

The Race Problem:

"What Are You Going To Do About It?"

An Address

At the Opening of the Fund-Raising Campaign

for the

"University of Community Involvement"

on April 1, 1968 at

New Rochelle Hospital

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By

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What we need is men of good will. Men who truly care. Men who want to help in the solving of the problem. Men from the white community, men from the black community, and women from both. Can we find one-hundred such in New Rochelle? Can we find fifty? Can we find twenty? What would we call them? It makes little difference. Call them the "Committee of 100," or whatever else. The main thing is to call them together.

Once called together, once engaged in dialogue, once exposed to the hopes, the problems, the needs of the city, as it strives to be what all of us want it to be, I can envision no problem that its members, as true men of good will, could not resolve together. It is the togetherness, the mutual respect and actual understanding that is so obviously lacking now and so obviously needed. And it will take the leadership that only such a committee can provide to do what is needed to be done.

Who can qualify for such a committee, for such leadership? I do not know. I do know that they must come from among the recognized leaders of the city as it now exists, so that, by their good example, others who respect them will be moved to follow. They must be leaders who want to contribute of their special talents to the good of all. In the final analysis they must, I believe, be able to answer "yes" to the three questions that I ask each of you now:

- 1.) If you have a child in school in New Rochelle at present or hope to have one there, be it a public school or private, at whatever level, grade, high-school or college, are you content to have a Negro child seated next to yours?
- 2.) If you are in government, in professional life or in a business are you content to have a Negro as a fellow-worker, a fellow-executive, and, if qualified, as president of your company?
- 3.) No matter where you live in New Rochelle, in any house, on any street, in any section, are you content to see a Negro family move next door tomorrow?

How many men and women can we find to answer yes, and mean it, and live by it, and lead others to follow them? I do not know. The answer is locked in the heart of each of us.

But that is what it will take. It is that simple or that difficult, depending upon what is in our hearts. You will be asked soon to be such a leader. Let there be no embarrassment if you cannot accept because you cannot truthfully answer "yes" to these three questions. You will at least have been honest with yourself.

Since I have proposed this self-examination to be made and answered privately, it seems only fair and proper for me to answer publicly. I do so now, humbly in the presence of so many better men than I, answer "yes" to these three questions.

Is this the impossible dream, is there not enough love in the world, is my life so busy that I am unable or unwilling to hold out my hand to my neighbor?

Perhaps if only a few respond it will be the impossible dream. But, if enough of our leaders are willing to try, with the help of the God, Who made us all, nothing is impossible.

I place this in your hands. I commend it to your hearts.

On the 19th of March, just one day short of two weeks ago, I was asked if I would talk to you today, here in New Rochelle Hospital. Although, like yours, my life and my schedule are filled almost to the brimming, I accepted immediately. I accepted for the strongest of all reasons: my conscience told me to accept. And happily I found myself in full agreement with my conscience. I would be less than fair with you, if I did not tell you why.

When those fleeting moments of reflection permit, I suppose that each of us on occasion talks to himself. On such occasions two voices within us seem to be engaged in a dialogue, voices that ask questions and give answers. Sometimes the questions go like this:

"How well do you think you are doing with your life?"

"You say that you are very busy, busy with earning a living, busy with various outside activities, perhaps a host of them, but are you aware that you could do more, that you could do better?"

"Now, please take a hard look at your life from the viewpoint of what surrounds it and answer this:

"What is by far the greatest problem of your time in your nation, in your city?"

"You know very simply, very clearly and very quickly what the answer is. It is the problem of race. The crying, hurtful, gnawing, frustrating problem, which exists because one man's skin is white and another man's skin is black."

And as you mentally nod "yes, you are right," there follows, as always it must, that awful, final question, that question which strips you of all the trappings of your life up to that moment:

"What are you going to do about it?"

Please note, dear friends, how this question is asked of us. Conscience is not content to know how we feel about it. It stubbornly wants to know:

"What are you going to do about it?"

I said that I would be less than fair if I did not tell you why I am here today. I am here because of that question. I want with all my heart to do something, to make some contribution, small as it may be, to the peaceful and happy solution of the most important problem of our lifetimes together, here in the city for which all of us share so deep an affection. I address you with the greatest of confidence, on a man to man basis, because I know so many of you and have countless reasons to be sure of the goodness in your hearts.

Specifically, we are here today to muster support for the idea and the financing of an infant enterprise called, rather unusually, the "University of Community Involvement." Is this an earth-shaking movement to date? Is it going to solve the race problem in New Rochelle? Has it been without controversy in the past? Certainly not! But the all-important thing is that it is a beginning. A community-beginning, imperfect as it may be, toward the final, searching question:

"What are you going to do about it?"

The "University of Community Involvement" is not even directly positioned as a program *only* for the Negro community. It may have, by past circumstance and realistic fact-facing, been forced to lean that way, but that is not what it envisions. It is ideally directed to black and white, poor and rich, young and old. It is called a "university" for a valid reason: its classrooms are the city streets and city buildings, where living together under love and under law are the subjects taught; its students are the youth of our city, be they black or white; and its faculty are the civic, government and business leaders of the total community. What it needs most of all now is a board of trustees, whose attitude is to support and guide this first small step toward the answer to the question which our consciences ask. In proof of what I have said, let me read the very first line written about this evolving organization: " 'The University of Community Involvement' is in the business of shaping Human Attitudes." Let me repeat: the business of shaping human attitudes.

