

(Address given by the Rev. Theodore M. Hesburgh, C.S.C., President, University of Notre Dame, at the 110th Commencement, University of Utah, Salt Lake City, Utah, June 9, 1979)

SERVICE TO OTHERS

This is a day and an occasion on which all of you graduates tend to think long thoughts: a chapter of your life ending, a new one beginning; something accomplished, something yet to be done; a time for planning, dreaming, hoping. It is also for some of you a time of uncertainty, nostalgia, even fear. I suppose that each one of you graduates has thought in your more quiet moments, what is to become of me and what will be the value of my life?

I cannot help you much with the first question, because I am not a prophet and I do not know -- only God does -- what will become of you in the years ahead. I can say something about the second question, what will be the value of your life, wherever you go, whatever you do.

Before doing so, let me try to put all of your lives in perspective. First, you have an abundance of reasons to be grateful. You might have been born in Neanderthal times when human life was brief and brutal. You might have been born in the dark ages when there was little culture and less hope. For most of mankind's history, and for most of the men and women who have ever lived on earth, life has meant a daily sun rise to sun set effort just to sustain physical existence, not to enrich it, or much less enjoy it. They have survived for awhile, have not lived humanly at all.

For some reason you and I cannot explain, we were born in the most advanced and civilized age that mankind has yet known. Moreover, we find ourselves living in the most developed and affluent nation on earth.

So far, so good, but the blessings of all this prosperity are not unmixed. We in America have our special temptations. We enjoy an enormous freedom to do something with our lives, but we are, because of our times, pulled in many different directions: to seek security even though it may mean a bland existence; to seek physical pleasure at all costs even though this means a superficial and selfish life; to seek money and material gain alone, even though we have been taught that spiritual achievement is of a much higher and more fulfilling order. We may also seek power for its own sake, a heady adventure, but chancy unless we have a fairly clear idea and intention about the use of power. None of these goals: security, pleasure, wealth, or power are bad or evil in themselves. They vitiate our lives only if they become ends in themselves, without *being linked to* higher goals that lift them to a nobler purpose. Seek any of them for themselves alone, and they will empty your life of value, whatever power you wield, whatever wealth or pleasure you enjoy. History books are full of leaders who have wielded power for its own sake and left millions of ruined lives in their wake. Hitler is a classic example in our century.

The greatest freedom you enjoy today is to choose your own goals for your own lives, goals that will enrich both you and your

times whatever wealth, power, or pleasure you will enjoy in the years to come. I would like to suggest one goal that has served our country, our world, and our fellow humans well. For want of a better term, I will just call it "service to others."

Years ago, de Tocqueville found this virtue of service to others one of the most redeeming features of American life. He remarked that when Americans discovered a problem, they just got together and did something about it. In the years since he wrote, volunteerism has given us all of the great religious and secular endeavors that enrich the life of this country, hospitals and universities; myriads of professional societies for lawyers, doctors, teachers; youth activities of every kind, scouts, 4-H, Y.M.C.A., C.Y.O.; clubs, service organizations, associations for good works on every level of local and national life.

In the great grey world of socialism, everything is done by the state, nothing is private or voluntary. Here we do the most important things for ourselves. In fact, if all private volunteer activities were to cease today, it would affect all our lives far more than if the federal government -- the greatest public power -- suddenly ceased to exist. ~~In fact,~~ It would be interesting to contrast the good done by the billions given to voluntary non-profit good works with the results of the much greater amount given through federal taxation.

Who can measure the good will and generosity that inspire and sustain all these beneficial voluntary activities? All we can say for

sure is that unless millions of Americans pitched in and made them work, there would be none of them, no churches, no political parties, no agriculture, no Red Cross or United Fund, no newspapers, radio, or television, no operas, ballet, or orchestras, no museums or galleries, not even any zoos.

Volunteerism, the great American virtue of giving something of one's self to help others, has certainly served America well. It has been suggested that your generation will not sustain all these good works, since this is called the "me" generation, with its own best seller, "Looking Out for Number One."

I don't believe that. Better than a third of our student body at Notre Dame spends untold hours each week in myriad tasks of voluntarism helping the young and old, the retarded, the sick, and the unfortunate. If I had my way, service to others less fortunate would be an expected and integral part of education for all Americans, not just in service to Americans, but to the world as well. I think it is part of the dues we should pay for our great good fortune as a nation. It may even be, for all the new generations to come, the only real way of keeping America great and of redeeming our times.

Allow me to suggest to you, ^{graduates} three qualities, intimately associated with the volunteer spirit, that I would hope you might make part of your lives in the days to come, to assure your lives and yourselves of value and quality.

First, compassion. This really means the human quality of sensitivity, to suffer with those who suffer, to be moved, to reach out, to understand, to want to help, to serve. We find the opposite of compassion in the story of the Good Samaritan.

The priest and the levite, both supposedly religious persons, saw the poor fellow who had been set upon by robbers on the road to Jericho, beaten and left helpless. The priest and the levite looked and passed on. They didn't want to get involved -- like so many moderns who pass by accidents on the highway or look the other way when someone is in trouble in our big cities. The Good Samaritan, however, looked and was moved by compassion. He bound up the poor fellow's wounds, brought him to the nearest inn, and paid for his care. Jesus told that story when He was asked, "Who is my neighbor?"

