

ND ALUMNI  
AUG 1971

# NOTRE DAME'S NEW BREED

Fr. Hesburgh talks about today's Notre Dame student.

*The following is an edited version of a conversation between the Rev. Theodore M. Hesburgh CSC, University president, and newsman Frank Reynolds on the American Broadcasting Company's program, "Directions." The interview occurred in May.*

**Are you generally optimistic about these young men who are leaving Notre Dame now?** Yes, I'm really more optimistic than I should be, but I'm generally very



optimistic. They're a kind of new breed and I look forward to hearing a good deal about them in the years to come.

**Why are they a new breed?**

Well, they've been sensitized to a lot of things that I don't think I was that much sensitized to when I graduated from here a long time ago. They, in a sense, bear more of the world's burdens and problems and moral crises on their shoulders in a way that graduates of the past—if they go back 10 or 20 years—really didn't.

**They've had different concerns here, too, haven't they, than those of 10 or 15 years ago?** That's right. I remember going through college in the '30's. I heard practically nothing about Asia or Latin America or poverty. There wasn't a single black student in school at that time. None on the faculty. We didn't know what the word "Chicano" meant, although it existed at that time. Today it's a whole different ball game. These

youngsters live in a different kind of world, they have a different kind of concern. They've been morally sensitized to a degree that is very good if they continue to be morally sensitized and do something about it. If I could oversimplify a little bit, I'd almost have a new definition for what I hope for graduates from this university: that is that they not only be compassionate regarding the plight of everybody in difficulty through poverty, through injustice or through underdevelopment or whatever, but they be very competent to do something about it. The problem you get into today is that you've got a lot of compassionate people running around but they're not competent to do something about it. If you get the two of those together, competence, which pertains to the head, and compassion, which pertains to the heart, then

you've got a good graduate.

**Do you think they're optimistic about their ability to influence the country, to bring about change?** Well, I'm not sure they're as optimistic as I am. Like all young men, hope runs high and idealism runs high, and they haven't really had much of life's acid on them. They have to really come up against those great obstacles, social progress and social change. Then I think they may be a little more realistic. I hope they don't lose their idealism in the process or get cynical. That would be the worst thing of all.

**They of course will find that perhaps their overall view may seem to be in conflict with their own personal well-being.** At times. But this is the first generation I've known that is

willing to do something about their idealism even to the extent of downward mobility socially and economically . . . .

I've had two or three youngsters stand in this very office since the last week or so, and just say "Look, I've just come to the conclusion that violence doesn't solve anything, war doesn't solve anything. I'm not going in the Army or go in the service and kill people. Now, if I've got to go to jail, I'll go to jail."

Now I find it hard to believe, see myself at their age in that circumstance, graduating from the university, being willing to go to jail because of the way I feel about something like this.

**Are the young Catholic men today, products of a Catholic university such as this, are they as religious in the sense of their adherence to institutionalized religion?** I'd honestly have to say no. Again, a lot swings on what you call religion, but you qualified it by saying, in the institutional sense, which I would imagine means going to church as often as they did in the past. . . . In one sense, this generation seems to be against institutions. They feel that institutions somehow have not served as a good enough purpose, or haven't done their task as they should. I guess that begins with government to some extent. Many of them are anti-government in some senses. Some are against church as institution. Some of them are really against their families as institutions or their neighborhoods or the clubs that their folks go to and that sort of thing.

It's an oversimplification of a tough philosophical question about what is the role of institutions in a person's life. I think if you were to cancel out the whole government or the whole church and everything else tomorrow morning, you'd start reinstitutionalizing them the next day. Because institutions are kinds of structures that we all lean against. They glue society together and they communalize, if you will, the kind of actions we have to take, whether in worship or in governing or in raising a family. But the difficult part for these youngsters is that they like to think they're being motivated by some interior fine force — which I'm in favor of incidentally—which they call love and you might call divine grace or something else. And some of them are very curious in their reaction. If you say to them, for ex-



ample, you've got to go to Mass on Sunday, they may go Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday and Saturday, but not on Sunday. They want to feel they're going, not because they were told to go but because they want to go. What they're really saying is that they don't want to just go to church for the sake of going to church, because it's the thing you ought to do; they want to go to church to do something, they want to do something together, they want to do it as a group. They want it to represent a common concern, a common prayer, not some souped-up prayer that comes out of some person's mind, be it mine or anybody else's.

