

(Address given by the Rev. Theodore M. Hesburgh, C.S.C., President, University of Notre Dame, on the Chicago Sunday Evening Club television program, December 6, 1981 (taped November 22, 1981).

#### VOLUNTARISM: AN AMERICAN LEGACY

One of the most perceptive tourists ever to visit America made his trip to our shores about 150 year ago (1831). His name was Alexis de Tocqueville. On his return, he wrote two books, with a five-year interval between them, although they bear the same title: Democracy in America.

De Tocqueville had many acute observations about America in these books, but I take for my theme today something he says in Chapter Five of Book II, something that has proved to be one of the most important realities that make America what it is, a country unique in all the world. A century and a half have enriched the central reality he describes, so that it is even more important now than it was then. But first, let us hear from de Tocqueville in his own words:

"Americans of all ages, all conditions, and all dispositions constantly form associations. They have not only commercial and manufacturing companies, in which all take part, but associations of a thousand other kinds, religious, moral, serious, futile, general or restricted, enormous or diminutive. The Americans make associations to give entertainment, to found seminaries, to build inns, to construct churches, to diffuse books, to send missionaries to the antipodes; in this manner, they found hospitals, prisons and schools. If it is proposed to inculcate some truth or to foster some feeling by the encouragement of a great example, they form a society. Wherever at the head of some new undertaking you see the government in

France, or a man of rank in England, in the United States you will be sure to find an association." (Vol. II, Chapter 5, P. 114, Vintage Books)

What de Tocqueville was describing, we call today voluntarism. I doubt that even he could have imagined to what extent this impulse was to build the America we know, in the next century and a half. All of the early institutions of higher education are the result of voluntarism. All of our churches, most of our hospitals, all of our businesses, all of our labor unions, all of our newspapers, radio and television stations, all of our clubs, all of our professional associations, all of our political parties, all of our opera, symphonies, and ballet companies, all of our entertainment, movies, and theater, all of our athletic teams, professional and amateur, all of our transport system, all of our artistic endeavors, in a word, almost the total fabric of our society was initiated, developed, and maintained by voluntary activity in the private sector. We even have, at least for the moment, a voluntary Armed Forces. The voluntary support for all of this in philanthropy last year totaled about \$48 billion. No one could possibly calculate the monetary value of the volunteered services involved.

If you wish to see how unique this makes America, visit a Communist or Socialist society, Russia, China, or Czechoslovakia. There the society is grey, monochromatic, not multi-colored. If you read a paper, it is government issue, so is radio and television. If you do business, you do it with a government entity. Olympic athletes are government employees, so are all transport services. If you join a club, it is government sponsored and supported. To the extent that churches are allowed, so also are they. All higher education, admissions, curriculum, professional and administrative appointments, are made by the government. Clubs, associations (to use de Tocqueville's word) hotels, entertainment,

hospitals, artistic and cultural activities are an arm of the government. So are, especially, political parties -- of which there is only one.

We take voluntarism so much for granted in America that its importance is really not appreciated until we compare our way of life to that in countries where everything is of the state, by the state, and for the state -- even citizens and their rights.

One might make the point more forcefully here if I were to put to you an interesting question. Suppose that tomorrow the most expensive multibillion dollar endeavor in our land, the federal government, were to suddenly be inactivated. What would be the effect, the impact on your life? I suspect it would be enormously less than if all voluntary associations were suddenly eliminated.

May I make of myself a guinea pig for the moment, to test this hypothesis. I was born in a private hospital and grew up with private medical care, in a private home, not a government apartment. I was supported by money earned by my father who worked for a private concern, the Pittsburgh Plate Glass Company. I attended private school for twenty-three years: parochial elementary and high schools, and three private universities. I was a Boy Scout, swam during the icy Syracuse winters at the YMCA, went to summer scout camp, played on a neighborhood football team. For spending money, I had my own private enterprise: mowing lawns in the summer and shoveling ashes from furnaces in the winter. I went to a church founded and supported voluntarily (thanks to the First Amendment -- an act of genius to launch voluntarism in the religious realm), joined a private religious order, was ordained a priest, taught and administered in a private university. Because I took the vow of poverty, all of my income goes to private causes, one-fourth to my religious community and three-fourths to the University. I belong to a variety of voluntary professional organizations

