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The Challenge of  
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letter

young man

THE  
CHALLENGE  
OF LIVING





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*letter to a  
young man*

THE  
CHALLENGE  
OF LIVING

by REV. ANDREW GREELEY

to be read

of the

THE

CHALLENGE

OF LIVING

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Bishop of Fort Wayne-South Bend


NIHIL OBSTAT—John L. Reedy, C.S.C.  
Censor Deputatus

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The young man today needs the courage to be free. Liberated from the restrictions of childhood and early adolescence and not yet enslaved by the restrictions of adulthood, he can choose freedom no matter what the cost or he can decide that being free is "too risky and too dangerous and that it is much safer and more comfortable to let other people and social forces" make his decisions for him. Here is one priest's way of trying to help. He speaks to all young men — the high-school student, the college man, the graduate student, the "young professional" in the world — through the "John" to whom this letter is written.

Dear John,

It seems to me that the best way to characterize the present age of your life — the time of transition between the teens and the 20's — is to call it the age of independence. For it is during these years that the beginnings of freedom are to be found in the human personality; and when these years come to an end freedom normally comes to an end, too.

Right now you have been liberated from the restrictions of childhood and early adolescence; you have yet to be enslaved by the restrictions of adulthood — or of



what passes for adulthood. It is during these fleeting years that you are given a chance to become permanently free. The decisions you make and, more importantly, the decisions you do not make are going to determine the whole course of your life.

For a very brief period of time you are the master of your own destiny. You can point your life in the direction you want it to go. You can decide that you are going to call your own signals, that you are going to be free no matter what the cost might be, or you can decide that being human is too risky and too dangerous and that it is much safer and more comfortable to let other people and social forces make your decisions and run your life for you.

I am sure that you do not remember what it was like to be 15 and would be horrified if I told you that you were not very different from the 15-year-olds you know now. These lads have never yet had an idea of their own. Their world views are a combination of prejudices of their families and the customs of their crowd. They are narrow and unperceptive because they have yet to begin to learn how to think for themselves. Their personalities are formless, reflections of the environment in which they grew up. But in a few years they will have an experience which you have had already. They will begin to think for themselves, just as you did a few years ago. When that happened you really stopped being an adolescent, though by no means did all your adolescent problems cease.

At that point, when you discovered that you had the basic human faculty—the intellect—you began to emerge as a human being. I am sure you remember the thrill of discovery that followed that experience, a thrill which I am sure is still going on. For suddenly there was the world, no longer a closed system, no longer to be summed up in a few adolescent clichés. Now it was a place of fascination and mystery, a splendid and confusing place which demanded an explanation and which was going to be compelled to stand before you in judgment.

Some people go through the intense intellectualism of the last years in high school and the early years in college very quickly. The responsibility of thought and judgment is too much for them to bear and they quickly return to clichés, though now the clichés sound more sophisticated. Others escape by trying to reduce the mystery of the world to a subject for bright conversation; they substitute intellectual chatter for thought. They may shine in the foggy give-and-take of the local tavern, but only at the price of divorcing their thinking from their lives.

**They May Shine  
At Local Tavern**

A few young men stay with the game much longer, struggling for an explanation, trying to fit themselves into the cosmos, but the struggle is difficult and the novelty of intellectual exercise soon wears off. There are so many things that are more interesting or more pressing or more “important,” that thinking for oneself is put aside to another day and the fundamental ques-

tions about the meaning of the world, the meaning of life, and the meaning of self are either shoved back into the unconscious or dismissed as youthful nonsense.

It is my contention, John, that the years of thinking for oneself and the years of independence are co-terminous, that they are for most people the time of transition between the stereotypes of adolescence and the stereotypes of old age — with the latter beginning at the approximate age of 22.

**As Thinking Ends,  
So Does Freedom**

I would not argue that intellectual freedom is the totality of the mature human personality; but in the absence of the freedom of the intellect, in the absence of curiosity and wonder, there can be no independence, no humanity, no real maturity. If one cannot think for oneself, one cannot direct oneself and ultimately cannot be oneself. The personality continues to be what it was in early adolescence — a formless reflection of the environment, though now surrounded by a hard crust.

