

Sermon delivered by the
REVEREND THEODORE M. HESBURGH, C.S.C.
President of the University of Notre Dame
at the Formal Opening of the School-year
Sacred Heart Church, Sunday, September 26, 1954

"God's gift it is, if speech answers to thought of mine, and thought of mine to the message I am entrusted with. Who else can shew wise men the true path, check them when they stray? We are in his hands, we and every word of ours; our prudence in act, our skill in craftsmanship. Sure knowledge he has imparted to me of all that is; how the world is ordered, what influence have the elements..... all the mysteries and all the surprises of nature were made known to me; wisdom herself taught me, that is the designer of them all.

"Mind-enlightening is the influence that dwells in her; set high apart; one in its source, yet manifold in its operation; subtle, yet easily understood. An influence quick in movement, unassailable, persuasive, gentle, right-thinking, keen-edged, irresistible, beneficent, kindly, proof against all error and all solicitude. Nothing is beyond its power, nothing hidden from its view, and such capacity has it that it can pervade the minds of all living men; so pure and subtle an essence is thought. Nothing so agile that it can match wisdom for agility; nothing can penetrate this way and that, ethereal as she. Steam that ascends from the fervour of divine activity, pure effluence of his glory who is God all-powerful, she feels no passing taint; she, the glow that radiates from eternal light, she, the untarnished mirror of God's majesty, she, the faithful echo of his goodness. Alone, with none to aid her, she is all-powerful; herself ever unchanged, she makes all things new; age after age she finds her way into holy men's hearts, turning them into friends and spokesmen of God. Her familiars it is, none other, that God loves. Brightness is hers beyond the brightness of the sun, and all the starry host; match her with light itself, and she outvies it; light must still alternate with darkness but where is the conspiracy can pull down wisdom from her throne?"

(Wisdom-7:15-30)

We begin the schoolyear today, as a faculty and student body, in prayer. I have mentioned at the opening Mass in other years that we offer this Mass to God, the Holy Spirit, that we might, as a faculty and student body, be granted two great graces: Wisdom to see the road ahead this year in light of the needs of time and eternity; and, secondly, the courage to do all that each of us must do to make our personal contribution to the living, growing reality of Notre Dame.

Others might well be here in our place today. There are other men, more intelligent, more courageous than we are, more zealous men, holier men. But, by the grace of God, we are what we are. And, in the Providence of God, we are Notre Dame this year. So being what we are, no more and no less, we pray for light to see and strength to do. To see what and to do what?

(more)

I fear at times that all of us are too close to what is happening here to grasp the real vision of what we are trying to do, even to appreciate what we are praying for today. We are not alone in this. Hundreds of universities are beginning a new school year this month. Many of them are larger than Notre Dame, some of them are older. But the only significant question today is: How many of them are better than Notre Dame as universities. Excellence as such has no direct relation to size or age. A small diamond is better than a huge rhinestone, and a youthful saint is better than an aged sinner. Excellence in the case of universities, however, does have a direct relation to what universities are supposed to do and how they are performing their proper function. It is highly significant to ask in this context: How do we compare?

Comparisons are said to be odious. I suspect that this dictum was coined by those who compared poorly with the best of their kind. The comparison in this present instance is particularly complicated by the general confusion regarding the purpose of university education: the only valid standard by which university excellence may be judged. Before we compare ourselves with any others, we should at least be clear ourselves as to what we are aspiring to do, and the adequacy of our means. Someone might say at this juncture: Is it not slightly ridiculous, after 112 years of operation, to ask what are we trying to do? If you think it ridiculous try to answer the question yourself, in a way that will do justice to the history and the tradition of the highest Catholic learning.

We have grown greatly in the past 112 years. We have our own power plant, fire station, laundry, hotel, and will shortly have our own shopping center and television station. However related these are to the general operation here, it would be ridiculous to see in them, or even in our magnificent academic buildings, an indication of excellence in our primary objective as a great Catholic university. In any consideration of physical plant, we compare favorably with many of the best universities, but ultimately the physical comparison is fruitless and somewhat unrelated to excellence as a university. The inner burning question is still pressing for an answer. What are we primarily trying to do and how are we doing it?

The question might be rephrased and asked in more familiar form: Why have a great Catholic university, or any Catholic university at all? The only legitimate answer would have to demonstrate that a Catholic university has a function, as university and precisely as Catholic, fulfilled by no other. This function would have to meet a real and vital need in the world today, a need being met by no other agent. All other universities would suffer by comparison to such a providential institution. This institution would be proud of its place in the world, would fulfill its mission with enthusiastic zeal and unrelenting effort.

