

# Bishop Sheen: Our Schools and the State of the Nation

My dear People:

Never before in our history have our schools been so needed. Once we had to build them to preserve our faith in a kind of civil war of religious sects. That day is passed. Now we are face to face with an invasion of barbarism, not active barbarism from without, but passive barbarism from below. It is not the State of the Church which requires schools of morality and religion; it is the State of the Nation. The school that was once the bulwark of the Church is now also the bastion of our Republic.

The Lord Who said: "Suffer the children to come unto Me," inspired our classrooms. But the same Lord, weeping over a dying civilization, prompts us now to preserve them. The hour has struck when our schools must render to God not only the things that are God's, but also to Caesar the things that are Caesar's. Nineteen out of twenty-one civilizations which vanished from history perished from within. Lincoln said he never feared that America would fall by an attack from without, but rather from within.

In a word, our schools of morality and religion must be preserved not only for the sake of the parish and the Church, but also for the sake of the country.

Listen to such a voice as that of Oswald Spengler who made a study of the rise and fall of civilizations: "You are dying. I can see all the characteristic stigmata of decay. I can prove to you that your great wealth and your great poverty, your capitalism and your socialism, your wars and your revolutions, your atheism and your pessimism and your cynicism, your immorality, your broken-down marriages, your birth control that is bleeding you from the bottom and killing you off at the top in brains—I can prove to you that these were characteristic marks of these dying ages of ancient states—Alexandria, and Greece and neurotic Rome."

All around us a suicidal impulse calls for madder music, stronger wine, and more violent disorders. We have become, in our absence of moral standards, like spectators in a theater applauding the announcement that the building is on fire.

Certainly, we need schools to preserve faith and morality in our own. But now we need them also for those who are not our own; for parents who knock at our doors and ask that we take their non-Catholic children for Inner-City children who would fill our buildings tenfold, if we could afford them.

In relation to our Republic, our schools must continue for three reasons:



"The mission of our schools is to make children good as well as smart."

## I TO GIVE CHILDREN THE MEANING AND PURPOSE OF LIFE

A boiler which loses its purpose given by the mind of the engineer, explodes. A pencil used to open a tomato can breaks. In like manner, frustration, despair, pessimism insinuate themselves into our people who dread the future which appears as death in disguise, and who know not the answer to the ultimate: "Why am I here? Where am I going?" We would not have a gadget in our house if we did not know what it was for. How then can we live with ourselves if education is only the accumulation of facts.

Victor Frankl, the Jewish psychiatrist, survived concentration camps because he found "a continuous meaningful contact with the outside world." Every neurosis, he says, "is a spiritual problem, a moral conflict in an existential vacuum."

The children who inherit the confused world we bequeathed them must be given a radar, a chart, a lighthouse, and a target. This is precisely what our religious schools do: they give all the facts everyone else does but, as Pasternak said, they "build meaning into education." It is

not frosting on a cake; rather it infuses and animates all teaching as the soul gives life to the body.

Our modern madness has come from man refusing to accept anything not of his own contriving. The result is that he is in a state of beligerence toward everything that is non-self, even saying with Sartre "My neighbor is hell."

In vain does education seek to adjust youth to a world that is not itself adjusted. Whoever has a reason for living will endure almost everything in life; he who has no reason will endure nothing.

It is not so much what happens to us that matters; it is how we react to what happens—and it is to this that religious schools address themselves. They will cut down the mental breakdowns, the psychoses, neuroses and split personalities of our times by giving youth a map before they get lost and a blueprint before they build.

## II TO PRESERVE OUR RIGHTS AND LIBERTIES

In these days when everyone talks of rights, and few of duties, it is important for us Americans to recall that the Declaration of Independence is also a Declaration of Dependence.

Where do we get our right of free speech? Where do we get our freedom of conscience? Whence is derived the right to own property? Do we get these rights and liberties from the State? If we did, the State could take them away. Do we get them from the federal government in Washington? If we did, the federal government could take them away. Whence comes the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness?

Read the Declaration of Independence and there find the answer: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that generation, the religious, and classical, are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." Notice these words: The Creator has endowed men with rights and liberties; men got them from God! In other words, we are dependent on God, and that initial dependence is the foundation of our independence.

If the State or the Dictator is the creator of rights, then the State or the Dictator can dispossess men of their rights. That is why in those countries where God is most denied, man is most tyrannized, and where religion is most persecuted, man is most enslaved. It is only because we are dependent on God that we are independent as persons from the total will of any man on earth.

Let us not think that by denying God we will have purchased independ-

ence. The pendulum of the clock that wanted to be free from its point of suspension, found that on becoming independent, it was no longer free to swing.

Democracy is based not on the divine right of kings but on the divine right of persons. Each person has a value because God made him, not because the State recognizes him. The day we adopt in our democracy the already widespread ideas of some American jurists, that right and justice depend on convention and the spirit of the times, we shall write the death warrant of our independence.