What the good Lord has done for you in the last couple of years is to give you your life. He gave it to you physically, of course, long before, but now He has given it to you for your very own. It is no longer under the direction of your parents or your teachers in anything near the fashion it used to be. It is yours to do with as you will. It is only the beginnings of life, only the very tiny movements of thought and love.

But the Lord has opened to you the possibility of



growth. He has said to you, "You are a man, you can think and love if you wish; be yourself and you will grow. What is still very small and frail in you can become great and strong, so great and so strong that it will sweep the world before you. If you wish, turn away from this possibility of growth; be content with mediocrity, but do not blame Me if you are unhappy."

I am sure you remember the Gospel story about the king who went on a journey and distributed some of his resources among three of his servants. Two of them took what they were given and went out and parlayed it into more money. One went off and buried it. I always picture those three as young men about your age. God has given you your life; you either go out and turn it to a profit for Him or you go and play it safe by burying it in the cold ground of mediocrity — or normality as it is so often called. The temptation to bury yourself, John, is strong right now and it will get stronger. The Lord has set you up in business and He is telling you to get on with it because someday He will come back to demand an accounting. As you may remember, things went hard with the servant who played it safe.

What is this business which the Lord has entrusted to you? It is the work of His Church, that endeavor on which the whole future of mankind depends. When you were baptized you were made an "ecclesiastic," a man of the Church, and the work of the Church — the work of the Incarnation and Redemption continued in time and space — became your work.

**God Has Work  
For You to Do**

This does not mean necessarily that you are called to be a priest. The work of the Church is much broader than the work of the priest. It is the work of humanizing the universe and Christifying man. When Christ came into the world He took on not only His own human nature but human nature as such. Men are to share in the new life of the Resurrection by uniting themselves to Christ, and the whole of material creation is to be united in the work of Christ by man asserting the rule of reason over the nonhuman forces in the world.

You should not think that working for God somehow divorces you from human activity. God does not withdraw from us when we work in the world. We do not

**You Can't Escape  
Behind the Altar**

find God only when we wrench ourselves away from human endeavor for a few moments of peace and contemplation in the course of a busy day or a busy week. We find Him in the midst of life, in our total and enthusiastic commitment to the world which He has given us to redeem. We do not hide behind the altar to escape from life or from our fellow men, for if we do, we are very likely to find that God is not behind the altar and that we are very much alone in our cowardice.

The question then, John, is not so much what your career is going to be — though that is, of course, important. The essential question is what kind of vision you are going to have of your career. I am sure that you will be good at whatever you do. The dangers are more subtle; one is that you will be good for inadequate

reasons — because it is profitable or because your self-respect demands it or because the lure of battle is intoxicating. While these reasons have some validity, there is a more basic reason for excellence: in your career you are Christ and must be excellent both because He will be judged by you and because His work will be retarded by your failures.

Another danger is that you will be good at your work but not as good as you might be because your heart will not be in it. Your career will become a job, something that has to be done so that you have the money and the status necessary to enjoy life, to support a family in the manner which our society demands of its successful men. Your work will become a necessity to be endured rather than a challenge to be exploited. You will have fallen victim to the pernicious modern heresy that one can find happiness — which is to say God — in family life, when one abandons it — which is to say Him — in other spheres of the human endeavor. You will only be kidding yourself and you probably won't even succeed in doing that for very long.

A final danger is that you will permit yourself to be forced by circumstances or by pressure from others to choose a career that you really do not want because that which you do want seems difficult to attain. This is perhaps the greatest temptation of all, to settle for the second-rate because the first-rate demands sacrifice. To succumb to such a temptation is a betrayal of everything that your position in the

### **The Greatest Temptation of All**

Church stands for; it is also the surest way to unhappiness.

What I am saying, John, is that it is not so much what you do in life that is important as the attitude with which you approach it. There is nothing in life

### **God Can Be Found In Every Work**

that is not part of the work of the Lord. Some things of course are more obviously and closely related to the divine plan, either because they are more intimately connected with the humanization of the world or because they flow more directly from the sanctifying work of the Church. I suppose, for example, that the work of a Papal Volunteer in South America might objectively be more Christian than the work of a TV writer; yet both are Christian vocations, and the latter may be a saint while the former may be a failure both as a Christian and as a human.

