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HIERARCHY

Commencement Address

1940

By

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I

This is a difficult June for commencement orators: they face young men and women trained for pursuits of peace, who are being graduated into a world at war. Much as I would like to refrain mentioning the war tonight, I cannot. It would be folly to try to shut out the facts which clamor for attention every moment on all sides. The graduates of 1940—along with those of the last twenty years—are not privileged this evening to think of their own careers without considering the world they will have to heal and mend.

Yet I shall not talk about the war except by indirection. I trust you will see the relevance of what I have to say, for I shall try to state the principles of peace.

Peace obtains in any multitude when the many are united in good order. Peace is order and order is in essence hierarchy, for order arises from equality and inequality among things. Tonight I wish

to give you, if I can, the vision of hierarchy—the vision of all created things in an order—in a state of peace.

But do not make one mistake: peace need not abolish change and motion. Rest is peace in its ultimate realization—but there can be peace in this world of moving, changing things. The life of man or of society is a motion. The problem is one of harmonizing the concurrent motions of many things. Men seem to succeed only at the expense of others: they move up in the world by pushing others down. So nations seem to rise and fall by competitive struggle, by conflict and war.

Can each man and each nation achieve its destiny—move toward its goal—without destroying everything in its path? without nullifying the destiny of others? I believe the answer is Yes. Within the amplitude of Divine Providence, which permits men to seek their ends freely, all of these free motions of men and nations can occur together in peace. The vision of hierarchy may reveal to us the secret of Providence—the possibility of such an order. It is expressed for me by a single scriptural text, much cited by St. Basil, St. Augustine and St. Thomas, from the Book of Wisdom, XI, 21. “Thou hast ordered all things in measure and number and weight.” Or, as St. Thomas so frequently reiterates the same text, phrasing it differently, “God disposes all things in number, weight, and measure.” I repeat these words because if you remember them and them alone, the vision will remain with you. “God disposes all things in number, weight, and measure.”

I shall comment on this text: first, in its speculative significance; then, in its practical meaning, in each case contrasting this medieval, this Christian vision, with the contemporary view of things.

And let me say, before I begin, that even if the war conclude with victory on the side of right, nought will have been achieved unless we who survive the conflict have a clear enough understanding of peace to know the difference between a mere cessation of violence and a positive program for peace.

II

Let us consider at once what a modern scientist would say if he were called upon to discuss the number, weight, and measure of things. The scientist is concerned with the number of things and their weight and measure, but when he considers the number of things he goes from one extreme to the other. Either that number is a vast infinity of things exceeding comprehension or it is unity, by the reduction of all things to merely accidentally different aspects of the

same. Notice the two extremes. On the one hand, the world is full of an infinite number of things; but, on the other, they are all on the one level, differing only in accidental respects, differing only in degree, not kind.

What does the scientist have to say of measure? Here he thinks of nothing but quantity. If the scientist considers the world as something to weigh and measure, he thinks of it in terms of quantity. I am reminded here of what Professor Shapley of Harvard University Observatory once did. He attempted to arrange everything in the universe in a scale based on their weights and sizes, from the smallest atomic particle to the largest galaxy of stars. The interesting fact he discovered was that man came just about at the middle of the series, midway between the least particle of matter and the largest galaxy of stars in size. That fact, as Professor Shapley recorded it, is unintelligible, for what is the meaning of man's being at the mid point in size?

Let me turn now to the explication of the vision of hierarchy. I can do no better here than to give you Saint Augustine's interpretation of the text from the Book of Wisdom. He says:

“Measure fixes the abode of everything, number gives it its species, and weight gives it rest and stability.” (Gen. *ad. lit.* iv, 3).

If you will think about these three terms, you will see one thing about them at once. Number stands for species or form, and measure or mode is antecedent thereto, as weight, and order according to weight, is consequent. In other words, in the ordering of things something comes before the species or number and this is its mode or measure. At this point I am going to discuss mode and number primarily. I shall postpone the discussion of weight until later. As you have probably already discovered, weight is the most personal thing about us. Therefore it had better be postponed until later. I am going to talk now about mode and number. Let me call your attention to the fact that there is here a fine convergence of the text from Scripture and the wisdom of the Philosopher. Aristotle says that the species of things can be compared to numbers, which differ in species by the addition or subtraction of unity. Saint Thomas follows him in saying that species are like numbers; for a unit added to or taken away from a definition changes its species. Think for a moment of the integral numbers 1, 2, 3, 4, and so forth. Each of these numbers differs by the addition of a unit or the subtraction of a unit. It is one less than the one above it, or one more than the one below it. And just as these numbers are discrete, so are the species of corporeal substance, each higher or lower than another, by the addition

or subtraction of a unit difference. So, Saint Thomas tells us, the species of things are like numbers in that each is above or below another by the addition or subtraction of a grade of perfection in being.

