</sup> status of the Kingdom of God and the people of God in our country and in our times is the concern of our priesthood, that we share with our Holy Father and our Bishops. It is the most important reality in our lives and theirs. Only the priesthood can put the problems and the opportunities in hopeful and promising Christian focus.

I spoke earlier of the Church and the world and, in doing so, I was not envisioning two great organizations, but two great realities that must interact upon each other. Looking upon the world today, with all its injustices, inequities, and moral ambiguities, one might

very well be pessimistic. But when one considers the possible <sup>salvific</sup> influence of the Church in the world, one begins to hope that things might be different. The difference is in our personal exercise of priesthood. No ambiguity or lack of goal or role here; no task so unimportant that loneliness puts us off; no lack of vision if we will prayerfully seek it from the Holy Spirit who has been promised to us; no discouragement or frustration if we really know what priesthood means: to mediate between what is and what might be with the grace of God; to stand between the hope of salvation and the despair of damnation, to uphold the ideal, even though the real is dismal; to work and sacrifice and pray and not to despair or give up -- because the good news has been announced long ago by the good Lord and we in this day have the great and noble task of proclaiming it anew. May we do so with the courage of Christ and the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and in keeping with the splendor of His vision, whatever our weakness or the magnitude of the challenges that face us. However few we are, let us remember that it all began with twelve Apostles, one of whom left, and a totally pagan world. The odds are much less today, and the same Holy Spirit is still with us.