

PRIORS COUNCIL ADDRESS - 1980

Grace is yours and peace from God our Father and the Lord, Jesus Christ.

I am glad to be here with Eunice and all of you. Last Saturday evening Eunice and I were out in Mansfield, Ohio. Fifty years ago, Joe and I were graduated from high school in the same class there and they were having the fiftieth class reunion. There were about 300 in the class. To indicate what happens over 50 years, about 25% of the people showed up with spouses, which wasn't, I think, a bad percentage. Another 25% were no longer here. For about 10% we didn't know their whereabouts. There were approximately 50% that didn't get there although some of them lived in that town. Joe was the president of the class. It so happened that I was asked to say a word at the very beginning. Just as I got up I noticed on the programme a list of the deceased, and there was my name with a blue pencil run through it. I want you to know that I haven't felt so good for a long time. I did say to them that if there was any prize that I ought to get the prize for coming the largest distance. And, just to show you how kind they were, no one asked where I came from.

It is significant that John Cock should just have spoken about the "global dance." You have just seen a few slides about my brother Joe. It was this trip we took together in 1963 that made him a global person. You have seen him dance in Africa and on the awe-inspiring brink of Victory Falls. It is about that that I wish to speak.

A few weeks ago the young Roman Catholic theologian, John Shea, published a book on Stories of Faith. It is right down your alley. He speaks of Mystery; of meaning in mystery; of pondering this meaning; of relating it to the issues of daily living; of speaking of it not in the specialized language of religion but of everyday language.

He writes poetically of dance. The setting is between the crucifixion-burial and the resurrection. Death, Sin and Fate struggle for dominance, but it is the dancing man Jesus who prevails:

Now the sun,
which Ecclesiastes says always rises,
broke the night of fierce debate
but no rooster greeted it.
Instead
a stone the size of twelve men
moved like a mountain on its way to the sea
and on the fresh wing of morning
came the Son of Man,
his shroud a wedding garment,
his feet between earth and air in dance.
Death, Sin, and Fate poured rhetoric
into the stirring air about them
but the silent Son of God only danced
to music beyond their words.
He whirled around Death
and with each turn
Death himself grew old
till with a last, unbelievable look
he saw no more.

Then wordless
 Christ spun around the words of Sin
 till a stammer started, sound choked,
 and finally there was only a mouth
 without a voice.
 Next Fate heard the risen footsteps
 and frost formed on his tongue.
 As christ lept before him,
 he froze in mid-syllable,
 iced by the warmth of God.

Now
 there was only the morning
 and the dancing man of the broken tomb.
 The story says
 he dances still.

That is why
 down to this day
 we lean over the beds of our babies
 and in the second before sleep
 tell the story of the undying dancing man
 so the dream of Jesus will carry them to dawn. (pp. 216-218)

How quickly the dance of years has gone for me. It's been my privilege to be placed in one of the great periods of all human history. It's the time of earthrise, of breakthrough, of resurgence, of globality. And then I like to think that also it's been my good fortune to be around in one of the great periods in all the history of the church. It's been a painful period, as all great periods have been, but the church has been renewed in unity with ecumenism, ministry, and service in the world. In our day every institution, public and private, throughout the world has been under assault. The religious order felt the pressure first for it is the role of the religious to be the sentinels of society. Somehow, they've come through and they have something to share with the recovery of all the other institutions of society.

We must speak of the religious order and the world together for they are constantly inter-penetrating. We call the roll of the tension spots of the world today which include, of course, Cuba, Zimbabwe, Liberia, Iran, Kampuchea, Guatemala, Afghanistan, Korea, El Salvador. The scene is constantly shifting. Woes are present also: inflation, almost world-wide unemployment, crime, particularly among the young, food shortage, natural disasters like Mount St. Helens, crises in boardrooms and bedrooms, energy shortage, nuclear hazards, Love Canal, disease, national priorities in most lands, budgets out of balance, single issue politics, and another election year. The list is always long, always humbling and always demanding.

It is, of course, possible to discern an almost totally negative and discouraging trend in the present day world. Dismal prophets have always emphasized this and specialized in it. Witness the worldwide emergence of violence of terrorist groups; the domination of weaker nations by superpowers; the proliferation of nuclear weapons and the possibility of their use; the

reliance upon armaments and militarism. Note the scandalous waste of the resources of nature, the pollution of air and water, the disregard for future generations, the notorious over-consumption of oil and food by some, and the hunger, poverty and deprivation of others, the global deterioration of human rights, the persistence of racism, age-ism, classism and sexism, the erosion of confidence in institutions, public and private.

