

(Sermon delivered by the Reverend Theodore M. Hesburgh, C.S.C., President of the University of Notre Dame, at the opening of the school-year, September 23, 1956, Sacred Heart Church.)

"And He (Christ) himself gave some men as apostles, and some as prophets, others again as evangelists, and others as pastors and teachers, in order to perfect the saints for a work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the deep knowledge of the Son of God, to perfect manhood, to the mature measure of the fullness of Christ."  
(Eph. IV, 11-13)

This morning, as we begin a new schoolyear with the Solemn Mass of the Holy Spirit, I would like to ponder with you some of the implications of the inspired words of St. Paul which we have just read. Last week, I was speaking with an alumnus who had not been on this campus for twenty years. He was, of course, astounded at the growth that is everywhere manifest. For those of us who live and work here, the blessings of the past twenty years are indeed a cause for joy and real reason for thanksgiving.

I know you will forgive me if I pause in this feeling of satisfaction, and ask some disturbing questions. In many ways, the growth and progress of Notre Dame have paralleled the magnificent advance of our own beloved America. Most human institutions, even of religious origin, tend to mirror in many ways the circumstantial aspects of the times, the spirit, yes even the weaknesses of the particular environment in which they grow.

Few can question the material growth of America or of Notre Dame. But the physical growth of a person or of a human institution is no guarantee of inner human growth, of mature spiritual perfection, of the kind of fulfillment that alone is important in assessing the true value of a country, a

person, or an institution. Physical growth can indeed become a kind of seduction, wherein we assume, from outward appearance, the existence of inner vitality and equal accomplishment in the line of mature interior excellence.

As you know, however, the two perfections, physical and spiritual, do not necessarily go together. Nor are they achieved by the same effort, or the same means. Physical growth in an institution is mainly a matter of money, masonry, and mortar. Spiritual perfection in its essence needs none of these. Rather, it begins with the human understanding of an ideal, the consecration of human minds and hearts to a task most worthy of man, but most difficult, because each new peak of perfection that is conquered finds a newer and higher prominence behind it, yet to be climbed. It is much easier to achieve physical growth, as a person or an institution, and to call it a day. But this never makes for a great person, or a great institution, because spirit alone vivifies matter and endows it with higher dignity and value.

Some thoughtful people have questioned whether or not the physical growth of America today has been matched by a corresponding development of our spiritual wisdom and moral character. The same question might be asked of Notre Dame, not in a carping spirit of criticism, but in a reflective mood of self-analysis that is linked to the sincere desire for the greatest possible perfection in the high task committed to us. It is certainly no

less true of universities, than of men, that the unexamined life is not worth living.

The inner growth of a university depends in large measure upon the excellence of its faculty. It is more than the sum total of their individual talents, however, because a university is a community of scholars working together, not a mere collection of individual good minds, haphazardly and geographically assembled in one place. Now collaborative human effort in a university requires some unity of spirit and ideal, some human understanding and sharing of the great dignity of the endeavor. In the nature of the world we live in, with its often superficial judgments and attitudes, some members of the university community will often receive a larger measure of praise and plaudits for accomplishments that are, in reality, the work of all. Yet, at the heart of the endeavor and in the eyes of God, each member must know that he belongs and is important and vital to the task.

Our opening text from St. Paul addresses itself to this problem, in the exact context of the Church. This is helpful to us too, because Notre Dame is, among other things, a work of the Church and, moreover, the work of Notre Dame highlights one of the great opportunities and deep problems of the Church today: that of priests and laymen working fruitfully together in a common endeavor. There is a meaningful historical and theological background to the position of the laity in the Catholic Church.

In modern times, some have accused Catholic laymen of being passive and silent by-standers in the work of the Church. There is some considerable truth in this accusation, and I am not implying that it is entirely the fault of the laymen, or that this is as it should be.