**Is the church responding to this properly do you believe?** The church is like every institution, it's just terribly hard to keep up with this constant flow of change and new ideas . . . . There are two concepts here: One is renewal and the other is reform. Now renewal is a thing of the spirit, it's the thing that people renew their lives, institutions in a sense renew their spirit, and this grew very fast on the church during the Council and following the Council. It was like the Spirit was really working overtime in the church and we were responding and a lot of new things were coming up, new ideas, new concepts, new dedication. But the poor old institution, it's something solid, steady, and it's been around for thousands and thousands of years and it has to reform its structures, it has to reform its procedures, its law, its self-perception. And that's a lot harder than the instantaneous renewal of the spirit.

**I remember as a boy all the novenas and so forth. You'd count all the Hail Mary's, ten thousand Hail Mary's, for the poor children of Africa or the starving children of India and it was almost like it was quantitative rather than qualitative.** That is completely gone. It's a curious thing, but anything at all quantitative, you can forget it as far as these youngsters are concerned. It isn't that they don't yearn for religion. The curious thing is that at a time when they're turning away from institutions, or at least getting turned off by institutions, they are turning to religion. That's why I say you've got to qualify what you mean by religion. I would guess that . . . as I sit here and read some of the things they write nowadays,

there's a kind of spiritual perception, there's kind of a deep-seated Christianity. The way they would criticize me in my own job here . . . they'll say, "Are you really running a Christian institution?" How can you do this and this when this is a Christian institution? They know they've got me dead to rights, because some of the things that we have done probably weren't very Christian, and their concerns are pretty much on target.

**I remember a quote from one of your speeches, "The events of the past 15 years have created in this nation a truly new generation of young people who fully believe that the conscience of the nation can be moved to do good without undue delay and years of waiting." Do you think they really believe that?** They are believing it less than they did. I'd say a year ago they believed it more than they do now. But I'm hoping that during the next year, by really activating this 18-year-old vote, by saying, now if you're really serious about this get yourselves registered and vote, and vote for people who come through to you as being concerned about the top priorities of this nation, what the priorities should be, and my guess is that this is going to make an enormous difference.

**I wonder if they'll find any heroes among the . . .** Well, this is a real problem. I was talking to a lady reporter yesterday and she asked me, "Who are your heroes?" and she caught me flat-footed. I started to think and I said, "Living or dead?" And she said, "Well, if you've got to resort to dead ones, okay, but who are the living ones?" And I said, "I think I have to say I don't have any."

**And the students feel the same way?** We're living in the age of the anti-hero of course, but I believe the students definitely need a few heroes. You can live without them, but it's better to have a few.

**On the subject of heroes and personalities, how do your students feel about the Berrigans?** They would be heroes of a sort. I don't think students would necessarily identify completely with all that the Berrigans do and their whole style of life, but I would say the great majority would have deep sympathy for them. The great majority would think they are being persecuted a little bit beyond what is deserved, and I would say even

those who might philosophically differ from the Berrigans, at least as far as their methods of protest, would be sympathetic to them.

Someone asked me yesterday, are you turning out a thousand Berrigans here at Notre Dame? I said, I don't think so. I'm not sure the world could stand a thousand Berrigans, but it sure needs a few, and there are a number of our youngsters that would identify very closely with them.

**The war has certainly been a major cause of the disenchantment of the young people of the country with the government. How serious do you assess our domestic wounds?** . . . . The country has a great resiliency and it responds beautifully to great leadership and I would think what the country needs at this point is some great inspiring kind of leadership. Where it's going to come from, I don't know. I'm not knocking the President because leadership requires followership and some of the things you're going to have to lead on are not very popular, like the whole civil rights area.

Every time we come out with a statement from the Civil Rights Commission about better housing or better integrated schools or doing something about ghettos or more employment, I can be absolutely sure that I'm going to get a bushel basket full of hate mail the next day. And I suppose you could multiply that by ten thousand as far as the President is concerned.

But, we've got to get through to the total American people the ideals that this country stands for. There's no question we've been terribly polarized, even within groups that are normally close together. To illustrate this, in the spring of the year, all of us at Notre Dame go around the alumni circuit. And I have found this past year that it's very difficult to talk about the things that I think are significant in the world today. These are things like war and peace, human rights, poverty, and welfare. It's difficult to talk about them without polarizing the group. Because the country at large is so polarized about many of these things. Polarization starts sifting down into groups that are normally pretty homogeneous like a Notre Dame alumni group.

