December 13, 1936

I greet you all, noble countrymen and countrywomen, with the words: Let Jesus Christ be praised.

Our newspaper columns teem with life’s events: events which demonstrate the fallibility of human nature and people’s imperfections. Newspapers inform us of robberies, failures and offenses against the commandments of God, natural and human. Reading some events awakens us to mercy; others, to hatred and abomination. Theft itself, be it as it may, is a grave and fearful thing. Even more sad when the robber is a young person, who deliberately throws himself into the deed, which ends up fatally, with jail or even death. However people are thick-skinned. They read of these things, shake their heads, and move on. In this country specifically there are court cases daily after which jail doors are closed. At that moment in our penal institutions are found a veritable army of prisoners, almost four million, the great majority of whom are between 18 to 26 years old. I cite this sad statistic, and one boding no good . I come to the news of the 24th day of November 1936 gotten through New York papers: “He looked as if he was on the way to church or to work – but he was sent to the electric chair. He rose yesterday, and before the judge, Peter J. Brancato, in Brooklyn. He stood slim, with an ashen countenance, seventeen year old boy, dressed in bright clothing with matching tie and shirt; with fashionable hair. His name was James Sullivan, who just the past year was a student of Richmond High School. Judge Brancato pronounced the sentence of death and Jimmy, as he was known by his school mates bit his lips and looked at the judge and he sentenced him to death: “Jimmy” is sentenced to death because he committed murder for the paltry sum of nine dollars. On February 20th he stole from the elderly Herman Meyerson’s store while beating him mercilessly with the butt of a gun and stole nine dollars from the register. The elderly store owner died after five days. Jimmy was arrested and on the 13th of November was found to be guilty by the jury. On the first days of the New Year, Jimmy will go to the electric chair. The date is assigned for the week beginning January 4th. Jimmy thanked the jurors who declared him guilty of murder. After a short while he asked if he could say a few words of advice to young people in order that they may take the right road and keep themselves free of theft. I will comment on it and then translate in plain English. “Tell them not to drink. Tell them to take school seriously and stay away from girls till they are really able to think of marriage. Girls can get you into a lot of trouble, always wanting something, and they can be catty too, and make you forget your best pals.” By best pals Jimmy said he meant his father and mother. In translation what Jimmy said was: “Powiedz chlopcom aby….” Now I name my talk:

TELL THEM, SO THAT….

About thirty miles from New York City lay the town of Ossining. This place is known throughout the world since in it is the federal prison of Sing Sing. It is one of seven state institutions which are widely known because of the presence of the electric chair which hungers for business and is never satisfied.” The United Press maintains this frightening statistic: “At Sing Sing today are more young people scheduled for the Electric Chair then graduates, more than graduates of whatever high school who will be graduating in June. There are 23 of them. None of them have completed their twenty first year of life. Every one of them took a human life and each one must give up his or her life as a result. The house of death once was empty; new before the holiday season it was renovated into a school dormitory. When James Sullivan, this week, visited its halls he found eight prisoners as old as he who were capable of voting but not free from murdering or being murdered. Sullivan is seventeen years old, he is a student of higher education; he brutally beat and elderly storekeeper to death for the paltry sum of nine dollars, which after murdering stole from the cash register. He was called the “young Dillinger.” He was a “tough” guy. His execution is listed for Thursday. Young Wentworth Springer goes to the chair in that same evening. He also will die. And he also killed a storekeeper as did the young Dillinger. And he also is only 17 years old: Springer, Lawrence Jackson, and Robert Teliafero, took part in this robbery. Teliafero is one year older. From the five thieves, two murdered the president of the bank; the rest has to pay for the murders in the thieves cells. Not even the prison garb hid youth of the prisoners. The young Sullivan noticed that at once and said: “We have here a good deal of Children – “Gee” he said “there are sure plenty of kids here”. I repeat once more that these unlucky prisoners call from their incarceration, close to the electric chair: “Tell them to listen to their parents; to go to church; tell them to avoid bad company! Look at us. Instead of using our freedom, they put us behind bars; they guard us day and night like wild animals; we have just begun to live and now we have to die, shaming our name and shading the reputation of our families. Let our loss, frighten us from crime. Young people believe us that a wayward life does not pay and the payment for sin is an early ignominious, terrible death. Young people on your way listen to the plea coming from their lips, which with their own hands have sealed their own fate in going to the electric chair, and now they see and understand that a wayward life can only end up in the prison at a hanging or the chair. Imagine high prison walls surrounding you, enclosing you in a tension ridden prison; imagine yourself laying on a cot in a cell, cursed by people you have offended and you conscience tearing at you; imagine them taking you along a corridor to your death by the electric chair and you are thirty feet from you final demise; and then they are tying you to the chair; imagine them blindfolding you and putting on the electric band on your head; imagine the current surging throughout your body and your soul coming before the Judge and then ask yourself if it was all worth it; should you not have listened to your parents and avoid unhealthy relationships.

