

Sheedy Lecture. University of Notre Dame. 24 September, 2004.

Professor Peter Walshe.

It is a particular pleasure to be here in the company of Bill Leahy. We first met, God help us, at Notre Dame in 1962! I also wish to pay tribute to Robert Vacca who died – far too young – earlier this year. Notre Dame has had no finer teacher.

It was, I think, that great British socialist R. H. Tawney who declared he would not accept honours – even from the Sovereign. “No self-respecting cat walks around with a tin can tied to its tail,” he said. I must admit that the Sheedy Award sounds to me, not so much like a tin can as a delightful bell. There are several reasons for this, starting with the fact that the honour has been bestowed by colleagues and students. Moreover, it was Thomas McDonough, C.S.C. (Chair of Economics) as well as George Shuster (retired President of Hunter College who returned to his Alma Mater as advisor to President Ted Hesburgh) and Dean Charles Sheedy, C.S.C. who welcomed me to Notre Dame in the early 1960s. Furthermore, Sheedy backed the formation of an African Studies Program a few years later. Then it was gratifying to learn that an eminent theologian, Mary Rose D’Angelo, had nominated me for the award, and I thank her for such a generous initiative. Lastly, I have been astonished by those students and colleagues who took time to write letters that in some moments moved my Welsh and Irish genes to tears. They wrote with affection and appear to have perjured themselves with great fluency.

My first university lecture, on the promises and limitations of the United Nations, was given in the late 1950s at the University College of Pius XII, only recently established by the Southern African Catholic Bishops’ Conference and the Canadian Oblates of Mary Immaculate. It is now the National University of Lesotho. I wish I had possessed the wit to entitle that presentation: “Pessimism of the Intellect and Optimism of the Will: A Case Study of the U.N..” Now, almost half a century later, let me try to explain what has motivated my teaching all these years.

The world I encountered ranged from the prolonged struggle against apartheid in South Africa to the dashed hopes and tragedies that followed the aftermath of independence in tropical Africa; through the decades of the cold war and the brutal foreign policies of two super-powers, to politically manipulative and declining volumes of foreign aid for the poorest regions of the world. All this has been compounded since the 1970s by a new level of arrogance in the capitalist West that followed the disintegration of the Soviet Union – an arrogance intimately associated with the consolidation of what has become known as the “free market.” This “free market” ideology has vastly increased the power of transnational corporations and primarily served the purchasing power of the rich. At national and global levels, it has eroded our sense of the common good and severely curtailed the politics of justice: that is to say, public policies designed to empower the poor. In the past four years these circumstances have allowed the Bush administration to assert a unilateral foreign policy in a drive for global hegemony that Zbigniew Brzezinski warns “could endanger American democracy itself.”

In this context, my teaching has been motivated by what my wife Ann has come to call “prophetic evangelism.” As I understand this vocation, it has a plumbline, namely the moral imperative to work towards a more egalitarian future, one in which resources are more equitably distributed. This in turn requires the strengthening of representative government and a world in which our various religions encounter each other with modesty and hence respect – recognizing revelation in each others’ faith traditions. Furthermore, consumerism must be checked as we turn to protecting our environment. This is not to suggest a utopian blueprint - the illusion of a definitive solution. Rather, it is a call to confront class and privilege, to reject the temptation to

dehumanize the other. It is a call to debate how, amidst the tensions and escalating conflicts of our world, public policies might nurture the dignity of every individual and focus on the cultural and legal restraints required to sustain both the national and global common good. The challenge is to make consciousness-raising and social analysis a vital part of education, of teaching.

As we are formed in large measure by our environments, forgive me if I continue for a moment with an autobiographical theme. I was born in South Africa, into a devout Roman Catholic family, one immersed in a racist culture. The only instruction I received on race relations was to “be polite to the servants.” I attended high school in comparably racist Southern Rhodesia, now Zimbabwe. Then I was lucky enough to get out of Southern Africa and so experience a wider world. I went up to Oxford in 1952 to read Philosophy, Politics and Economics, made friends across the colour-line and began to realize something was seriously wrong back home.