Perhaps, I can make this concrete for you by attempting to give you the numbers of all created things, because all of them can be numbered. This is itself a startling fact—that one can number all created things. Thus viewed, it is not a vast universe. It is a relatively small universe when we consider things according to measure and number. The basic distinction all created things *according to mode* is between the incorporeal or spiritual being and corporeal substance. In the incorporeal or spiritual realm, there are three hierarchies of being and in each three orders, making nine modes of angelic being in all: seraphim, cherubim thrones; dominations, virtues, powers; principalities, arcangels, and angels. And in each of these nine modes there are many species for each angel is an individual species and in all this vast multitude of angels there are not two angels equal in being. There is no more startling or interesting fact than that, among spiritual creatures, *there are not two equal things*. Each angel is different by being a species, and thus is higher or lower than every other angel by reason of the possession of more knowledge and more love, or less knowledge and less love. We will find this inequality of angels significant for our later consideration of individual differences among men.

There are two modes of corporeal being: the mode of living things and of things which are dead and inert. In these two modes, there are but five species, five numbers of things. In the mode of the non-living, there are but *element* and *mixture*. In the mode of the living, there are but *plant*, *brute animal*, and *man*. Beneath these species—for these are the numbers of corporeal things—there are many sub-species or infra-specific, accidental classes. All the things that the scientists tell us are “species”—and the scientists have numbered one and a half million “species” in the field of living things—are only accidental classes. I must call to your attention—though it may seem paradoxical at first—that in the domain of plants, an orchid and an onion are only accidentally different, as in the domain of animals, an oyster and an elephant differ only accidentally. And in this order of all created things, man again is found at the midpoint, but now in a different way from that in which Professor Shapley of Harvard located him as at the median in size. According to Saint Thomas, man is at the midpoint of creation because, as a rational animal, he is on the borderline of the corporeal and spiritual realms, participating in the nature of both. Because he has this peculiar status of being on the borderline of corporeal and spiritual

things, there is about man one other distinction, namely, that one man differs from another individually, not merely because of the accidents of signate matter, but because each individual human soul is a special creation, and not a product of generation. That is why individual souls, when they assume their saintly posts, can occupy discrete places in the heavenly hierarchy, each higher or lower. Everywhere among spiritual beings, inequality prevails.

I say this because it is important to know that men, in their immortal and eternal destiny, move not to the same place. Each goes to his own place, unequal in spiritual position to the place occupied by any other.

Now let us turn to the world of man himself. We find a hierarchy there also. The generic powers of men are ordered as higher and lower. Within these generic powers, there are specific powers ordered as higher and lower. The virtues, by which these powers are perfected, are divided into two modes, the supernatural and natural. Within the supernatural, there is faith and hope and charity, and of these, the greatest is charity.

So also among the natural virtues there is an order; the cardinal virtues are supreme, and among them there is the order of prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance.

In the intellectual virtues there is an order: understanding is for the sake of science and science for wisdom. Within the field of knowledge itself there is an order. We pass from lower to higher degrees of knowledge: from history to science, from science to philosophy, from philosophy to theology, to mystical wisdom, and ultimately to the vision of God. And within philosophy itself there is an order; the gradation of physics, mathematics, and metaphysics. And within metaphysics there is an order of first principles and conclusions. So too, in all practical goods, there is an order; for some goods are external, and antecedent to happiness, some goods are of the body, and instrumental to happiness, and some are of the soul, and constitutive of happiness.