My dear Youth, listen to the letter written by the young criminal sentenced to life in prison: I will translate it into English:

Dear Father Justin: “Thanks for your kind letter. I have come to feel that in you I have an anchorage when I feel myself going adrift. When I look back over this ill-spent life of mine, with its years of emptiness through which I have passed travelling the downward path, they seem a little less empty because of you. I feel that I have you who know me – and, sometimes thinking of me. This thought heartens me more than a little, for I know you realize my home-sickness and the longing in my heart. I sometimes wonder – but never mind, for people doubtless wonder at our lives; one can never get at the bottom of the mystery of why some men do things. Many men are behind these high walls. Some good men, and some of them devils, - men good by nature, devils by circumstance. We are all degraded, fawning and sullen, yet few are looking for sympathy. Every mood of man is isolated behind these walls; all are lonely. After finishing my studies, I had real ambition, but I went too high for a youngster – promoted too rapidly – I held fond hopes for myself, building a future beam by beam! Of course it was dangerously pleasant pastime. Then, little by little, my ambitions changed to hopes, they had become more and more real, until just before the end, they were the foundation upon which my future was to rest. And down they came; too high a life, too much booze, and a future buried in ruins. Many a sleepless night I have spent here. I have been a fool; so much is true. Frequently I wish I could spend the balance of my time in my cell. I do not care to go to the yard: I do not care to have any visitors; I do not care to talk or be talked to. I do not care to talk or be talked to. I do not care to think either, but that I cannot help. I wish my end would soon come!”

I suppose it isn’t necessary to make a comment about this letter; perhaps just one sentence: “too high a life, too much booze, and a future buried in ruins.” I shall add: “And years wasted behind bars.”

