

THE SECRETARY-GENERAL

COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS
AT THE UNIVERSITY OF NOTRE DAME
South Bend, Indiana, 21 May 2000

Father Malloy [President of the University],
Members of the Class of 2000,
Ladies and Gentlemen and my dear friends:

Thank you Fr. Malloy for that most flattering introduction, and thank you for this degree of Doctor of Laws.

It is indeed a great honour for me to share this special day of achievement with so many of you. This university is justly famous, and we can all be very proud to be associated with it.

Of course, I know what's going on through the minds of some of you. We work so hard for our degrees and some just get 100 degrees as you saw this afternoon!

This University has built its reputation for learning on a solid link with the Catholic Church – a body which even we who are not members of it must admire for its message of the universal brotherhood and sisterhood of men and women, of social justice and respect for human life.

Just six weeks ago I had the privilege, with my colleagues in the United Nations system, the heads of all the U.N. agencies, of being received in Rome by His Holiness Pope John Paul II. Once again I was struck by his acute sense of the times we are all living in, and by his burning desire to see the benefits of human progress more widely and equitably shared.

He spoke of the world's increasing interdependence. He rightly said that this requires new ways of thinking and new types of international co-operation.

And he defined the challenge facing us, at the dawn of the twenty-first century, as that of building a world in which individuals and peoples fully and unequivocally accept responsibility for their fellow human beings, for all the earth's inhabitants.

I was greatly encouraged by this message because it chimes exactly with one that I myself am trying to get across.

In just over three months' time, political leaders from all over the world will gather in New York for the Millennium Summit. In preparation for that meeting I have issued a report,

which deals with issues of peace and security, with environmental problems, and with the reform of the United Nations itself.

The longest section in it, which I feel is specially close to the Pope's message, is entitled "Freedom for Want." And it is that theme that I should like to dwell on briefly this afternoon.

One of the aims of the United Nations is "to promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom." The founders knew that this aim is inseparable from the other aims – peace, human rights and respect for international law – which they listed alongside it.

Without doubt, in the past half century the world has made great economic gains. Since the 1960s, life expectancy in developing countries has increased from 46 to 64 years; infant mortality rates have halved; the proportion of children enrolled in primary school has increased by more than 80 percent; and access to safe drinking water and sanitation has doubled.

Some parts of the world are now getting richer at almost vertiginous speed. But others are falling further and further behind.

Sixty percent of the world's income is now earned by one billion people living in developed countries, while the 3.5 billion in low-income countries earn less than 20 percent.

Nearly half the world's population has to make do on less than \$2 per day. And some 1.2 billion people – including 500 million in South Asia and 300 million in Africa – are struggling on less than \$1 per day.

No doubt one dollar per day goes further in the villages of India than in the shopping malls of Indiana. Even so, just imagine what it is like to have only one dollar in your hand to provide for all your wants and needs each and every day of the year. Just one dollar for food, clothing, education, medicine or shelter.

How do you start a family, or a business, with that kind of capital? How can you enjoy any kind of freedom? How can you escape from pain and despair?

This extreme poverty is an affront to our common humanity. It also makes many other problems worse.

For instance, poor countries – especially those with significant inequality between ethnic and religious groups – are far more likely to be embroiled in conflicts than rich ones.

It is in poor countries, particularly in Africa, that the worst effects of HIV/AIDS and other diseases are concentrated.

And poor countries often lack the capacity and resources to implement policies that protect the environment.

I do not mean to suggest that the poverty of the many is caused by the prosperity of the few, or vice versa. It is not that the poor are exploited. Their tragedy is that they are *excluded* for the world market.

What I *do* suggest is that the extraordinary success of the new global economy offers all of us a great example and a great opportunity. But at present perhaps half of humankind is missing out.

We *must* find ways to enable the rest of the world to join in. We must put the great new global market within reach of the poor, so that they too can become producers and consumers.

My report suggests some ways of doing this. Many of the keys lie in the hands of the developing countries themselves, and especially their leaders. But there is much that the more fortunate people in the world – a category that includes all of us here this afternoon – can do to help.

The future of developing countries depends, above all, on their ability to mobilise capital and attract investment.

And that in turn depends on their goods and services being allowed to compete fairly in the markets of richer countries, such as the United States.

In many cases it also depends on their governments being able to spend money on education and health instead of having to devote all their revenue to servicing external debts.

And when a country *does* adopt sensible policies, it can benefit enormously from financial assistance.

And yet, over several decades during which the industrial world has been enjoying unprecedented prosperity, development assistance has steadily declined.

It is particularly shameful that the United States, the most prosperous and successful country in the history of the world, should be one of the least generous in terms of the share of its gross national product it devotes to helping the world's poor. I am sure many of you share my feeling that this is unworthy of the traditions of this great country.

So there are three areas – trade, debt relief and official development aid – where I hope you will use your privileged position, as citizens of a great democracy, to advocate the changes in public policy that are needed.

But you can also make a difference more directly, as individuals. One of the glories of this university is its emphasis on service learning and volunteerism. A large number of you, I am told, have done service work throughout your years as students here – not just occasional hours tutoring, but major time commitments, here in the South Bend community and, during your vacations, further afield.

Even more encouragingly, Notre Dame students have a tradition of taking a full-time volunteer job for the year after graduation, supported both by the university and by their parents. I hope many of you will follow that tradition, and make that year a year of real service to those who need it most – the poorest countries and the poorest people.

Let me mention one way in particular that some of you could do that, especially those of you who have acquired skills in information technology – which I suspect is most if not all of you, whatever subject you have majored in.

Information technology, I am convinced, is one of the main keys to economic growth and development for all countries. At present, information technology is even more unequally divided than other forms of wealth. There are more computers in this country than in the rest of the world combined.

But information technology is cheap compared to other forms of capital. It depends less and less on hardware or on major financial investments, and more and more on human brainpower – the one form of capital which, thank God, is fairly distributed among the world's people.

All that is needed is a relatively small investment in basic education, and in making things like computers and cell-phones available to groups of people, so that each individual does not have to buy their own.

That investment can give many poor people access to the new technology. And that, in turn, will enable many poor countries to leapfrog some of the long and painful stages of development that others have had to go through.

Already this is happening in parts of the developing world. Bangalore, an Indian city, has become a centre of the world software industry. Costa Rica, by exporting microchips, achieved the highest growth rate in Latin America last year. Public telecentres have been established in places from Peru to Kazakhstan.

In Egypt – to give just one example – the United Nations Development Programme has helped create Technology Access Community Centres to bring the Internet and fax services to poor and rural areas.

This is where you come in. We are in the process of setting up a United Nations Technology Service – UNITeS for short. It is a consortium of high-tech volunteer corps, which will send young people out to train groups in developing countries in the uses and opportunities of information technology.

Net Corps America is a member of this consortium. I am sure many of you here could help, and I hope you will not hesitate to get in touch with us or with the UN Volunteer Programme.

Your year as a volunteer could bring enormous benefits to people in a developing country. It would also make a difference to your own lives, which I am sure you would never forget, and never regret.

In any case, I hope all of you will take a commitment to the wider world, and to the cause of peace and development, into your future careers – whether they be in business, public service, or professions like teaching, medicine and the law.

All of these can have an international dimension. And all offer opportunities to be of service to your fellow men and women.

I feel confident that you will seize those opportunities. I know that Notre Dame represents much that is best and most generous in the American tradition. I am proud, as all of you must be proud, that from this day forward we can call ourselves Notre Dame graduates.

I wish you all a very happy day; and may you live lives of great benefit to others as well as fulfillment to yourselves!

Thank you very much.