As usual, history gives us an understandable background of the situation. In earliest times, St. Paul spoke with great affection of those laymen who helped him with his great mission to the gentiles. The situation of a too passive laity in recent centuries is perhaps best explained by the doctrinal emphasis on hierarchical authority following the negation of this authority in the Reformation, when the preacher was substituted for the priest, when the sermon replaced the Holy Sacrifice, and private interpretation was judged superior to traditional pronouncement. Re-emphasis in time of crisis may then have strengthened the position of embattled clergy, but quite another phenomenon is taking place today, and this time it is the laity whose position in the Church is being reaffirmed, again historically in the face of crisis. The crisis of our times is the almost universal divorce of the spiritual from the temporal order, the capital sin of our age, the process of secularism, which someone has aptly described as the practice of the absence of God. In this present crisis, the layman is the key man. The solution to secularism must be a work of mediation between the two orders. The layman is in a perfect position to mediate: as a member of the Church, he is in the spiritual order; and as a layman, he

is, by definition, in the temporal order. However, one does not mediate merely by being in a circumstantial position to do so. The layman must understand his position, the true inner nature of the problem, and have the power to act. This is where we leave history and enter theology.

To understand fully the position of the layman in the Church, one must understand the Church. And to understand the Church, one must understand Christ. It would be utter presumption to cover this vast field of theology in so few words, but the main lines of thought may be indicated with the hope that all of you may study the matter more deeply as it deserves, and indeed requires, for full comprehension.

In the fullness of time, God sent His only begotten Son into the world to restore to men full access to eternal union with Him, to which all mankind is destined, by the great goodness of God, our Creator. The work of reuniting God and man was also a task of mediation, and Christ, Our Lord, is the great, and in a true sense, the only eternal Mediator of all time. His basic work of mediation was accomplished for all time in His Person, by His Incarnation, wherein the Eternal Son of God is born of the Blessed Virgin Mary; God becomes man and dwells among us. God and man are substantially united in His Person. The act of sacrificial redemption on Calvary is not the end of the story, but only the beginning of the great drama of redemption and salvation that goes on as long as there are men to be saved. The important part of the story for us this morning is that while Christ's work of redemption and salvation happened

once for all, in His divine plan it is applied man by man in every age, and every man has his own proper part to play in the redemptive process. It might have been different, but the fact is that Christ wished to associate us with Him, and, for this reason, He established His Church, His mystical body of which He is the Head and we the members. Christ, Our Lord, said that He came to give life and give it more abundantly. The Church is not just a juridical organization, but a life giving body. We are incorporated into this body by Baptism, reborn to the very divine life of Christ, Our Head. Through the sacraments, this life is nurtured and grows. We are not independent of each other because we live the same divine life of Christ, Our Head. In serving others, we serve Christ, and if we should despise another, we despise Christ.

The particular point I would highlight here is that no one is unimportant in the Church, because all of us have the same basic dignity as members of Christ, partakers of His divine life. All truth, all grace, all power, all dignity in the Church, from Pope to peasant, is from Christ. And because we share His life, we also share His work of redemption, not all in the same measure, but all truly participate if the redemptive work is to be accomplished as He wishes. This is why the Catholic laity have been exhorted by every recent Holy Father to take active part in the prayer life of the Church through the liturgical movement, that inwardly all of us may grow to the full maturity of the life of Christ together. And because life is manifested by works, there has been a constant appeal for lay participation in the works of the Church through the lay apostolate. In speaking to some

pilgrims at Rome, Pius XII recently said: "You do not merely belong to the Church; you are the Church." For the Church, ultimately is the presence of Christ in the world today, in each of us, still living and working at the age-long task of bringing God to men and men to God, through Christ and in Christ. And so it may truly be concluded that, to the extent that Christ lives in us, to that extent is our work Christ-like and of eternal value.