One can add to this list the spiritual malaise, the cynicism, the skepticism which are the experiences of many; the loneliness, the alienation, the exploitation, manipulation and frustration experienced by others. This list is also long, and the diagnosis is dreary. If someone should ask whatever became of sin, I would say that it has gone underground into millions of private and personal hells: it has assumed false names; it has spawned and, in its grossest forms, afflicts society with an endless category of ills.

All of this rightly causes the man or woman of faith a deepest concern, and it may distort our sense of values and blur our vision of God. But it awakens also the wellsprings of our caring and provokes a universal cry for justice and peace and constructive change.

It is also possible to view the church - the whole religious order - with eyes of despair. In some lands, people are sorely persecuted for their faith. Its survival is threatened. In others there's an effort made to suffocate and stifle the religious order by ignoring it. In some cases acute secularism has taken over. In some places it has simply refused to be a truly inclusive religious order. It has sought to save its own life in an illusory quest for safety and security; it has withdrawn within its own walls and settled for the comfort of lifeless theological propositions or empty conservatism. It has turned itself away from the world.

But the religious order in our time is discovering in this contemporary setting that it is faced with one of the great challenges and responsibilities that the People of God have ever faced. The time is now ripe for the recovery of vibrant religion. Our is an age of faith, even of credulity, but too often our contemporaries find their faith directed toward outmoded and absurd notions.

There are signs of the religious life bubbling to the surface once more and the depth dimension of life again revealing itself. A new authentic spirituality is beginning to stir in our midst. It would impact itself on every part of life, would concern itself with every need, would care for all and would manifest itself in concrete social action and change. In this country, for example, they finally did justice at Kent State ten years after four students were killed on the campus. A financial settlement was made but, more important, a document was signed by the Governor of Ohio and the leaders of the Ohio National Guard apologizing for the tragedy. That's just about unheard of, anyone in public life ever apologizing about anything; ten years is a long time to wait for justice but it's not too long. Or again in the United States, in this past year a black sharecropper's son was elected mayor of Birmingham, Alabama. The religious order has been judged by the Word of God and revitalized in our time by the Holy Spirit. To fail to acknowledge these realities is to be unfaithful to the one who calls us, and is, in our day, asserting his lordship over every faith and over the whole world.

Now let me state very simply the theological perspective that I feel is significant: first of all, this is God's world, all of it. Second, I would affirm that people are made in God's image, all of them. Third, I would affirm that it is our world, too. All the earth belongs to all the people, I've read in a book somewhere. And I would affirm that everybody, everywhere matters. And I would affirm that despite the fact that things go awry, God is, through the anointed one, Jesus, changing the whole life of humankind. I would affirm that God's spirit is available to all; and I would affirm that we stand always, and everywhere, for all that the anointed one stood for. That would be an appropriate theological stance for our day.

Yet there's more than this. The religious resurgence, to which I have referred, is corporate. Lest anyone should conclude that we are committed to an excessively individualistic point of view, let us recall one other element, what Jesus called "the Kingdom of God". That is the Good News of God in social context, the New Reality. This is the first element, really, rather than with those other affirmations I made a while ago. In the very first witness, in the first chapter of Mark, when the anointed one appeared on the scene for the very first time, he announced the New Reality, the Kingdom of God. Clearly Jesus offered and secured new life for all but he emphasized its personal nature. The four Gospels record one conversation about being "born again" as a prelude to entrance into the New Reality of the Kingdom of God.

Krister Stendahl said that the mission of God is to "mend creation", and that the Kingdom of God is the name of creation when it's mended. The mission of the religious order, which Stendahl calls the "brokerage firm", is to unblock whatever opposes the Kingdom. We Christians utter the Lord's Prayer which is an implication of our commitment to this new reality.

When Jesus spoke of the sacred it was not as a mystical idea. He spoke of sacred order both subjective and social; at the same time it is "at hand", it is "within you" and it is "among you". And so I was simply delighted that in Melbourne in May the World Council of Churches had a conference with the theme of "Your Kingdom Come".

This New Reality offers us a new experience of time, a new experience of space, a new experience of ourselves, a new dimension of mission. If we fail to see all time as God's time, or if we really only "live for the weekend"; if we think that our assigned place is unimportant; if our caring is only for ourselves and our small circle; if our mission is not all-inclusive, then this is a sure sign that we have not begun to enter the New Reality. For all time is God's time; everyplace is God's place; He cares for all and expects us to do the same; He loves the whole world and so must we.

I want to mention, as I draw to a close, four programmatic dimensions to which we ought to be committed in one way or another. One has to do with peace and arms control. So compelling has become the threat of war and nuclear holocaust that even a few words will establish its importance. Now last summer at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Cambridge there was a World Council Conference on Faith, Science and the Future. They made this statement: "The totalitarian nature of weapons of mass destruction has made the whole human family a community of peril which must become a community of hope."