and clubs. I have served the government in a multiplicity of roles from Commissioner to Chaplin, to Ambassador, and until earlier this year as Chairman of the Select Commission on Immigration and Refugee Policy. I performed these jobs without pay, because it seems more fitting to volunteer my services. Take the voluntary element out of this one life, and there is practically nothing left. De Tocqueville was right when he said later in Chapter Five: "What political power could ever carry on the vast multitude of lesser undertakings which American citizens perform every day?" (P. 116) All of you have had similar experiences in your own lives. All our lives, as presently lived, are inconceivable without the large involvement of voluntary associations, voluntary gifts, and voluntary services.

If you agree with me that all of this voluntarism is good for America and Americans, may I then suggest to you that in our day we are facing a counter movement that strikes at the heart of what has made America great and unique. Despite our history of voluntarism, despite our unique record of doing by and for ourselves what needs doing, I sense that today there is a tendency to say, "Let the government do it." I say in all earnestness that when the government does it, the doing is almost always more costly, less free, more complicated and generally less productive and effective for America and Americans.

Hannah Arendt once made a study of revolutions during the past 200 years that were aimed at human liberation. She judged that only one of them had been successful in liberating the energies and productivity of the vast majority of its people and in showing promise of steady progress towards reaching its highest goals. The one successful revolution took place in the United States. It was successful, Arendt says, because of two prior conditions: first, it could build on the historic traditions of the Anglo-Saxon peoples, pragmatic, modest, distrustful of individual authorities, but still respectful of authority and law; and, second, the success was based on a vast proliferation of voluntary associations.

Now to the extent that we say, "Let the government do it," we are bartering away our freedom, that hard won liberation from royal authority and unjust laws.

We must not underestimate the continuing creative value of voluntarism. I give you as a case study, something that happened only two years ago, a classic example of the private and public sectors of our country cooperating for the common good, both national and international. In this case, their mutual roles were synergistic, not destructive.

Towards the latter half of October, 1979, it suddenly became apparent that almost one-half of the Cambodian population, the educated and professional half, had been brutally exterminated by the Khmer Rouge, the Pol Pot regime, and that the other half was in proximate danger of dying from starvation, disease, and the usual ravages of war. United Nations Secretary General Kurt Waldheim was about to announce a relief plan, Phnom Phen was about to open up a bit, and thousands of refugees were crossing over the Western Kampuchean Border to Thailand. Contrary to a previous order of the Thai government, these later refugees were to be helped, not driven back as before to death and destruction.

At this time, there were more than thirty voluntary organizations, religious and secular, plus several national and international public organizations, interested in staving off this new holocaust. We summoned them all to the Board Room of the Overseas Development Council on October 25, 1979. In two hours, all agreed to act as one. We approved a letter to President Carter and Secretary Waldheim. Then we all went to the White House where President Carter granted our seven requests for government action and pledged over \$60 million for Cambodian relief and rehabilitation.

A few days later, representing all of these agencies, I went to the United Nations with Secretary of State Cyrus Vance. We met with Secretary Waldheim and, together with other nations, pledged a total of more than \$200 million to activate our efforts.

Then Mrs. Carter went to visit the refugee camps on the Thai-Kampuchean border. On her return, we had another all-day meeting at the White House, opened by the President and continued with a report from the First Lady. At this meeting two years ago, we formalized our cooperation under the aegis of the American Council for Voluntary Agencies, established a Cambodian and Thai Border Committee, a Crisis Center in Washington to coordinate information and fund raising, put a representative in the headquarters of UNICEF, the International Committee of the Red Cross, and another in the office of the United States Ambassador-at-large to coordinate all national refugee and relief efforts. This gave us hourly coordination.

On January 29, 1980, we had a third White House meeting of the group to establish a National Committee for Cambodian Relief, again with Mrs. Carter's presence and cooperation.

In the two months between the November and January meetings, we had raised \$30 million, multiplied fifteen times the medical people in the field, reached our quota of 30,000 tons of food delivered in Phon Phen and Thailand, begun rehabilitation efforts and surmounted innumerable roadblocks to progress in the area of distribution.