Against this historical and theological background, I would now like to sketch briefly the task of the layman who lives in the temporal as well as spiritual order. The great danger is twofold: that the orders be kept absolutely separate, the secularistic scheme of things, or that they be hopelessly confused, as those do who would substitute piety for competence. The temporal and spiritual orders are indeed distinct, but certainly need not be separate. Human nature and divine nature are distinct realities in Christ, but united in His person. His humanity did not suffer from the union, but was ineffably glorified and enriched. Nor was divinity diminished, for only by becoming man could Christ give us the supreme evidence of God's love for man by dying for us as a man. Our work, in a modern secularistic world, must but be patterned on these great supernatural realities. The lay man must have a clear view of both orders if he is to be a Christian humanist in the modern world. The alternative is utter naturalism, or a pseudo-supernaturalism. The layman must respect the values of both orders, too, as well as the proper objectives and

techniques of both orders, if his life and work are to have balance and full significance, and if he himself is to be equal to the challenge of secularism.

In the spiritual order, the plane of the Church, the layman's action is directed towards eternal values, towards God and the things of God, towards the goal of eternal life for himself and those about him. Here the layman is engaged in liturgical and apostolic life as a member of the Body of Christ, he offers prayers and sacrifices and indeed participates in the re-offering of the Sacrifice of Christ in the Mass. He practices virtue so that Christ may be manifest in him; he lives his faith and serves with the freedom of the sons of God. This you may say is his life in Christ and God.

In the temporal order, the plane of the world, if you will, the layman's action is directed towards the goods of time. Here the layman acts as a citizen of the earthly city and he takes his legitimate part in the affairs of humanity in time. The values he works for may be of the intellectual or moral order, they will certainly involve civilization and culture, works of science or art, the political, economic, and social exigencies of daily living. I would underscore here again that all these are real values. The important work of mediation is this: these earthly values, insofar as they are true and good, may be revived, elevated, offered to God by the man of the spirit who engages in them. In this way, our activities in the affairs of time will never become final ends. And,



on the other hand, we will not be tempted to offer to God a mediocre service in the temporal order, for God is not honored by poor art of shoddy science, or shady politics, or a sensualist culture.

What is needed so desperately today is what Maritain calls the integral humanist, the whole man who is really at home, temporarily in time and eternally in eternity, the man who respects both orders, and neglects neither, the man who has been completely revived by the grace of Christ, whose faith and hope and charity are able to renew, direct, and revivify the things of time, and to achieve the human good in all its fullness in time while referring it to the eternal good that awaits beyond. This is the man who cherishes the higher wisdom and is not afraid to let it shine through his life and work on to the things of time. Without this man, I know not how the elevating and eternal spirit of the Gospel, the saving presence of Christ, is going to be manifest in the many quarters of this modern world where the temporal order and the things of time have become ends in themselves, divorced from any higher wisdom, any nobler law, any breath of God and the things of God.

The world is poorer today for secularism, and will be poorer still if the work of incarnation does not take root in the lives of our laymen. I know of no place where this new breath of divine life could more effectively grow and multiply than here at Notre Dame. Many of our concerns are of the temporal order, but all about us there are reminders

that this is not a lasting city. Our work of education is in the world, but never completely of the world. We have priests and laymen side by side; we are committed to a higher wisdom while working effectively for all the perfection that is possible in the things of time. And there is a undefinable spirit of devotion and consecration here that alone can explain what has already been accomplished and the great things that we yet aspire to accomplish.

We began by reading the words of St. Paul to the Ephesians, where he describes how Christ has provided for many functions in His Mystical Body, the Church, and how all of these various functions are for the building up of the Body, until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the deep knowledge of the Son of God, to perfect manhood, to the mature measure of the fullness of Christ. I would like to conclude with the words of St. Paul which immediately follow this passage:

"We are no longer to be children, no longer to be like storm-tossed sailors, driven before the wind of each new doctrine that human subtlety, human skill in fabricating lies, may propound. We are to follow the truth, in a spirit of love, and so grow up, in everything, into a due proportion with Christ, who is our head. On him all the body depends; it is organized and unified by each contact with the source which supplies it; and thus, each limb receiving the active power it needs, it achieves its natural growth, building itself up through love."