On the other hand, I find that if you can put it in ideal enough terms, and if you can show that you can't really be against justice, and you

can't really be against peace, and you can't really be against doing things that reflect on the sanctity of human life and the dignity of man, that somehow people can be lifted out of their prejudices and brought together in a common endeavor. But that's an act of leadership that is desperately needed at this point.

**I wonder how today's students will be when they have responsibility a few years from now, I mean responsibility for the schools and for other social . . .** I often kid them and I say I hope you don't grow up and become fat-headed like some of your elders who are not that idealistic, who perhaps are cynical. I think you'll have to say, if you have studied human nature, that some of them are going to go that road too. But I would hope that enough of them keep this kind of pristine purity of soul, or this clear commitment to what is right and just—that they put that strain into our society in the years ahead.

**Do you find when you go around the country that somehow you're considered a spokesman for the bomb throwers and the radicals?** Well, if you say to the country, there's a very simple way of getting law and order: work for justice, because justice is the price of law and order. You can't get justice without law and order. I think the reason you have disorder in society is that people just get frustrated. They say there's no other way of getting people's attention. Nothing happens. And the worst thing a society can do is to put a price on violence. If every time people are violent then you get action, the way to get action is to be violent. Now I don't believe in violence as a means of getting action, but I'd say that if you push people to that as a last alternative, that's what you get. The way to avoid that kind of attention-getting device is to have people convinced that you're working for justice.

You take in the university, just to give you a quick example. I've been fairly tough around here about saying we want law and order and we don't want people doing goofy things and disturbing the rationality and the civility that have to characterize the university. But, I'm perfectly willing to say that every good idea that you have as students, I'm for it. I'll do everything I can to achieve it. For every bit of justice that you want to achieve in this University and in the society surrounding us, I'll work as

hard as you are. Now if they see that you really mean that, they'll take anything you say on law and order because they see that you need law and order to achieve that kind of goal.

**You mentioned sometimes you run into a little difficulty traveling around talking to alumni groups, people who are a bit older than the students here at Notre Dame. It's got to be a two-way street, this generation-gap bridging if we're going to do it. Does the self-righteousness of the students, or the apparent self-righteousness sometimes turn you off?** Well, I suppose I try a little harder to understand them because I've spent my life living with students. My whole adult life has been in the University. I grant you, there is a certain self-righteousness. There's a certain naïvete, there are certain simplistic approaches to very tough problems that are not going to be answered easily. That's why I've tried to push within our own educational system for them getting out into the community. It gives them a dimension of realism they don't get just being in a classroom. For example, I think that when a thousand of our students go downtown to tutor, they find out that teaching isn't as easy as it looks. They may have griped about bad teaching. When they try to do it themselves, it's not quite as easy. In the summer many of our youngsters go out and go into social action programs. They do a lot of work in Latin America and Mexico and down along the border. They build houses, do manual labor of various kinds, try to help a community upgrade itself through co-operatives. They learn that very important lesson: No social progress comes easily and that you can't sit in the room and run a revolution. You've got to—if you want to revolutionize people's thoughts—spend a long time reasoning with them. . . .

If we could ever get these two generations working together (and that's what I'm hoping the political process and the early vote will do, because they'll have to work with candidates) they'll have to work in the tough part of the political process—the ringing of doorbells and the stuffing of envelopes and that sort of thing. They won't all be speech writers. When they do that tough work and find out how good it is to get a good man elected, or how difficult it is to get people just to get out and vote . . . then I think we'll get a better realism. They'll begin to have

a little more respect for the expertise of their elders, for the hard-thinking of people who really know a field and have worked in it, who bear all the scars and have had the acid of life on them, and who now are much more realistic without having lost their ideals.

**Do you ever suggest to the people who complain to you about the youth of America, how bad it would be if they weren't behaving as they are now? Suppose they were apathetic, which they were not too many years ago?** Every country needs a little burr under the saddle, and one thing is very revealing. We brought the presidents of about a hundred of our alumni clubs here and they lived in the residence halls with the students. Many of them came here with much criticism about the University—it was too permissive, it was too open. . . . After being here a week, living in the residence halls with the students, they passed a unanimous vote of support for the students, the faculty, and for the administration even. If somehow we can keep this conversation going between young and old, realizing that the young have some inspiration, some drive, some generosity, some enthusiasm to put into the older society and that the older society has all kinds of realism and tough expertise and hard work to put in with them, to join with these ideals. Then we get the country pulling together. That's what we need.

