

# Lent: Opportunity to teach magnanimity

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On March 22, 1959, when the oldest of the baby boomers were in their early teen years, poet Robert Frost appeared on the Sunday morning television news show, "Meet the Press."

The interviewer was Lawrence Spivak, who preceded Tim Russert and David Gregory as host of that long-running - since 1947 - Sunday morning TV show.

Spivak asked Frost, "Do you think American civilization has improved or deteriorated during your lifetime?"

The poet replied, "I think it has made its way forward. ... (But) we are so rich that we are like rich parents who wish they knew how to give their children the hardships that made them so rich."

The interviewer asked about the young people of 1959.

Looking for reassurance, he asked, "Do you think they are more promising? Are they harder, more alert than those of a generation or two ago? Do you think they are better than their fathers or grandfathers?"

Frost said, "The fear is they won't be if they are made too comfortable and have their life too easy. We are like a rich father who wishes he knew how to give his son the hardships that made the father such a man. We are in that sort of position. We can't. There seems to be no answer to that."

Trying to cut under that reply to get at what Frost might see as value deficits in the

young, Spivak asked: “What has been the most important thing, do you think, to you in your life? Love, justice, learning, truth, faith, work; or has it been courage?”

Frost said, “That is hard to answer. I suppose that the greatest thing of all would be magnanimity.”

Magnanimity. Now, six decades later, it might be time to take another look at the relevance of this concept to America’s future.

An 80-year-old grandfather I know, who is still active in a successful business career, told me recently: “We have deprived our kids of deprivation.”

He was thinking of his own children and grandchildren, but he had in mind a certain drift and purposelessness he sees in young Americans today. Not all, of course, but enough to raise a warning flag about the future.

Magnanimity is a good Ignatian word.

St. Ignatius of Loyola advises those who would undertake the retreat experience known as the Spiritual Exercises to enter into them with a spirit of “magnanimity and generosity” and to expect to emerge from the retreat experience with even more magnanimity of heart.

This, Ignatius believed, would be good for the soul. Frost thought it would be good for the country.

Where is the magnanimity in American life today? How might the young catch the large-hearted and high-hearted love of others that Frost viewed as important for the future of this nation?

Lent provides an opportunity to invite the young to consider magnanimity.

Magnanimity is a nice summary of all the demands that the Christian Gospel makes of a man or woman of faith. It is quintessentially Christian. It is something that has appeal to the young once they see it in the Gospels and try to translate it into action in Christian service.

Frost told Spivak that “there seems to be no answer” to the problem of a rich father

wondering how he might give his son or daughter the “hardships that made the father such a man.”

Perhaps the observance of Lent, in some form of service to others, can provide a workable answer.