The impending disaster was averted, the path ahead clarified, and realistic goals established. All this was done in the best American tradition of voluntary leadership and cooperation between public and private, national and international organizations. I truly believe that absent the voluntary effort in the private sector, much of what happened in the public sector would not have been possible. There was no unseemly rivalry, no reaching for publicity or acclaim, just generous and wholehearted cooperation in a good and just cause. No matter that the victims were mainly Buddhist, the effort was mainly Christian and Jewish. No matter that the victims were goverened by various Communist factions backed by the USSR and our

most recent political enemy, North Vietnam, they were suffering and dying human beings who desperately needed help, so we gave it.

This case study is, I believe, a true paradigm of the kind of beneficent, creative, and voluntary activity that de Tocqueville--and Paul in writing to the people of Corinth--had in mind.

There is a spirit here that needs to be rediscovered, cleansed of over-regulation, and reinvigorated in modern America. This spirit is the antithesis of the attitude: "Let the government do it." This spirit transcends the meddling of excessive and irrational federal regulations and nit-picking bureaucrats who pile up mountains of meaningless reports. This spirit surmounts the selfish single-issue zealots, unmindful of the common good of the nation and the world. This spirit springs from free citizens who prize and use their freedom to touch humanity in its basic needs and anguishes, by dedicated service, freely given. Voluntarism, in its variegated manifestations, is America uniquely at its best.

Rather than antagonism, interference, and confrontation of the kind so eloquently denounced by Derek Bok in a recent Public Interest article, "The Federal Government and the University," great American voluntary associations, be they hospitals, social agencies, churches, or universities, should be welcomed by our government into a symbiotic relationship that recognizes the great service voluntarism provides for America and Americans in a way that governments never can. Who would seriously trade the rich texture of our society for the grey monochromatic boredom of most Socialist societies? Who would seriously want to badger into extinction the rich array of voluntary activities that concern themselves with everything from battered children to loving care of the dying?

The spirit of de Tocqueville is also the inspiration of the Christian. There is an integral, organic unity to the life of a Christian. In the broadest sense, the committed Christian is, like Christ the savior, engaged in the creation of a new world and a new man. As Vatican II put it, "We are witnesses to the birth of a new humanism, one in which man is defined first by his responsibility towards his brothers and towards history." One could add, and toward history in the making, the new creation, for this same constitution begins by saying that the Church today must share "the joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties, of men of this age." The presumption spelled out later in the Constitution on "The Church in the Modern World" is that we are going to do something about these hopes and anxieties, that we are going to be engaged in some new creative and salvific action as Christians.

One can say this without identifying all temporal progress with the building of the Kingdom of God, which is by nature eternal. However, while there is a distinction between temporal progress and the growth of the Kingdom, they are and should be closely related in the minds and motives of Christians working for peace and justice; indeed, they must be part of the total endeavor of the one life we live.

There is, then, a profound unity in the divine plan for man, creation, salvation, and the Kingdom of God. Redemption embraces the totality of creation, and those working for a new man and a new earth are very much creating, and redeeming the times as well. There is one history of mankind. It is not static but dynamic, and all that we say, propose, dream, and hope for the development of mankind in our day should be seen <sup>as preparing the way for the Kingdom of God</sup> in the broadest possible historical context, which is also eschatological. Looking ahead to that ultimate Kingdom of Justice, Peace and Love validates, as nothing else can for the Christian, his or her efforts to seek eternity through time, to love God by loving men, to serve and to create,

to build a community of men that may also, by God's grace, be a Kingdom of God. Anything less is unworthy of a christian.

Believing all of this profoundly, and relying on the words the good Lord proposes to use in judging us all, "What you did to one of these, my least brethren, you did it to me," I find no dissonance in a Christian's involvement in the world. In fact, I would be deeply disturbed about a Christian, a Christian community, or a church that did not concern itself seriously in all these temporal matters.

The good Lord left no doubt that He identified the love of neighbor with the love of God Himself. When we feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked, or visit the imprisoned, we do it to Him. When we refuse, we refuse Him. We then love neither God nor neighbor.

And thus is our heritage of voluntarism twofold. From de Tocqueville, we have the image of the free citizen contributing to secular society. From the example of Jesus we as Christians have the mandate to serve others in His name. Let us rededicate ourselves to this legacy.

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