We are praying this morning in the Mass for the wisdom and the courage to be such an institution, to be not just what we are today and have been, however good that is, but to be what, by the Grace of God and the demand of the times, and the richness of our heritage, Notre Dame could and should be,

Universities, like all other human institutions, came into being because men saw in them an answer to a crying human need. Of course, these needs vary somewhat from age to age. This results in a varied emphasis on the part of the university. This much though, I think, should be stated as a matter of stable principle regarding university objectives, irrespective of the actual cultural, political, religious, or economic climate of any age: The university is by its essential nature committed to the mission of learning and teaching. The university is born when human minds are at work together for intellectual purposes. The university prospers when men are willing to stand firmly for the value of things intellectual, to devote themselves wholeheartedly to study and learning and teaching that the
(more)

human intellect may "become richer and stronger, broader in appreciation and sympathy, more firm in judgement, more sure in action... to gain at last some measure of wisdom, some vision of truth, some understanding of the Will of God."

It was such a vision and such an intellectual human need that first drew men together in an association that became a university at Paris, Bologna, Louvain, Chartres, Oxford, and Cambridge. It might be noted that all these were Catholic universities too, since all their learning was ordered under theegis of theology, the highest wisdom. They were not called Catholic then, as there was nothing else comparable that would necessitate this qualification. They are not Catholic today because much has happened since, religiously, culturally, politically, and economically, to further complicate this essential intellectual task of the university. There is nothing we can do to change what has transpired since the founding of the first universities. But we can and must try to understand this historical background in its dynamism and general direction, because it has fashioned the world we live in today. Our particular task as a modern Catholic university is certainly more complicated than in mediaeval times. Yet, our work today is more challenging, and certainly more vitally needed because of the climate in which we do live.

How summarize what has happened? The very listing of the historical figures brings to mind the strong currents of new theologies and new philosophies that made the ordered flow of knowledge a swirling, churning vortex of conflicting assertions and denials. Luther and Calvin, Francis Bacon, Descartes, and Rousseau, Hobbes, Locke, and Voltaire, Hume, Kant, and Hegel, Darwin, James, and Dewey. This is part of the geneology.

It is equally difficult to summarize the kaleidoscopic nightmare of isms that have ebbed and flowed through these past four centuries: rationalism, skepticism, agnosticism and atheism; voluntarism, pragmatism, dialectic materialism, and existentialism; positivism, scientism, mechanism, and relativism. However good the intentions, however valid the critical spirit, however sincere the authors, one cannot view the actual results the world we have inherited today, without shuddering at the formidable task of putting all the pieces back into order again. Nothing has escaped this intellectual disorder - neither man in his spirit, his mind and his will, not society, government, history, or law not the world itself, nor God who made it. All are denied, denatured, despiritualized. And as a somber closing note, we find a growing distrust of intellectuals and things intellectual by those who should ordinarily look to great minds for leadership.

One ray of light, one road of hope remains. Minds have created this disorder and minds alone can begin to remake the order that has largely been lost. It was for this purpose that God gave us our minds - that there might be order and ordered growth in man and in his world. It was for this purpose that the mediaeval universities were founded - to further the acquisition of those intellectual virtues of understanding, wisdom, science, prudence, and art. It was through such discipline of the mind that the first universities hoped to influence persons and society, to quench the thirst for truth in the minds of men, to enable the intelligence of man to order and dispose human acts in the light of truth in all its fullness. This was a high calling at that time. It is an even higher calling today, given the need of our times for what we alone as a Catholic University can offer; adequacy of knowledge, truth in all its fullness, human and divine.

A Protestant educator had to remind us recently that ours is the richest and most constant intellectual tradition in the Western World. What does this tradition say? It says that there is a God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. That He made all that is, and man particularly after His image and likeness: with spiritual endowments of intelligence and free will, and an eternal destiny of perfect happiness

(more)

with God. It says that man is fallen, but not totally corrupted, that Adam's fall was a kind of felicitous error since the Son of God became man in the person of Jesus Christ. That Christ lived and died to redeem us, and founded an age-long mystical body to continue His work of incarnation and redemption, to teach, govern, and sanctify all men in Christ. That men are persons, free and equal as sons of God and brothers of Christ, endowed with dignity and called to greatness. This tradition prizes the power of man's mind in all of its search for truth and the expression of truth through science, art, philosophy, and, most highly, through theology, wherein man is given a direct assist in his quest for truth through God's own revelation. This tradition prizes the freedom of man, not as absolute, but as a power to choose what is best, even the divine. This tradition cherishes and promotes the inviolability of man's rights as a person, seeks justice and charity, law and order, truth, the good and the beautiful. The century-long tradition of Christian wisdom seeks all of these things in order and symmetry, in peace and understanding, and would have them produce a profound and rich Christian culture today, even as in the latter dark ages it disciplined minds and souls and drew men from barbarism into a world of natural and supernatural reality. This tradition is the same one that created legal institutions when the Western World was in transition from barbarism to civilization; this tradition fostered the arts, preserved the documents, founded the schools and universities and taught men that they could know, love, and serve God while transfiguring the natural world by the intelligence, and freedom, and creativity that are in man's nature because he is made in God's image.