When watchmakers set watches according to their whims and not according to a fixed point of reference, such as the sun, we will no longer have the right time; when aviation engineers build machines in repudiation of the laws of aerodynamics, we will no longer fly. When we deny God as the foundation of our rights, we shall no longer have rights. The Declaration of Independence, — I repeat, is a Declaration of Dependence. We are independent of dictators because we are dependent on God.

In these days the State encroaches more and more on man. Some doctors are urging that since the State educates and cares for the welfare of man, the State shall also have the right to say whether or not he shall have children.

When this happens, our people need an education which challenges a State that says: "Since you profess no other allegiance than to us, then you wholly belong to us." We teach that our rights are inalienable, because they come from God. In doing this we are preserving our nation.

As Walter Lippman wrote, "The prevailing education is destined, if it continues, to destroy the Western civilization, and in fact, is destroying it." The plain fact is that the graduates of the modern school are actors in the catastrophe which has befallen our civilization. . . . Modern education is based on a denial that it is necessary, or useful, or desirable for the schools and colleges to continue to transmit from generation to generation the culture of the Western World. . . . By separating education from the classical religious tradition the school cannot train the pupil to look upon himself as an inviolable person because he is made in the image of God. These very words, though they now sound archaic, are the noblest words in our language."

## III TO CORRECT VIOLENCE BY INNER VIOLENCE

Violence is of two kinds, the outer directed against neighbor, in which we project the guilt of our own soul to others; the inner which is directed against our own guilt, our egotism,

our lusts, our cynicism, our dishonesty. The first kind of violence uses a sword that is thrust outward; the other a sword that is thrust inward.

Too much education today starts with the philosophy: first, the feast, then the hangover. Our nation is now ready for the other philosophy which starts first with the fast, then the feast. Parents who survey delinquent children know that they made a mistake in rearing them to do whatever they pleased, instead of whatever they ought. A talent in human nature makes it easy for the young to assert the "I" to the exclusion of the "Thou," and to interpret love as pleasure-to-me rather than as good will-for-others. This makes children say: "I don't like you, I don't like anybody! I only like myself."

Surrounded by destruction and violence in the mass media, the child needs a training which makes him see that as a knife needs to be sharpened, and as a sculptor must knock off huge chunks of marble to produce the form, so character emerges through a series of self-denials, all of which implies violence toward all that destroys our personality.

As the youths would not play baseball without foul lines, so the game of life will be played within reasonable limitations. Discipline must not exist only in the Armed Services and on the football field.

Our teaching is based on the principle that a youth has a will as well as an intellect; the will is the faculty of the Good, the intellect the faculty of the True. Knowledge alone, without goodness, can make us learned devils instead of stupid devils. When all the dust and chips and tinsel has been brushed off his life, each one must face the hard question: "Was it good or evil?" The mission of our schools is to make children good as well as smart.

The swords our people must put back into their scabbards are those which hurt others; the swords which we must unsheathe are those which hurt our diabolical conceits and our unconcern for neighbor. It is easier to carry a placard damning someone else than to carry the cross of our own guilt. God knows we need an intellectual training to amass knowledge; but we also need a training of our will in goodness to denounce the nuclear warfare born of that wisdom.

But this cannot be done without discipline, for by nature, as Immanuel Kant said: "We are raw and wild." Because our schools of morality believe in Goodness as well as Knowledge, they believe in tightening the strings of human violins in order to give better music. This will be a cure for the violence which turns our streets into jungles, and introduce another motivation into conduct than

"This is what I want and who will stop me?"

Will we survive in a conflict with Soviet Russia unless we do something for our youth more than cram their heads with facts and leave their hearts empty? George Kennan, one of America's great statesmen has his doubts: "If you ask me, as an historian, whether a country in the state this country is in today with no highly developed sense of national purpose, but the overwhelming accent on the life of personal comfort and amusement, with the dearth of public services and the surfeit of privately sold gadgetry—if you ask me whether such a country has, over the long-run, a good chance of competing with a purposeful, serious and disciplined society, such as that of the Soviet Union, I must say the answer is 'No.'"

## OUR PROPOSAL FOR THE FUTURE

In conclusion, we will keep our schools because of two loves: love of God and love of country.

We will sacrifice for them not just for the sake of our sanctuary, but for the benefit of our Republic.

So necessary have we become to the Flag, as well as the Cross, that we believe:

1. The United States Government will soon give equal aid to our schools. If it buys guns and ammunition for our young, it can buy books and blackboards.
2. We believe that the ecumenical spirit among all Christian Churches will make them unite efforts to work together in teaching the un-churched youths of America, to give them the meaning of life, to build the foundations of our rights and to substitute morality for hate and violence.
3. We believe also that many parents who do not share our faith will continue to want their children to share our moral training. Since our schools exist not only for the sake of the Church, but for the sake of the world, we will welcome these children to our classes.

America is fed up with lawlessness, dishonesty and dishonor. It now wants to get back that which made us great. And what did? Not a single signer of the Declaration of Independence was educated in a non-religious school.

Our nation can be great again and our schools, along with all other religious and moral forces in the nation, can make it great again!

Begging your prayers, I am  
Your servant in Christ,  
Fulton J. Sheen,  
Bishop of Rochester

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