I do not expect you to be a member of the rectory "team" for the rest of your life. Surely the apostolate of the local parish is not limited to its clergy. Of course, we need some laymen who are deeply involved in the work of the parish; perhaps it is part of the formation of most people that at one time they be involved in the parish apostolate. But the parish is essentially a training ground where people are prepared for their mission in the world and it cannot claim to be the unique apostolate of the Church. Do not fall victim to that myopia which sees Christian dimensions only at the level of the neighborhood, the parish, the rectory, the clergy. Your particular mission may extend far beyond these.

It is not my task to designate your apostolate for you. This is a decision that only you can make. However, I can insist that whatever choice you make should not lead you to abandon your concern about other aspects of that endeavor upon which the future of mankind depends. It is the mark of the man of the Church that he be concerned with everything the Church is doing. He is concerned about the suffering in the underdeveloped countries, he is concerned about persecution, he is concerned about the foreign missions, he is concerned about racial injustice, he is concerned about the liturgy, he is concerned about formal Catholic Action, he is concerned about the Catholic schools. Wherever the Church is there he must be also.

I recognize, John, that this is a big order. I am saying quite explicitly that you must never be content with the quiet and simple life, with a small comfortable little niche of reality where you can wall yourself off from the confusion of the chaotic and disorganized world. Indeed, I am arguing that such a life would be a betrayal of your vocation. You must learn to live with tension, confusion, and uncertainty. You can never be really sure that a particular form of activity to which you have committed yourself is the best possible one. You will be condemned to living in a world where the blacks and whites are few indeed and the varying shades of gray dominate. You will constantly have to make new decisions and re-evaluate old ones. You will never have the luxury of being able to relax completely and say to yourself, "Truly this is what I ought to be doing for the rest of my life."

**Forego the Luxury  
Of Being Content**

It is very easy, of course, for me to sit here in my clerical ivory tower and to consign you to such a fate, but it seems to me that in the human condition as we

now know it the only alternative is stultifying mediocrity. Surely such a life will require courage, indeed, probably more courage than you now

### **Only Alternative Is Mediocrity**

imagine. What is needed is the bravery to risk failure at something really big when you know you can be successful at something rather small. By the standards of our society you are certain to be a success if you content yourself with the pursuit of those standards; if you set off on the Christian mission, if you add this extra dimension and this extra confusion to your life, the world may very well judge not only that you are a failure but a fool. Some of the most zealous Christians the world has ever known have ended up with their life's work a shambles. I cannot guarantee that this will not happen to you, though, to be honest, at the present state of the Church's history, I have a hunch that you will be in a position to laugh — even in this life — at those who counseled mediocrity.

You will have to make sacrifices, John; of this there can be no doubt. It is going to be difficult, very difficult indeed. There will be times when you will feel like the Lord in the Garden, that you would like to get out of it all just as quickly as you possibly could. There may very well be times when you will feel like cursing those of us who got you into the mess. And yet of this I am certain: there will also be happiness, greater happiness than you can now even remotely imagine — that hundred-fold in this life which the Lord promised.

There is a lot of fuzzy talk among your contemporaries about idealism. I am not really sure that they know what the word means. When they speak of losing their ideals, they seem to mean that they are afraid they will have to get involved in a dirty, messy world where they will have to live with and tolerate evil. Such an approach is not idealism, but angelism — the desire to escape from the human condition.

Anyone who is committed to working in the world must suffer the confusion, the uncertainty, the mess which abounds in the world; he must put up with evil while hating it; he must tolerate the imperfect while trying to change it. This is not to lose one's ideals, but to act like a human being in a world in which the full force of the Resurrection has yet to be felt. These gentlemen who will not dirty their hands by becoming involved in the human condition are not idealists, they are cowards. They are afraid to live with evil for fear that evil will contaminate them. The Christian on the other hand is prudently cautious about evil, but he is not afraid of it because he knows that it has already been conquered and that he will assist in its burial.

**You Can't Escape  
Your Humanity**

But since the word "idealism" has been corrupted by improper use, I suppose we need another word to describe the psychological and spiritual state that I am urging on you. What we want you to be, John, is a visionary, a man who sees things the way they really are, a man who has acquired the penetrating insight that is

necessary to clear away the stupidity and cliché of prejudice and conventional wisdom and see the world the way the Lord sees it. For a few brief years in your life, you have begun to catch a glimpse of this vision. Never let it go. Do not let anyone try to extinguish the light that it has brought into your life.