If we have been at times unmindful of this tradition, how could we have forgotten the great persons who made it live and grow in their day. Athanasius, Leo, Augustine, Ambrose, Gregory, Bede, Bernard, Albert, Aquinas, Bonaventure, all intellectual giants, and holy men, too, for as Rabanus Maurus said, no one can perfectly achieve wisdom unless he loves God. Then there were the great creative geniuses in literature and the arts - Dante, Chaucer, Fra Angelico, Michaelangelo, Da Vinci, Thomas More, Palestrina, Pascal; science has had its share and more - Copernicus, Galileo, Linacre, Lavoisier, Pasteur, Mendel, even our own Nieuwland.

How, one might ask, could the intellectual climate of the Western World have become so clouded if such is the strong tradition and such the valiant men. Perhaps the answer to this question may hurt, but it should be faced. The tradition of Christian wisdom was more vital centuries ago than it is today. The great Catholic scholars were more plentiful in the past than they are in the present. Why? I fear that the dynamic and creative forces behind the movement were dissipated by the turn of events and became less vital. Christian philosophy spent itself in dialectics and sterile distinctions, did not keep pace with an awakening scientific curiosity and method. Catholic theology repeated itself into formalistic patterns that were more mindful of the enemy without than the eternal spring of new Christian life and wisdom within. We defended the walls, but we ceased to build the city, and we looked too seldom to the new problems beyond the walls in the new secularistic city of man.

All this may be explained away by saying that at least we still live and still do have schools and universities - but again comes the agonizing inquiry: Are we really doing all we might do to redeem and re-order and revivify the world in which we live today?

I grant that it is easy to condemn the past. Our own American past gives us much to be thankful for. Notre Dame's own history is a thrilling account of sacrifice, devotion, and sheer pioneering doggedness that brought this University from a low grade grammar school to what it is today.

(more)

But the present and the future are our immediate problem as we begin the 113th year in Notre Dame's history. I would say to you today that the pioneering days of childhood and youth are over. And if we are staggered to think of the Herculean tasks already performed in childhood and youth, I would further stagger you with the thought that to be true to our vital mission, even more prodigious tasks are ahead to achieve maturity.

I would apply to ourselves today the fullness of the words of two great men, Leo XIII and Bishop Spaulding regarding universities:

Leo XIII wrote: "The end of the Catholic university forever will be this: with the light of Catholic truth showing the way to provide for youth in our country the fullness and the best of learning on the highest levels."

And Bishop Spaulding: "A true university will be the home of ancient wisdom and new learning; it will teach the best that is known and encourage research; it will stimulate thought, refine taste, and awaken a love of excellence; it will be at once a scientific institute, a school of culture and a training ground in the business of life; it will educate the minds that give direction to the age, it will be the nursery of ideas, a center of influence.....that which is the strongest in man is mind, and when a mind truly vigorous, open, supple and illuminated reveals itself, we follow in its path of light."

Here is no physical task of survival in a raw new land. Here is a demanding spiritual task of the highest order, in fullest accord with the rich age-old tradition of Christian wisdom. Here is an apostolate that no secular university today can undertake - for they are largely cut off from the tradition of adequate knowledge which comes only through faith in the mind and faith in God, the highest wisdom of Christian philosophy and Catholic theology.

Here is a task that requires that we be conscious of our past heritage, and enthusiastic in bringing new insights of Christian wisdom to the present. Here is a task for the greatest minds, and the most devoted hearts and completely dedicated lives.

I know of no other spot on earth where we might make a better beginning than here at Notre Dame, where we might inaugurate a new center of Christian culture to effect a re-awakening of the potential of Christian wisdom applied to the problems of our age.

This is no work of defense, no declaration of war, no practice in isolation, but a move to revitalize our own understanding of the treasure of supreme intellectualism and divine faith, wedded in strength and beauty. It means working together, each with our own particular talents to exploit the full power of Christian wisdom to order what is disordered, to complete what is good but incomplete, to meet insufficient knowledge with the fullness of truth, to give a new direction and a wider, saner perspective to all that is good and true in our times.

The time is ripe, The old errors are sunk in frustration, and pessimism and disorder. Men of good will are not wanting. Darkness awaits a light. We have done and are doing, a wide variety of good things at Notre Dame. If we do everything else and fail in this, our proper task, our high calling, our providential mission, then as we pray in the presence of God here today, we will be unworthy servants, and a failure as a Catholic university.

Let us pray then, sincerely and humbly this morning, as we begin another academic year. Let us ask again and again for wisdom and courage, the light to see and the strength to do what the times demand and the richness of our heritage promises.

end