In a shrinking and highly interdependent world, everyone is our neighbor: especially the billion unfortunates of the Fourth World who are hungry every day, who are illiterate, who never see a doctor from birth to death, who live in cardboard shacks or mud and wattle huts, who have to live each year on less money than most of us will spend this weekend. Like ourselves, all of these billion unfortunates are human, as are our own American unfortunates who live in our affluent country's too numerous pockets of poverty. Unlike us, all of these, like the man beaten and robbed on the road to Jericho, have little hope, unless we look upon them and are moved to compassion.

However, compassion alone will not do it, unless joined to another quality that I recommend to you for all of your lives today,

namely, commitment. We are told by the so-called wise ones of our generation that it is neither cool nor clever to commit oneself to anything. Maybe that explains why we have almost as many divorces as marriages in America today. It takes real commitment to love enough to say and to mean: "for better or for worse, for richer or for poorer, in sickness or in health, until death do us part." Commitment is very much akin to love and the measure of love is to love without measure, especially in giving ourselves to others less fortunate. Calculation never made a hero.

Albert Schweitzer, a true hero of our times, was a promising theologian, a concert organist, a medical doctor as well. He loved those less fortunate and most needy enough to leave Europe and his triple career there to serve those without any medical care at Lambarene' in what was then French Equatorial Africa. I do not know what fame he might have achieved in Europe, but he inspired all the world for what he did in that remote village on the shore of a turgid African river.

One of our students, Tom Dooley, was inspired by Schweitzer to give up a promising career here at home to give his life and medical skill to literally hundreds of thousands of unfortunates who otherwise would have been without medical care in Southeast Asia. I was with Tom on his thirty-fourth birthday, in Sloan-Kettering Memorial Cancer Hospital in New York. He died the next day, leaving a dozen hospitals he established in the poorer parts of this planet. Not a long life, but it had a quality all its own.

We cannot all make the commitments of a Schweitzer or a Dooley. But without some measure of compassion and commitment, we are likely to live for ourselves alone and that is a poor and valueless life indeed.

The third and last quality I would recommend to you today is consecration. This is obviously and admittedly a religious word and reality. I make no apology for it because I personally find the other two qualities of compassion and commitment very difficult to achieve in life, unless buttressed by religious motivation. Transcending, unaided by divine grace, the overwhelming urge to personal selfishness and self-centeredness is something I cannot honestly advise you to try. I think the Lord was telling us this when He said we have to lose our lives to find them. We lose them in service to others and find ourselves much enriched by what we have given away.

Once more, a story is worth a thousand words. One of our students was spending his Summer on the altiplano of Peru working on a social project there. One morning, as he walked along the shore of Lake Titicaca to the clinic where he worked, he passed an Indian hut and a little girl of four or five ran down the path to see him. He knelt down to talk to her, face to face, and found that she did not even speak Spanish, only Quichua, the Indian language of the high Peruvian plateau. As he looked at her, ^{and considered her situation,} his faith was deeply shaken. It is cold at 14,000 feet. He had a warm jacket on, she, only a thin cotton dress. He had eaten a decent breakfast, she would be lucky to get a crust of bread all day. He was a university student, she would be not

only illiterate in the language of her country, but in her own as well. He had high hopes for the future, she could only face a short, hard, painful, and hopeless life.

How can there be a God, he thought, with such injustice, such inequity, in this world? Then he remembered the stirring words of the Gospel, the ultimate judgment on each of our lives. "I was hungry and you gave Me to eat, I was thirsty and you gave Me to drink, I was naked and you clothed Me, I was in prison and you visited Me, I was a stranger and you took Me in. Whensoever you did this to one of these, the least of My brethren, you did it to Me."

*God works in this world through us
we can bless by serving others*

That young man completed his education, fulfilled the compassion and commitment of that moment by the lake side, and is consecrating his professional efforts today in a distant and very poor land for the betterment of his neighbors there. I like to think he is loving and serving God, too, by all he does for others. And I know that while all he does is of great temporal value, fulfilling him today, it is also, and more importantly, of eternal value as well. Consecration says all that.

*as a person
to bless God by serving others*

You do not have to go afar to serve others. All around ^{us} are those in need. They need teachers as well as doctors, lawyers as well as social workers, mostly they need compassionate, committed, consecrated neighbors and friends. Wherever you go, whatever you do, you will always find people in need of something you can give, if you will, *if you are prepared to give.*

Is all of this too idealistic to be true? Let me say to each of you, in conclusion, the truest advice I know. One day, on a trip back to Europe, Dr. Albert Schweitzer was asked to address a graduating class like yours today. His words were few, for his life was his message. He simply said: "I do not know where all of you are going or what you will do, but let me tell you simply this: unless you set aside some portion of your lives to help and serve those less fortunate than yourselves, you will really not be happy."

My best wish and prayer for all of you today is simply this: May you all find, in all your various ways, the wonderful secret of happy lives in serving others.