In the month of November, I went to a far-away state prison in Wethersfield, Conn. It was a sad journey because I went to see a prisoner sentenced to death. He had killed a police officer. Listen to the details. He had a fairly good job. He was a mechanic in a plane factory. He had good pay. He earned less than 35 dollars weekly. Sometimes as much as 85 dollars. He was healthy. He was unlucky as to associate himself with bad company. He sought recreation in shady places. He learned to drink and drink too much. One morning after spending all night dancing and drinking, his buddies took him to a place where he could live. He welcomed them occasionally and drank with them. One of his friends suggested they steal and radio in a nearby store. Despite the fact that they all drank too much, his friends had enough consciousness to stay in the car and sent him to steal. They gave him a gun. He went ahead and stole35 dollars and came back. While he was entering the car, the police arrive. They began to search the car he came with his friends. Our drunken hero, in order that the police would not find the stolen merchandise, or from some brave idea, took the revolver from his pocket and killed on of the policemen and wounded another seriously. The other young bandits ran away. After a few hours, after finding the body and took the suspects but the whole guilt fell on the young shooter. His friends forgot about their friendship with him. In order to save their own lives, they testified against him. Then the sentencing, another young man sacrificed to the electric chain. So, I take my journey to visit him.   
The day was cloudy and cold. Rain falls mixed with snow. Outside the town stand the prison walls. They remind me of the fortresses of old bordered by huge unscalable walls with small turrets. The guard is on duty is well armed. A searchlight scans the premises. I pass through the main gate and to the window of the receiving clerk, identify myself, my place of residence and the reason for my visit. They tell me to wait until the warden comes. They explain that without his presence, no one may enter. In about 15 minutes, the warden enters and I undergo a thorough search. I sign a document with my name and address. I am accompanied inside by prison official through a small door. The tell me to take off my hat and boots. In the meantime, I observe the environment in which I am now. I see three storied cages – prison cells. I walk up a steel stairway. Every ten yards a guard stands with a lead filled Billy-club. About nine hundred prisoners live here. About one third of them are sentenced to life imprisonment. By race they are white, yellow and black, representing all classes and nationality, every persuasion. They walk the corridors and group themselves. Cold unemotional faces, eyes cast down, heavy footed, and slow moving. The caretaker points to a black man. He is called “the black terror!” Not without reason. He is a superhuman and inhuman giant who looks like an orangutan. He received a twenty year sentence for an attack. I ask the caretaker what the average age of an inmate is. He responds: “Father it’s a sad statistic the 65 percent of our inmates are less than 30 years of age; about25 percent are under 20 years of age.” “What are the principal reasons given as causes of their downfall?” Listen to this: “Drink – bad company-gambling, the desire of having good times and drugs.” – Drunkenness – bad company – gambling – the desire to use narcotics. You have the testimony of one who knows best. At the end of one of the corridors, I see huge barred doors with little doors in them. The caretaker opens the door with clanging key. Slowly the little doors open. I enter. There are still barriers. The caretaker shows me one of them; inside is a prisoner reading a book. “It’s curious that you are here, but in this moment I was thinking when you will come. He gives his hand through the bars. A cold sweated hand. The caretaker gives me a small chair. The prisoner asks, “Father have you heard anything from my mother. She hasn’t visited me for quite a while.” What a sadness in that question! He stands, I sit. The cell is well lit. The lamp is barred and is in the ceiling. Above the bed hangs a calendar, so many days to the execution. The prisoner is guarded until he dies in the electric chair. The guard changes every eight hours. Once every day they take the prisoner outside. He is permitted thirty minutes for gymnastics. The rest of the day he is behind bars. Even now we have two guards - one stands two steps behind me, the other is at my right hand. My prisoner is pale. His eyes cast downcast, bloodshot eyes, frowned brow. His lips tightened. He talks to me in whisper: “If I received my freedom back, even if I lived to a thousand years, I wouldn’t touch a glass of vodka. Under the influence of alcohol I let myself talked into committing a robbery. I went crazy. I wanted to show my courage – and today I am here. Whatever else he told me is lost in the recesses of my memory. Enough that some emotional rendering happened and took hold of my soul and such great sadness took hold of my soul of the waste of this young man’s life which life will be snuffed out in a short while. I spoke yet a few words to him but my heart hurt from mercy for this forlorn soul. I wondered what went on in his soul. The guard himself brought to my mind a visit to the cell and room of death. I walked somewhat hesitatingly because in my imagination the young man stood behind bars, pale and white, the man whose days were numbered. I was led to the other side of the building; somewhere in the deep cellar where the “dance hall” was situated. First we visited the cell where the sentenced were gathered according to rank, before they were called for execution. Bars, small doors of steel- a glass cubicle into which the sentences was led into with shackled feet. Six steps and he sits on the chair with shaven head. His shirt open on his chest. The executioner put the cap-like electrical connection; and attaches the electricity to his ankle. Three others bind his chest, hands, and feet to the chair with three inch leather straps. The moment has arrived. The executioner pulls the switch and death is swift and sure. A sound like a swarm of bees is heard and smoke rises from the head and the smell is of burnt flesh. The hands redden and then bleach white and the veins puff up. The executioner turns the key twice more. The mouth opens, the tongue appears, the eyes show great pain. I hoped for his salvation. I began to sweat and my knees buckled. I saw before my eyes the many prisoners who had gone through the Electric Chair and were deemed to have justified their crime in the eyes of society. Why this great pain and loss? Why? They thought that they had a future ahead of them where they could live and let live? For in their eyes that there was no power either divine or human that could prevent them. Being of short-vision, they had not realized that the hand of man could deprive them of their lives. They were late convinced that it was too late, that crime does not pay, that a moment of playfulness can lead to prison, often even to death. And some in the last moment cries out desperately: I could have lived and now I must die. Ah. It is too late. – I left the prison as if intoxicated. I returned to the friary unsettled and exhausted. I lost my appetite. I turned restlessly during sleep. As I closed my eyes to sleep, I saw in my mind’s eye the prisoner in the electric chair looking at me with a terrified glance.