Most men are blind, John. For all their sophistication and certainty, they do not have the foggiest notion of what is really going on. They are pathetically short-sighted, stupid little creatures who must appear to the angels much as the compulsively active ants seem to us. As I said before, you have just one life — one whole life. And with it you can do nothing, or with it you can change the human race. In the final analysis the latter is surely more work. It is also certainly more fun.

As you read this you may be inclined to say, "Well, of course, I am not going to settle for mediocrity." But it is not going to be that easy. The obstacles are many and you are not going to surmount them without much hard work.

The first obstacle I would like to talk about is what I might call — for lack of a better name — "the mating instinct." Now I am sure that this brings a smile to your lips. Obviously, as a matter of principle, I am not opposed to either sex or marriage. Yet the mating instinct can blot out the vision I have been describing quicker than anything else. A wife who

**"Mating Instinct"  
Blurs the Vision**



shares the vision with you is a priceless asset. But one who does not have the vision or, even worse, one who pretends to have it for a time, can ruin your life.

You say that this is clear, that no one could be so foolish as to marry a girl who did not have the same ideals and goals. You are right, John, no one ought to be that foolish; but it is happening every day. All one has to do is to look around and one realizes how ill-matched so many young couples are and how absurd is our present pattern of courtship in which strangers can marry even though they have known each other for years. So it is quite possible for you to sail into marriage convinced that your bride wants the same things out of life and is willing to make the same sacrifices to achieve them, only to find out after the wedding day that when you thought she was agreeing she was only being a good listener. At that point it is much too late.

### **They Marry As Strangers**

There is another problem. I think that it is possible for a young man and a young woman both to have the beginnings of the vision and to blot it out for each other. This happens because they do not communicate with each other on the level of life where the vision exists — during their courtship or during their marriage.

I suspect that what happens is that they both act as young lovers are expected to act in our society, playing the roles that they are expected to play, being concerned with the trivia they are expected to be concerned

with and ignoring the vision which they are expected to ignore. In short, what is going on, is that they are exploiting each other as young lovers normally do and hence in the process destroying themselves.

If you look around at your friends you may note that the most stable and mature romances are those where the public commitment of both parties to the vision has antedated the romance and thus cannot be retracted.

What is required in dealing with the mating instinct is restraint. One must not get involved in romantic entanglements that will lead to marriage before one is old enough to have values, much less to judge someone else's values. **True Love Passes** The age of marriage is not nearly **Test of Restraint** so important as the age of falling in love. It is really unimportant that people get married at 24, if they have made their choice at 17 and have blinded themselves for the ensuing seven years. If the choice at 17 is a good one, it is only because they were lucky, because they fell in love with the right people for the wrong reason.

I am sure you are aware of how many of your friends of both sexes you have re-evaluated in the past few years. If you still admire them, it is for very different reasons, reasons of whose existence you were unaware three or four years ago. This process is not finished. Your perceptions will grow in acuteness and your values will

grow in clarity in the next two or three years, and a definitive choice made then will be much more rational than one now. This is not to say that you should not have certain tentative interests at the present state of your career. You would be less than human if one girl was not on your mind more than others; but do not confuse this preoccupation with love, do not think that daydreams justify looking at furniture.

Restraint may also be essential if career training is to be pursued. Prolonged engagements during this time usually create all kinds of psychological and emotional problems (not to mention the moral ones). What can easily happen is that a young man settles for much less than his career expectations because the so-called realities of family life interfere. He will come to hate those "realities" for blighting his dream. In the same way romantic involvement can stand in the way of plans for travel or direct apostolic service as part of one's preparation for life. To compromise these ideals for early marriage is to put more stress on the marriage relationship than it may be able to take.

### **Career Will Not Be Compromised**

If one is going to practice restraint during these years, to stop considerably short of the involvement that definite engagement implies, then one pretty clearly must be dealing with an exceptional girl. This kind of girl is not especially easy to find, but on the other hand, if someone is not fond enough of you to be willing to take her chances on the future, it is just as well for the two of you that you forget about it all.