The 1950s were heady years in Britain. One legacy of World War II was a renewed hopefulness in the possibilities of politics – a sharp contrast with the entropy degrading our current political systems. I believe that one important role for a teacher today is to bring students into a comparable circle of hope. After the general election of 1945, the British Labour party set about forming the welfare state, *inter alia* providing out of general revenue free access to schools, universities and a National Health Service. The United Nations with its Charter of Human rights was launched. India achieved independence in 1947. Ghana followed in 1957, then Nigeria and the countries of tropical Africa. In South Africa the Defiance Campaign was underway with its Freedom Charter, adopted by the Congress of the People in 1955. Keynesian economics emphasized the role of the state in regulating and humanizing capitalism and, for the United Kingdom and the United States, it was a time when the gap between rich and poor was narrowing.

I should add that I encountered the Dominicans and Jesuits in Oxford, and so Catholic social teaching. Then came Vatican II, the “The Pastoral Constitution of the Church in the Modern World” *Gaudium et Spes*, and the encyclicals of John XXIII: *Mater et Magistra* and *Pacem in Terris*. While, as a colonial boy, I found it hard to make head or tail of Oxford’s “logical positivism,” the Dominican journal, *New Blackfriars*, was much more interesting, particularly as it developed a commitment to the Christian-Marxist dialogue. All this and a touch of Teilhard de Chardin had a profound effect.

After Oxford, as I mentioned at the outset, I taught in the mountains of Basutoland – now Lesotho – at the University College of Pius XII. Ann and I had been married in Rhodesia and, in thrall to Rome, had three children very quickly. (Our fourth, the “autumn lamb,” came later.) Employment became an urgent necessity. The first serious opportunity was an offer from Anglo-American, the transnational giant dominating the mines of Southern Africa. Neither of us was enthusiastic about this corporate prospect. Then, call it serendipity (Ann discerned the Holy Spirit!), I spied a small advertisement in the *Southern Cross* (Cape Town’s Roman Catholic newspaper) for a Lecturer in Economics at Pius XII. It transpired that the Rector was about to visit Rhodesia. We met, he offered me the job with a mission salary; we gathered the infants, our few possessions plus the pug dog and took the train south. What followed was a foundational experience, one that has oriented my entire teaching career.

Pius XII College was a small, non-racial campus nestled in the foothills of the Drakensberg but outside the grip of apartheid. At the time it was the only English-speaking Roman Catholic university in Sub-Saharan Africa and drew its students from east, central and (predominantly) southern Africa. Its international faculty of thirty five (including black and white South Africans) taught a student body approaching five hundred. Ninety five percent of the students were black. Approximately twenty percent had fled across the border from South Africa, often pursued by apartheid's security forces. There I was taught by my students, many of whom were older than I. It was a heavy dose of reality. Their experiences revealed the full extent of racism and the desperate urgency of political struggle. This was particularly so after the Defiance Campaign ended in 1960 with the shootings at Sharpeville where the South African police opened fire on an unarmed group of protesters, killing sixty nine and wounding hundreds. In the aftermath of this police violence, the African National Congress was banned. Nelson Mandela went underground, eventually to be picked up by the security forces (on a tip from the CIA) and sentenced to life in prison. The liberation struggle, at least for the moment, had been crushed.

In the decades that followed, my research focused on African protest movements, specifically the rise of African nationalism in South Africa and the emergence of an indigenous strain of liberation theology. This "contextual theology" helped to de-legitimize the apartheid state and encouraged political activism, making a major contribution to the liberation movement, particularly during the 1980s and South Africa's political transition in the 1990s.

I must also mention a transforming personal influence. When I met Ann Pettifer in Oxford, she was a committed socialist and Anglican Christian. She had run as a Communist candidate in her high school mock-election and, although I did not recognize it at the time, Ann was to do her damndest over the years to keep me self-critical. For example, Ann and later my three daughters firmly persuaded me to extend my concern for racial, political and economic equality to gender equality – a further liberating if initially uncomfortable dose of egalitarianism.