We simply must, so far as superpowers are concerned, get on with the SALT process. I have encountered the interesting suggestion that we ought to "leapfrog" SALT II and move right in to a more comprehensive SALT III. The second programmatic dimension is simpler economic lifestyles. The mere mention of inflation, high taxes, unemployment and shortages point out the concerns of multitudes of people throughout the whole world. This condition is global. A new word, "stagflation", has had to be minted to describe this condition. It is apparent that the much praised classic laws of economics do not seem to be working currently. When the demand goes down the prices ought to go down, but they don't. So it's hard not to conclude that, in large measure, the word inflation is spelled g-r-e-e-d.

All this impinges acutely upon the poor who become even poorer. But the poor, the hungry, the naked, the discarded, are our brothers and sisters. They do not need to adopt a simpler lifestyle. It is thrust upon them. For the rest of us, we do. The state of our world and the mandate of our holy faiths demand this of us. Interestingly enough, in this country, 55% of our citizens say they want to be taught to live simpler lives. We can begin where we are. We can reverse our habits of wasting food and energy; we can resist impulse buying; we can develop greater "group effort", and, perhaps, use barter for goods and services to an amazing degree. We can dress more plainly, eat less and of simpler foods, declare fast days and gas free days. The scope of experimentation is boundless and needs acutely to be shared.

The next programmatic dimension is involvement in the political process. We should be unashamedly involved, where we can be, in the political order. Politics has to do with all life, and faith has to do with all life. Therefore, they must constantly inter-penetrate, and we are called, as never before, to social responsibility. We lament the lack of leadership in politics and observe that the best leadership potential somehow does not make itself available. At the very least, therefore, we should encourage politics as a religious vocation and support those who, in conscience, opt for it.

One is forced to be impressed by the historian's observation concerning the ancient Greeks: that the Greeks loved liberty but they came to love security more. They loved liberty and security but they came to love comfort more. And, finally, they reached a stage where people demanded more from society than they were willing to contribute to society. Then it was that they lost their liberty, their security and their comfort. It could happen again.

Well, I don't expect you necessarily to agree with me on this next point. I speak pretty much from the perspective in this country but I have a notion that it would be not bad in other parts of the world. I would suggest that we urge the development of a tradition where instead of military draft, every citizen voluntarily offer himself and herself for public service for at least a period of a year at subsistence compensation. When one thinks of the social ills in a country like this, this might be the way to begin. For example, we have a tremendous number of functionally illiterates, a part of the training could be used to remedy that condition. In the next ten years, five hundred colleges and universities have to close in this country. They are ready-made facilities for a training operation, and one only has to take a walk around this block to see conditions which could be remedied by voluntary service on the part of the young. The social cost of doing it would be great; the failure to do so would be ever greater.

Finally, I want to suggest that we get the Word out there. We Christians call that "evangelism", although that word does not appear in our scriptures. The word "evangelist" does. Sometimes we simply ought to admonish one another to do the work of an "evangelist" and then turn people loose to do it. In a sense, we have nothing to do but to point to the Lamb of God. We ought to be constantly engaged in the provocative deed which can only be explained by the Word. Now, the trouble is, we declare the Word when no one's asking about it, and, no wonder, it falls on unfertile soil. But with God, the Word precedes the deed. With us, just the reverse, the deed must precede the word. Some people have not experienced Good News for so long, they would not recognize Good News if they heard it. They've got to be shown. They experience good news, if they're unemployed, with a job. If they have a serious disease, they experience good news by healing. If they are a prisoner, they experience good news by the establishment of equitable criminal justice. If they are bound by the status quo, they experience good news by having it announced that they are set free from that kind of bondage. We are engaged in the provocative deed, and this must be accompanied by the explanatory Word. There are plenty of opportunities to answer the questions which are provoked by human demonstration.

As you know, I'm supposed to be retiring. But in our system bishops are general superintendents and, like generals, they never really retire and could be called back into active duty at any time. So, I don't expect to fade away. Eunice and I in the next couple of years are supposed to write in the field of religious leadership and in the accompanying field of biography. I'm supposed to teach in a seminary and I hope to be available for help or trouble-shooting in connection with the Ecumenical Institute and Institute of Cultural Affairs. Then, I would rather suspect there will be surprises along the way for the dance of life is full of surprises.

I would conclude with just these four words to you. First of all, that you recall that you are rooted in faith. Second, that you recall there is an integrity about faith. The third is to avoid entangling alliances. And, finally, continue to serve everybody, everywhere, for everybody everywhere matters.

And so the dance goes on.