Now, friends, it is on the subject of "attitude" that I most earnestly want to open my mind and my heart to you and to ask you to search your own hearts and minds, as we consider together the number one problem of our nation and city, *the problem of race.*

Let us suppose for a moment that we could stand far enough removed from the problem so as to view it objectively and without prejudice. Hard to do? Very hard. But just suppose that we could. Certainly God does. Let's at least try it together.

The first reflection we might well make would be to wonder why in the world, when God came to make Man, by far the greatest of all in His series of created things, why in the world did He make some men white and some men colored. (And parenthetically, He made many more colored than He did white.) Didn't He foresee that this was going to lead to trouble? Then why did He do it? Not one of us knows, not even the most brilliant among us. All we know is that He permitted men to be that way.

The second reflection that we might make would be that, even considering the many shadings of religious beliefs, there emerges a very basic formula for solving the problem: love God above all else and love your neighbor as yourself.

Now from our hypothetical, unprejudiced and objective point of view, knowing the problem, and knowing the basic formula above for solving it, it really becomes quite simple to point out three steps, which, if taken earnestly and sincerely by men of good will, would solve the problem in the only way it will really ever be solved.

The three steps should come as no surprise to any thinking man or woman, white or black.

- 1.) Give the Negro the full right and the full opportunity to have the same education as the white man.
- 2.) Give the Negro the full right and the full opportunity to hold any job in any company for which his education and ability qualify him.
- 3.) Give the Negro the full right and the full opportunity to live in any house, on any street, in any city, which he can afford to occupy.

You will note, I believe, the inter-relationship of these three essential steps and the reasonableness of the order in which they are listed.

In preparation for talking and thinking with you today, I felt it not only important but essential to check my thoughts against those of several men of acknowledged importance and competence in our city, both white and Negro. The time with which these men favored me was not a brief matter of minutes. The average time spent in these conversations was a good two hours. I pause for a moment to thank them silently for their generosity to all of us. Whatever good may come from our being together here today will be, in the greatest part, due to their generous help and encouragement.

In each of the conversations with each of these leaders, there was complete agreement that the three steps calling for equal education, equal employment, and equal housing rights and opportunities were basically sound. But it is most enlightening and important to know that, when the point of view of the Negro leaders was expressed, our threefold answer took on a fourth dimension. Please listen carefully to this fourth dimension.

The Negro, with too few exceptions, does not feel himself worthy of these three equalities. How strange this is, how foreign to the way the white man thinks and feels. It was explained to me in this way. Three hundred years of approximate slavery, generation upon generation of a master-servant relationship, lifetime after lifetime of grinding poverty, of ignorance, of brainwashing that what was white was good and virtuous and powerful, while what was black was evil and menial and weak have had their effect, may God forgive it. They have made the black man believe that he is, *in fact*, inferior and thus unworthy of the white man's slowly emerging best intentions.

The Negro is trapped, so *he believes*, in a ghetto society until he is shown that there truly is a way out. Hence the despair, hence the indolence, hence the crime, hence the anger, hence the riot, hence the ever-increasing polarization into a white society and a black society, two Americas, and, in a smaller sense, two New Rochelles. No city, no state, no empire in history has ever been able to exist thus in peace. Not even Rome when it ruled the whole world. It is the obligation of the leaders of the black man and the white man to disprove this myth of unworthiness and apply in its stead the obvious and only true solution which we have discussed above: the three equalities that make a man a man.

Since we are only human beings who live in a practical world, let me be as practical as possible in concluding these remarks to you. I am going to ask you and many other leaders in New Rochelle to give of your substance and of yourself. In plainer words, I am asking for your money, but, more importantly, I am asking for your hearts.

In money, the minimum need is for \$30,000, to be contributed by April 15. This will underwrite the improvement, the extension and the application of the Community Involvement program through the full summer ahead. This is to be raised by and from the business and social communities of New Rochelle both black and white. I consider this sum desirable and entirely reasonable. We ought to be able to over-subscribe it in five minutes right here in this room. It won't be done that way; it will be done by direct contact. I know you will give it. You are both too generous and too practical not to.

But I am much more interested in what is in your hearts. In the final analysis, that is the only place the answer can be found to the question we began with:

"What are you going to do about it?"

EPILOGUE

Subsequent to the occasion on which these thoughts were expressed, the citizens' committee to which they referred was formally named

"The Peoples Assembly
New Rochelle, N. Y."

It will be thus incorporated in the state of New York and any gift to it will be tax deductible. Checks should be drawn to "The Peoples Assembly" and mailed to the above address.

Particular emphasis should be placed upon the important fact that "The Peoples Assembly" in no way seeks to intrude upon the activity of any other committee, commission, or body, be it governmental or private, in the city of New Rochelle.

Its objective is to provide a community-wide gathering of men of good-will, who are dedicated to the peaceful solution of community problems, and, above all, those which spring from our difference of race.

"The Peoples Assembly" belongs to all the people of New Rochelle. It seeks without prejudice the happiness of all. May the God Who made us all guide it to that accomplishment.