What Ann came to call "prophetic evangelism" was also formed by my teaching at Notre Dame: courses on "Economic Growth," "Third World Development," "The Politics of Tropical Africa" and "The Politics of Southern Africa." There was also "Hope and the Human Condition" (co-taught with Tjaard Hommes of the Department of Theology who, in his gracious manner, taught me a great deal) as well as "The Socialist Tradition and Modern Reform." These courses have been concerned with the all-to-often agonizing details of the human condition and with the search for appropriate public policies. Inevitably I struggled to clarify the sources of inspiration that might sustain me in the classroom.

I believe there is an ineradicable tradition of protest, of moral imagination, perhaps even of divinely inspired discontent. As I have come to understand this tradition, it has the following components that form powerful "magnetic" forces moving our moral compass towards greater equality. While there are several additional cultural and faith phenomena that could contribute to this convergence - for example Islam and "ubuntu" (the sense of mutual respect and concern for communal wellbeing found in the traditional cultures of Sub-Saharan Africa) - I have focused on four traditions that were central in forming "the West," each with its own ontology, yet each in its own way envisioning a more egalitarian future.

First, the humanism of the Enlightenment at its height in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the "liberal tradition" with its faith in reason, human consciousness and, particularly in

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the Scottish Enlightenment, compassion. This tradition began to define our language of human rights. Second, Marx with his class dialectics and - perhaps just as important - Marx as a latter-day prophet offering the prospect of a promised land and hope for millions. It is also worth noting that his analysis of capitalist economics and cultural dynamics is taking on a renewed relevance in our era of intensifying globalization and powerful transnational corporations. Third, the democratic socialist or social democratic traditions - still particularly strong in Western Europe - that set out to integrate class analysis with the over-riding power of values and the mechanisms of representative government. A leading example of this was the rise of the Labour Party in Britain, a movement correctly described as owing more to Methodism than to Marx.

The fourth “magnetic” force is our denominationally diverse Christian tradition. This harbours at its core the dignity of every human being and so has radical political and economic implications that are not always recognized. Let me elaborate with three unsettling insights found at the core of Catholic social teaching. (i.) As we are all born in the likeness of a loving God, we are able to love, know and create. In this inheres our essential dignity. (ii.) The world was created for all people, which requires each generation to be prophetic, to ask the question: Are the resources of our planet being shared with all people? In other words, are our institutions impeding our capacity to love God and our neighbours? (iii.) Jesus gave us a new commandment, “that you love one another.” In our modern, rapidly evolving world this longstanding charge now requires a response that encompasses both charity and justice. In earlier centuries charity might have sufficed; but today, social analysis and justice-related public policies are crucial if we are to nurture more equitable institutions within nations and at a global level.

Encouraged by these four traditions, I have come to embrace a particular view of history, one I invite students to consider. This, I suggest, is important because so many of them have been taught to conform to the *status quo*, not to take history seriously and are thus content simply to acquire the credentials that will privilege them in the existing order - much of which John Paul II has described as “a culture of death.” Other students, a minority, are disturbed by the world they are discovering and long to explore alternative possibilities. History is not just “one damn thing after another.” Rather, among many deeply depressing, and at times overwhelming obscenities, history reveals a creative, empowering phenomenon - the evidence, again and again, of hope, of resistance by individuals and groups who imagine a more compassionate future.