So it is easy to agree in theory that restraint is necessary. Why should it be so hard in practice? The biological and psychological urges are strong at your age in life, but I do not think that is the whole story. Restraint is difficult because what passes for romance in our society is often merely a dependency relationship in which two weak people lean on each other because they are unable to stand on their own two feet. Love and marriage then become not a merger of strength but a combination of weakness. Love if it is to be anything must be a relation of strength to strength and not of need to need. You do not love a girl when you cannot get along without her. Only mature people can love and if you cannot survive without someone you are not mature. The marriage union was not designed to compensate for our deficiencies and insecurities, but rather to supplement our resources and abilities. I fear that in marriage many young people are seeking a father or a mother (or occasionally a son or a daughter) instead of a husband or a wife.

It does not take much observation to note that many of the relationships in which your contemporaries are involved are really escapes from reality, two people fleeing into each other's arms because they cannot face the world. Such a relationship is basically exploitive; the boy and girl are using each other as sources of security and pleasure and not as persons to love. On the side of the boy the exploitive nature of the relationship is usually obvious enough; he can engage in playing the male sexual role up to (and frequently beyond) the **limit that the moral law and/or convention prescribe**

without assuming the responsibilities that such a role implies. He can satisfy a puny, insecure ego and at the same time escape the duties of being a man.

The exploitation a girl is practicing may be a little more subtle. She is avoiding the humiliating experience of not having dates; she is finding something to talk to her friends about; she is achieving a reasonably high rating in the popularity scale; she is reassuring her own ego that she is worth something since she is able to manipulate this rather gross male, to keep him interested without compromising her own position.

How can anything like love or maturity emerge from such a climate? Love knows the meaning of restraint, but dependency and exploitation by their very nature do not. The ultimate in exploitation is the wedding day, when, in the midst of the most solemn social approval and with great communal rejoicing, two people announce their intentions to love each other until death, though their emotional equipment is such that all they are capable of doing is exploiting each other by feeding their own ravenous appetite for security. And the most ironic part of the whole picture is that the very process of "falling in love," courtship, and engagement that began in their middle teens precludes the possibility of things being any different.

### **Exploitation Is Love's Undoing**

This is not a very pretty picture, John; but I do not think I exaggerate. I am sure you can avoid getting

trapped in such a mess and trapping someone else who, given a different chance in another set of circumstances, could quite easily mature into the kind of wife you would want; but you will be able to avoid the mess only with strong positive effort. It is so very easy to slip into the ongoing process in which practically everyone else is operating. It is so very difficult to go against the tide of today's social pressures.

I guess what I am trying to say is that the relationship between a man and a woman at your age must be judged not so much by specific acts as by the whole tone and climate of the relationship. I find this a very difficult concept to convey to people; they want to know what they can *do*, how far they can go, what are the absolute limits of morality. They do not want to be forced to evaluate the totality of the relationship. It is intellectually easier to think of morality in terms of stop watches, measuring tapes and anatomy textbooks, than it is to agonize over the emotional and intellectual attitudes which characterize the situation. It is difficult for young people to say, for example, "We are continuing a relationship that is unhealthy, that has no future, that will harm both of us, that will destroy our plans and impair our vision. We are engaged in a relationship that we both know is unwise but that we are continuing because we are not strong enough to end it; we depend so much on exploiting each other that we cannot live without each other." But then no one wants to be forced to judge his general orientations toward life; it is so much easier to engage in semineurotic scruples about individual acts.

While the sexual instinct because of its great elemental power can be a serious obstacle to the carrying out of your vision, it is probably not the toughest obstacle to overcome. Much more difficult to fight, because it is much more pervasive, is the attitude of those whom I might call the "naysayers" with

### **The Naysayers Will Tempt You**

whom you must associate. There are two kinds of people who will attempt to destroy your vision, although they will most probably be acting in good faith — the cynics and the realists, the former because they are intolerant, the latter because they have despaired. They are the enemies of life, those who have sold out either because they tried to climb the heights and were not strong enough to make it to the top or because they did not even try for the top that looked too far away. They will tell you that you do not have a chance, that you are a fool, that you lack courage, that you should settle down to being a responsible adult, that you can never accomplish anything with your dreams, that the real challenge in life is economic, that you should get out into the business world and make something out of your life.