The task of human wisdom is to find order in things. The task can be performed because God created things in order. The order, and hence the inequality of things, is from God, as Saint Thomas tells us:

“It must be said that as the wisdom of God is the cause of the distinction of things, so the same wisdom is the cause of their inequality. (A twofold distinction is found in things: one formal, specific; the other, material, individual.) Now, formal distinction always requires inequality, because, as the

Philosopher says, the forms of things are like numbers in which species vary by addition or subtraction of unity.”
 (*Summa Theologica*, I, Q. 47, A. 2)

One of the most moving passages in the *Iliad* of Homer is the place where the poet gives the catalogue of the ships which brought the Greeks to Troy, the names of their captains, the numbers of their men, and of the things they brought. How much more moving poetry it is to number the things God has created—not only more moving, but more profound in its practical significance. The grades of being are correlative with the grades of goodness. Each thing has as much goodness as it has being; this leads us to the vision of hierarchy in the field of morals.

III

I wish to talk briefly now about some simple truths in (ethics and politics) which accord with this vision of hierarchy. First let me review what the contemporary world has to say on these matters. All values are looked upon as man-made measures of higher and lower. They are all relative to time and place. Equality and liberty are prized more than distinction and order. In the world in which we live quantity is almost the only standard—our world is one in which getting ahead means beating your neighbor. In the political realm, there is, on the one hand, the extreme of liberalism which views government as a necessary evil, incompatible with freedom and equality; and, on the other hand, the extreme of totalitarianism, in which government is the great equalizer, absorbing everything into itself.

As compared to these two errors, let me show you what the vision of hierarchy helps us to see in the moral order Boethius defines happiness as the state of those who possess in aggregate all good things. To my mind it is a perfect definition, but it is not an easy definition to understand because it is not easy to understand how one will or can possess all good things. The vision, of hierarchy helps to interpret this truth: all good things can be possessed only if one possesses them in due proportion and in the right order. There is no more profound truth than that too much of a good thing is bad. Therefore, we must have the right amount of every good thing. One must have good things not only in proportion, but according to the order of their excellence. There is the possibility of happiness in the fact that all goods can be well ordered: as man moves to his last end, he does so by a progression of steps, in which means are ordered to ends at every level.

There is also hierarchy in the political order. Government is founded on the inequality of men, not on their equality. The good society is hierarchical. It is not, an organization of equal men, but of

unequal orders of men. It is a society of perfect peace and freedom, of peace through order and freedom through government. Government is the ordering of the inferior by the superior. There is an equality of men, but it is not absolute. It is only the equality of common membership in the human species. Individually, men are unequal. Their basic inequalities are proportional to the differences in their qualities. Lest you suppose that I am saying something here which is untrue to American traditions and institutions, let me remind you that Thomas Jefferson is not the only founding father. There is another, often forgotten, John Adams. Adams says:

“Nature, which has established a chain of being and a universal order in the universe, descending from angels to microscopic animalcules, has ordained that no two objects shall be perfectly alike and no two creatures perfectly equal. Although men all are subject by nature to equal laws of morality, and in society to equal laws for their government, yet no two men are perfectly equal in person, property, understanding, activity, and virtue, or ever can be made so by any power less than that which created them.” (*Discourses on Davila*, in *Collected Works*, vi, p. 286.)

John Adams was fond of quoting a line from Pope which compactly expressed the vision of hierarchy: “All nature’s difference keeps all nature’s peace.” In hierarchy there is a harmony of ordered differences and in hierarchy resides the peace and order of all things from the least body in the universe to the universe as a whole. I cannot refrain from reading to you a passage from Saint Augustine which summarizes the whole vision. Saint Augustine says:

“And so the peace of the body is ordered temperature of parts. The peace of the irrational soul is ordered rest of appetites. The peace of the rational soul is ordered accord of cognition and action. The peace of body and soul is ordered life and health of the animate being. The peace of mortal man and God is ordered obedience in faith under the eternal law. The peace of men is ordered concord. The peace of the household is the ordered concord of commanding and obeying of those living together. The peace of the city is the ordered concord of commanding and obeying among citizens. The peace of the celestial city is the most ordered and concordant society of enjoying God and enjoying each other in God. . . . The peace of all things is the tranquility of order. Order is the disposition of equal and unequal things attributed to each its place.” (*De Civitas Dei*, xix, 13, i.)