I believe that my most important role as a teacher is to draw the attention of students to this tradition of dissent. Of course there are innumerable examples of such creative unrest, but I am thinking of the Jewish exodus and Covenant; the Jewish prophets confronting corrupt elites on behalf of the poor; those early Christian communities, communist in their sharing of resources, impressive in the leadership of women; slave revolts during the Roman Empire, and later in the Caribbean as well as the United States; the religious orders of the Middle Ages, particularly the Benedictines and Franciscans; peasants resisting the enclosures of the late Middle Ages, including a celebrated protest in England led by John Ball who asked a question that has echoed down the centuries: “When Adam delved and Eve span, who was then a Gentleman?” Then there were the Levelers and Diggers calling for one person one vote and land re-distribution, only to be harshly repressed by Cromwell during the English civil war of the 17th century. By the 18th century we have the American and French revolutions, flawed but pointing towards the “sovereignty of the people,” radical in de-legitimizing divine right monarchy. I should mention, too, the communitarians of the radical reformation; later came the Shakers and then secular socialists like Robert Owen, offering his cooperatives as an alternative to the harsh

conditions of the industrial revolution. More recently in the United States, the Social Gospel Movement (Walter Rauschenbusch and company) of the late 19th century can be seen as a precursor of contemporary liberation theology. We ought also to enjoy a sense of solidarity with those who inspired the rise of trade unions, the civil rights movement, the suffragettes and those who have led and are now leading the women's movement for full equality. Finally, I include the Greens in this pantheon, environmentalists trying to protect our fragile planet from the indiscriminate results of consumerism and the harnessing of technology to the profit motives of a globalizing, unconstrained capitalism.

In all this there has been a re-defining of "justice," a deepening of our understanding of this slippery word the meaning of which tends to be confined by particular cultures. For example, "justice" among the Jews after the Exodus and under the Covenant differed from "justice" in the militaristic culture of Sparta – or "justice" as understood in Hindu caste society. Likewise, "justice" in the southern United States was not the same as "justice" articulated by those in 1945 who supported the formation of the United Nations with its Declaration of Human Rights. Six decades later, there are signs that "justice" has been taking on global or universal dimensions. As we enter the 21st century and continue to explore the meaning of this seminal word, we may well need to reassert the language of civil rights - but also move on in the pursuit of the common good by taking socio-economic rights just as seriously.

In summary then: the four traditions I allude to, plus the historical evidence of recurrent dissent and this evolving understanding of "justice," orient my teaching as I set out to encourage students to take their citizenship seriously - that is, their responsibilities in the public square which is now much larger, more complex and more depressing than I ever imagined it would be. As they complete a course, my hope is that some will have developed a capacity to interrogate the society in which they live in areas such as the distribution of income and wealth, the importance of progressive taxes, democracy in the workplace (some call this co-determination), the condition of prisons, the availability of healthcare and education, environmental degradation, foreign policy and long term economic aid for the poor of our world – particularly the destitute trapped in regions with low *per capita* income and high population growth rates. I must add a further hope, namely that students learn to critique their church with equal rigour – not least on its persistent sexism - so graduating from Notre Dame with a robust faith rather than a passive or vapid piety.

Before closing, it would be "Pollyannerish" not to mention some of the issues on which I have experienced real tension with the University. There are strains of clerical and corporate paternalism that fuse under the Golden Dome and frustrate the full potential of our community. Education is broader than a classroom experience. It embraces how we live together and those issues we become excited about to the point of gathering in the south quad to express our convictions, protesting on the steps of the administration building, or praying at the Grotto. Examples of such problematics include a Board of Trustees over-loaded with corporate executives; the advisory status of the faculty senate; the repression of trade unions on campus which began with the crushing of the ground keepers in the early 1970s. More recently I was incensed by the University Trustees' refusal to divest from apartheid South Africa, and there was that egregious invitation to George W. Bush to receive an Honorary Doctorate and address Commencement a few months after he had been appointed to the presidency.

But enough. I continue to rejoice in teaching here because so many graced things happen on the campus: for example, the Joan Kroc Peace Institute's initiative in reaching out to Islamic

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and Jewish scholars; the astonishing, inquiring intelligence that emerges within each cohort of first year students. Above all I delight in being at Notre Dame because of its stalwart defense of academic freedom and its foundational commitment to exploring an unfolding understanding of justice that is rooted in the Gospels. The language of the Exodus, the Covenant and the Christian Scriptures is not foreign to the culture of this place. Thank you for gathering here this afternoon.