You will be able to defeat these naysayers on the level of intellectual discussion; they are clearly wrong. But you must not forget that they control the cultural system of our society; it is in the midst of their values that you will live and in their world that you must breathe. They dislike you because you stand as a sign of contradiction to the compromises for which they have settled; they fear you because they know that you will eventually strike down the rotten structure of which they are a part if you are given half a chance.

The naysayers are often not bad or even unattractive people. Indeed, they may want the best possible for you, only their idea of what is the best is not part of the vision. Parents and family are often among the prime naysayers. So many parents have planned every detail of their offsprings' lives since before their conception; they cannot bear the thought of any deviation from the plan. They often want to see enacted in the children's lives what they hoped for in their own.

### **Their Idea Not Part of Vision**

Even if this unconscious mechanism is not at work, it is often very hard for parents to understand that the younger generation must cross its own bridges and not the parental bridges, that it must find its own challenges and not inherit the predigested challenges of its ancestors. The present generation of parents grew up during the harsh years of depression and war. They find it very difficult to think of life goals beyond the economic and social. This is not to say that they are failures in their own lives, but rather that the world has changed.

Many Catholic parents have done a superlative job of preserving the Faith as they moved up the ladder from the old neighborhood to the suburb, but they do not understand that it is not enough in the present state of the world and of the Church for their children to follow the same path.

Other relatives may be an even worse problem. Older brothers and sisters, and cousins who are part of your



generation have a vested interest in seeing that you are not different from them, because if you are different it would serve as a living proof that their choice may not be the right one. Heart-to-heart talks, ridicule, ostentatious display of their alleged satisfactions — all these constitute subtle (and at times not so subtle) weapons for making you look and feel like a fool.

Your friends, the neighborhood group, the environment in which you grew up are also a threat to the vision. Everyone you know is beginning to settle down, to act sensibly, to find his "place" in the world. Unfortunately, these phrases usually mean that they are settling comfortably, though somewhat guiltily, into a rut from which they will emerge only with psychoanalysis or death. It may look like you are being left behind, that you are frittering away your life while they "get ahead in the world." They will find it increasingly difficult to understand you. Your reputation will become, if not tarnished, at least slightly off beat. The word will go out that John has become kind of strange, or maybe even a bit fanatic.

### **They'll Tell You To Settle Down**

Ignore these people; they are whistling in the dark, trying to convince themselves that you are wrong; for if you should by some miracle be right, they are terribly wrong. Nor should you think that you are alone; there will be others who think as you and their number will increase in years to come. Even now there are unquestionably a good number of your contemporaries who are waiting for the leadership that you can give.

To some extent your school is no help to you. I do not think it is an exaggeration to say that, by and large, the culture of any student body is usually nonvisionary in the extreme, that most of your contemporaries have made a decision and that it is the opposite of the one I am urging on you. They have sold out, they have settled for the "good life" as it is narrowly conceived in this country and they would rather not be disturbed, thank you.

We who are your clergy fail you too and to that extent we, too, are perhaps the worst obstacle of all. We are the prophets who are supposed to portray the vision for the people of God, and we often do not do a very good job of it because we are bogged down in our own fears and organizational dilemmas. We give you a version of Catholicism that is largely negative. We stress the other world so much that we forget the value of this world. We try to reduce the people of God to docile errand runners. We do not communicate to them a passion for justice and charity because we do not have this passion ourselves.

**Your Leaders Fail You, Too**

Indeed, it often seems that we have as much a vested interest in your being "normal" as does anyone else. If you show signs of piety we immediately argue that you must have a vocation (by which, of course, we mean a priestly or a religious vocation, what other kinds are there?). When you join our Catholic Action organizations we try to run them for you, using you as puppets or fronts because we do not have enough courage or faith in you to permit you to make your own mistakes.

We are really not ready to take the consequences of the laity becoming full-fledged Christians. Our life is difficult enough without adding one more problem.