Now this vision of hierarchy has a personal significance for each of you. It is not merely a magnificently comprehensive view of creation. It is a view which concerns the personal destiny of each of us. Since I now wish to speak of the significance of what it means to say “God disposeth all things in number, weight, and measure” for each of you individually, not merely as members of the human species, I must discuss your weight. Let me remind you what Saint Augustine said of weight: it is that which gives to each thing its rest and stability. Just as mode or measure was a determinant antecedent to form—number or species—so weight is consequent thereto, and it is that expression of our being which resides in our individual differences. To understand this we must understand ourselves as moving, because it is as individuals that we move. The easiest way I can convey what I mean is to talk, first, about non-living things. Let us consider a relatively simple truth about the motion of stones. All terrestrial bodies have gravity. Gravity means that they are all moving toward one place—the center of the earth. That place is the term of the motion of all terrestrial bodies. As these bodies move toward this place, something happens to their weight. You know that relative to the mass of a body it becomes lighter as it nears the center of the earth. Notice also that nobody actually achieves this; and if anybody did, all the other bodies could not, because all the bodies tend toward one place and therefore tend to exclude each other. In the motion of bodies there is competition and exclusion. Now there is a three-fold difference between the gravity of men and the gravity of stones: (1) Whereas all stones move toward the same place, the individual soul of each man moves towards its own proper place in the hierarchy of things. Hence, whereas stones exclude one another from achieving their ultimate goal, every man can achieve his goal. (2) Stones do not exercise their motion freely; they move according to the impact of external forces; but men operate freely. (3) Although stones get lighter as they approach their goal, human beings get heavier. The inequality of men in the divine creation is the cause of each having a proper place, but each of us, however, like a stone, may be nearer to or farther from his proper place. There are, therefore, two sorts of inequality among men: their inequality by nature, that is, by birth; and the inequality due to the use of their freedom, according to the fullness or emptiness of their actions, and the degree to which they attain their ends thereby.

This is commencement for you. You are admitted, as the saying goes, to a new degree. I would say that you have taken on weight. I hope you will continue to do so gracefully as each of you proceeds to that singular place which is your destiny. You have already each achieved a certain weight, a certain degree of spiritual gravity. I wish

to insist you have not all achieved the same weight. If your education has been good, and I know that it has been, it has not made you, all equal; it has rather brought each nearer to his proper place in the scheme of things. As I listened to the honors cited, I thought that each of you did have a distinct and different weight. That is as it should be, because if education has done equally well by each of you, it has made each member of this class to be more or less than another in weight. It has made this class a perfectly ordered set, an image of the hierarchy of spiritual things.

The vision of hierarchy will enable you to understand this fact. It is a hard thing for most people to accept the fact that men are unequal. If you keep the vision of hierarchy before you—that each of you is higher or lower in being and in goodness—you will live vigorously, but not competitively. You will strive for your own perfection without disorganizing society and sacrificing others to your ambition or greed. You will find in your own proper end the only true measure of success. You will be well-tempered in yourself, and you will be able to live in concord with others. The simple rule is never to rest in less than you can be, because fullness of weight is the only measure of true happiness. But never strive to be more than somebody else, because no one else is a measure of your perfection.

This is the wisdom of the *Divine Comedy*, that poem which, of all poems, celebrates hierarchy and through it peace and happiness.. Thus, in Canto III of the *Paradiso*, Dante meets Piccarda, and this conversation takes place:

Piccarda—I am Piccarda, who, placed here with all these other blessed ones, am blessed in the lowest spheres.

Dante—But tell me, you who are happy here, do you not desire a more exalted place, in order to see more, or to make for yourself more friends?

Piccarda—Brother, charity quiets our will, and makes us wish only for that which we have, and quickens not our thirst for aught else. If we desired to be more on high, our desires would be discordant with the will of Him who assigns us here, which thou wilt see is not possible in these circles, if to exist in charity is here of necessity, and if thou dost well consider its nature. Nay, it is the essence of this blessed existence to hold itself within the divine will, whereby our wills are made one. So that as we are, from seat to seat throughout this realm, to all the realm is pleasing, as to the King who inwills us with His will, and His will is our peace; it is that sea whereunto everything is moving which It creates and which nature makes.

Dante—Thus it was clear to me, how everywhere in Heaven is Paradise, even if the grace of the Supreme Good does not rain down in one measure.

If you keep the vision of hierarchy before you, you will never forget the two precepts of charity: love God, and thy neighbor as thyself.



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