The Challenge of Leadership

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On the bridges of Novi Sad, Serbia. December 2004

Winters in Serbia are like nothing I have ever felt, not in terms of temperature but of an ancient chill that hangs dimly in the air, a feeling of loss and grief that left a profound imprint on my conscience. Standing on the battered edge of a bridge in Novi Sad, a town north of Belgrade, which was bombed six years ago amidst the tragic realities of war, I stared into the waters of the Danube but found no answers to years spent studying the region and its restless, turbulent history. As a crossroad for empires, the Balkans seem, inevitably, to serve as the battleground for dueling religious sects, compelling nationalist ideology, territorial disputes and any other slanted, manmade reasoning amounting to war.

America, a nation formed in the latter half of the 18th century, has not the cultural depth or historical aptitude to fall prey to certain beguilements and temptations of history, which feed into centuries of predictable yet powerful transgressions. These are the ingrained proclivities to destruction, the adherence to vengeance as a duty, lack of sympathy or mercy, and the kind of desperate memories that leave violent and pervasive stains of human horror sodden in places like Srebrenica where thousands died in the wars of dissolution in the Former Yugoslavia.

When I contemplate in a hypothetical framework where I might be in fifteen years, I imagine without a doubt that I will play a minor but functioning role in the international political system. It is my dream to stop

a pandemic in its tracks, to produce Pulitzer-worthy work depicting untold truths, and to unite fragmented societies that have long since known a peaceful night. In more realistic and modest imaginings I find myself as part of an environmental assessment unit operating under the direction of a nongovernmental organization dedicated to water policy and sustainability in developing countries. It is no secret that a career in international affairs presents multiple opportunities for one to exercise leadership in serving the common good, from responding to natural disasters to developing economic models that suffice hungry infants to brokering negotiations in distant territories.

I ponder more routinely the positive possibilities that could arise in such a line of work but I have to acknowledge the ethnical challenges that materialize into greed, bribery, corruption, graft, and the manipulation of truth to maximize personal gain, which lead to continued accounts of poverty, sickness, conflict and bitterness. With a deeper reflection, however, I know that the greatest ethical challenge to any leadership position I may come to assume rests in both complacency and the tendency to choose sides in war. I cannot allow myself to perpetuate the cycle of war that plagues so many regions and leaves so many regrettable stains on the hearts of nations. By doing nothing I most certainly am doing something. I must respond to injustice with the most objective commitment I can.

Two years at Seton Hall University have not given me the courage I need to confront worldwide despair single-handedly – this comes from within – but it has afforded me greater sense of fellowship and spirituality. I am surrounded by the beauty of individuals who serve a higher force, individuals like Monsignor Liddy, Lynda Manon, John Nowik, Regina Novicky, and the late Monsignor Cusack, who have reminded me of the value of Christian faith, taught me self-worth and an appreciation for charity, and have inadvertently called upon me to never accept the ordinary when the extraordinary will transform lives. An exceptional team of professors at the Whitehead School of Diplomacy has equipped me with both theoretical and policy-oriented approaches to serving world needs while the quiet silence of the university chapel has swept for me a path closer to God – it is more than I asked for but all that I need.