But the biggest enemy to your vision, John, is not your relatives or your friends, your neighborhood or your school, your teachers or your clergy; the biggest enemy, as I'm sure you must know, is yourself. In the final analysis, the only one who can put out the light of your vision is yourself. You can weaken it with your fear of failure, you can diminish it with your hesitations about the risk to your reputation, you can damage it with your spiritual laziness, you can endanger it with your pseudosophistication, you can compromise it with your lack of faith and hope, you can permanently corrupt it by substituting sentiment for charity, you can turn it into a mockery by trying to replace creative action with prolonged critical analysis. It is so very easy to find excuses, to come up with all kinds of brilliant reasons for sitting and doing nothing. You can, in short, despair, despair in God and despair in yourself.

**Let's Face It,  
Though . . .**

You can do these things, John, but you won't get away with it. The Lord has given you all kinds of opportunities. Do not think you are going to escape from the responsibilities that these opportunities involve. The Hound of Heaven is going to hunt you down and He's going to catch up with you one way or another, either to reward you or to exact a price for your failures.

**Hound of Heaven  
Will Haunt You**

I have often been puzzled by what I have come to think of as the "reverse hypocrisy" of many young people I know. A hypocrite is someone who pretends to be better than he really is; it is a most reprehensible vice. A reverse hypocrite, on the other hand, is someone who pretends to be not nearly as good as he really is, whose phony self is much less attractive, much less human, much less virtuous than his real self. For a long time I could not understand this phenomenon, though part of its cause is certainly linked to the fear of ridicule; but now the real explanation begins to dawn upon me. Young people are afraid to admit to themselves how good they really are because the obligations which flow from this goodness are so enormous. Far better to persuade others — and ultimately yourself — that you are mediocre; life is much simpler this way. Such a mentality will destroy your vision, John, and it will ultimately destroy you.

Well, so far I have stressed the ardors of the search, the risks of the game. You are not without resources. After all you do have the Communion of Saints on your side, an organization which has been, on balance, rather successful against its enemies. You have prayer and the sacraments, you have action and contemplation, you have the vast reservoir of Christian spiritual wisdom, you have the Word of God as contained in the teaching of the Church (a teaching which in our day is being spoken with a clarity and vigor unmatched in the 2,000 years of its history). You have or will have comrades who will not desert you in the heat of battle. You have the Word made Flesh, Who rose and will come again.

Worship must be the center of your life. You must realize that you become most truly human when the light of the Divinity is reflected in your face upturned in prayer. It is at the Eucharist when you unite yourself most completely to the rest of mankind and the rest of the Church, when the strengthening graces of the Resurrection flow into your soul before the priest says those most significant words — *Ite Missa Est*, “Go, you are sent on a mission.” The Eucharist is not a snack lunch in which you participate when you need special favors; it is a banquet in which you celebrate your unity with Christ and through Him with the rest of mankind and where you receive the strength you need to carry that unity into your daily life. We should therefore go to the Eucharist because we need It and not as a routine habit or as a sacrifice for Lent or as a plea for good marks in an exam. What I take to be the proper approach of the layman to the Mass is that he needs it if he is to do his work. Without it he cannot go on.

### **Worship: Your Greatest Resource**

Thus I would be opposed to a person's going to Mass routinely every day because daily Mass is a good thing in itself. Obviously, it is good only as we permit it to affect our lives, and we will do this only to the extent that we need its strength to live. So I would argue that the Christian layman goes to daily Mass because he senses that he cannot be what he ought to be without daily Mass. Indeed, I should think that this can be said of the entire spiritual life of the layman; it ought to flow from the needs of his vocation rather than from some abstract concept of the duty to seek perfection.

Here I think we have the beginning of a solution to the problem of whether apostolic formation comes from action or contemplation. In the life of the layman at least, both are required. Without

**You Must Both  
Pray and Act**

action, contemplation is likely to be sterile and stunting. Without contemplation, action very quickly loses its drive. What is required is worship and contemplation flowing out of the needs encountered in action, and action re-enforced and strengthened by the power of the Church as experienced in worship and contemplation.

So, John, you must act. Without active charity all preparation, all theorizing, all praying, all intellectual training becomes pretty meaningless. But, on the other hand, you must contemplate, you must pray, you must take out time each day, each week for reflection and for meditation, for thought and discussion, for reading and analysis, for worship and for something that might be the beginning of mystical union. If you do not do these things, you will simply not be able to go on.