After all that, I return to the warnings thrown by young Jimmy; “Tell them to listen to their parents, tell them to go to Church; tell them to study; tell them to stay away from girls.” Listen to your parents because it is the commandment of God: “ Honor your father and mother as the Lord God commanded, in order that you may live a long time, and that it may bode well for you on earth, which the Lord God will give you.” Do not think that obedience is weakness on your part, for it is not only dictated by the Creator but is necessitated by natural law; obedience is lack of freedom but giving boundaries to your freedom. The Creator gave us unseen guardian angels but also visible guardians in the form of father and mother. It is their responsibility to watch over you, take care of you and teach you. Your father works for you; your mother is concerned with your welfare. They wish with all their soul for you to be happy and safe. It may seem to you that they are old and old-fashioned in their caring, that they do not know about life, and that they envy your freedom. You are mistaken. You go to others and seek their advice and neglect that of your own flesh and blood. When in difficulty you hold out your hands to strangers and they only push you toward and early grave. And then what will you do? You will weep bitterly, you will heartily express sorrow, but…it will be too late. The questions will lay before you: “Why didn’t I listen to them? If I only knew what I know today? There has never been, never is and never will be a more judicious and experienced mind as that of our parents. What is there to understand? What life has taught your parents you will never find in any book. As a result of this advice, listen to their advice and be obedient to them. Go to church and pray. Want to know why? Because that will give the strength and energy to live honestly and fear not the Billy club of the police, the judge, the prison but the love of truth and honesty. In 1933, a well-known politico and diplomat, Appony, died. In spite of being 85 years old, he was always of good humor and good health. Others asked what sport he played that gave him that strength and energy. He replied: “I owe it to my faith which was and is my only sport. I tried during my whole life not to miss daily mass at 7 in the morning. – Keep yourself uninvolved very seriously from the opposite sex until the time when you can take on that responsibility in marriage. Do you understand why? Because you devote too much time to entertainment. Your time is precious, your health of mind and body important, so that all these transitory things may be replaced with responsible thought and learning life. Above all, education is important. Added to that, a spirit of perseverance and dedication and seriousness is vital. If you wish to be a good human being you need to lay a good foundation for adulthood. Your education shall be your greatest treasure. No one can take that away from you. Add work to an education, whatever it will be - mind or hands - it ennobles man, as someone once wrote:

Work is the salt of life

Which keeps you from spoiling,

He who does not eat for free,

Will be blessed and prosper.

Giving attention to learning and to work, you will not have the time to cruise the streets, where begins the slippery road to problems, the green stool to the glass and eventually to prison. My dear young people, make up your own mind. At this moment almost a thousand prisoners sit in the shadows of the electric chair or the hanging platform. Today each of them is sad but too late. About 225 thousand prisoners are is suffering behind bars in our country. This army of prisoners, larger than soldiers serving in the regular army of the United States. About 15 million residence were arrested more than once and of these about 5 million spent more or less time in prison. It is a frightening number. Take time to look, young people, and check out Jimmy’s plea to reform your lives: “Tell them to…….”