What must your action be? What must your reading and study be? What must your prayer be? What must your worship lead you to do? Do not expect answers to these questions from me. You must

find your own answers. What action is required? Our answer is that you must find what is to be done and

**These Questions  
You Must Answer**

tell us. What should you be reading? Theology, Scripture, sociology, psychology, history, philosophy, poetry — whatever fits the demands of your vocation, the needs

of your spirit, the interests of your intellect. What should you pray for? Certainly for greater power of love and greater clarity of thought, but what this means concretely for you, we surely do not know.

You are not going to be able to "go it alone." The days of the lone-wolf apostle are part of the past. One hears not infrequently a complaint against organizations. Such complaints are the cliché mongering of the pseudo-intellectual who thinks it looks good and sounds clever to defend the autonomy of the individual against the hyperorganization of society.

Unfortunately, their social criticism is about two decades out of date and philosophically absurd. In our complex society the individual, no matter how personally pious he may be, is not going to have any effect unless he is united with others. Nicolai Lenin, Mao, and Pius XI all understood this when they insisted on the necessity for tight and efficient organization. All of them knew that a small group of well-organized, determined, and dedicated men can change the world. The problems we face are too confused and too intricate for one man to hope to do anything about them unless he combines his skills and his zeal with those of others.

**A Few, If United,  
Can Change World**

I am not arguing for the kind of organization that stifles the creative initiative of its members, but rather the kind of democratic group which by combining the

strengths of the members and dividing the work creates a situation where the personalities and the abilities of the individual members can best develop.

I remember that at one time you were highly skeptical about the establishment of committees to weigh problems, but you yourself ended up forming a committee when

**Organizations  
Can Be Creative**

you wanted to make an investigation of one area of difficulty; it became quite clear to you that the combination of intelligences tremendously improved the performance of the individual members. This does not always happen; there can be nothing more oppressive than poorly run committees, but they need not be poorly run; neither are organizations necessarily the destruction of the individuality of their members. It is up to you to exercise the independence of judgment and initiative that keeps organizations creative.

So it is perhaps a frightening picture that this aging cleric has put together, but I trust that it is also exciting. There is work to be done in the world, John, thrilling, fascinating, challenging work. There is injustice and suffering, irrationality and confusion, prejudice and ignorance, narrowness and fear, stupidity and meanness which must be wiped out. The Lord is calling upon you to engage in these tasks. He does not promise you that it will be easy or simple. But He does promise you that you can live in such a way that the world will never be quite the same because of the kind of man you were. He promises you the sword, not peace, but He also promises you the happiness that comes from the joy of battle.



These are great days to be alive. The lay vocation has always existed in the Church, but only in our time has its full meaning become clear. It is more exciting to be a Catholic today than at any time in the last thousand years. You are riding the wave of the future. For millennia to come, people will look back on our time and say, "How wonderful it must have been to be alive in those days." Yet, tragically, tens of thousands of your contemporaries will pass their whole lives and never really know what they have missed. They will not have had the faintest notion of what is going on around them, not because it was not obvious, but because they did not want to see.

**Today May Be  
"Our Finest Hour"**

Commitment is a curious thing; it is so gradual that up to a point one does not realize how far one has gone. Then there comes a time when it suddenly becomes apparent what one is doing, and these are the moments which decide people's lives. It is as though Caesar was crossing the Rubicon and suddenly discovered that the water was cold; there were people on the near bank jeering him and the far bank was lost in the mist. The temptation is to get out of the water just as fast as one can. I suspect that this is about where you are now. I have known all kinds of people to come this far, John, and then turn around and go back to the safety of the shore. I cannot find it in my heart to be angry with them; they came so close, so very close. Another half step more and they might have made it, but now all is lost. Perhaps you have gone beyond this point of no return and are now on the other side.

Enough has been said, John; more words would not help. The decisions of the next few months and years are your own. We will watch, we will pray, we will be concerned, we will listen, we will help to whatever extent that we can. If you choose to let the world pass you by, there is nothing much we can do to stop you. We will always be your friends, but as the years go on we will come to pity you. If, on the other hand, you choose for life, for the Church, for your own better self, well then, John, there are great days ahead.





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