LEAGUE OF NATIONS

SEVENTEENTH ORDINARY SESSION OF THE ASSEMBLY.

Speech by His Excellency Dr. C. Saavedra Lamas.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

First let me thank you for the great honour which you do me in electing me President of the Assembly. I interpret your choice as a tribute to my country whose conduct has always been the reflection of its attachment to the principles of law and its love of peace. I find in it a further encouragement to our policy of fidelity to international morality - a policy of ordering the nation's life in accordance with the principles of law and justice.

Your choice has no doubt another and broader significance. This is not the first occasion on which you have entrusted this office to the representative of an American nation. You forget neither the American origin of the League nor the co-operation of a continent which helps to give its activities a universal character. From the New World you have always heard words of sympathy and loyal support and you know that, in your high-minded efforts to bring about a closer brotherhood between States and further progress towards the reign of law, the young American nations will always be found standing by your side.

In accepting the office of President, I am fully aware of my responsibilities. I need hardly say that in performing my duties I shall do everything I can to live up to a tradition of impartiality which has never been broken in the past, and which is more than ever necessary at this grave juncture in the world's affairs.

We must proceed with our quest for peace and mutual understanding. We must not be disheartened, either by the diversity of our problems or by their unvarying complexity.

During the seventeen years of its existence, the League has known alternately success and deep disappointment. Such is the lot of every living organism, in its necessary efforts to adapt itself to circumstances. This is a biological process which should cause us no surprise.

We have undertaken to perfect the institution which we created; that is one of the purposes of our present gathering. It was decided that revision should be carried out in the light of the experience gained and I am gratified to note that six American countries are even now in a position to bring you quite recent evidence of successful peace-making.

The conciliation procedure employed to put an end to the war in the Northern Chaco is indeed a valuable precedent for the deliberations on which we are about to enter. That the President of the Council shares this view is clear from the words of appreciation which he has just pronounced and for which I thank him, both personally and on behalf of the Conference over which I presided; those words are equally applicable to his own country for the part it played on that occasion.
The Chaco dispute lay within the jurisdiction of the League, as both the belligerent States were signatories of the Covenant. Taking a practical view of the situation, however, you suspended your own direct action in the matter and delegated your functions to a group of neighbouring nations whose action was supported by the United States of America. There you have in some measure a regional principle which is certainly worthy of your consideration.

The salient feature, the chief characteristic of the settlement of that dispute was unquestionably the high minded and valuable assistance given by countries which are not members of the League. In a concrete case calling for an effort at conciliation, there is therefore a real possibility of associating the nations outside the League in a concerted action for peace. To my mind this fact points the way to a peace policy which should be not intermittent and occasional but finally recognised as being of general application.

But I do not wish to anticipate the proceedings of the Legal Committee, nor the proposed reforms which will have to be calmly and carefully considered, and to which we shall all make our several contributions.

If procedure by amendment is slow and difficult; if the interpretative system can do no more than lay down rules, are we not entitled to think that there is a third way of attaining the end we have set before us and of strengthening our institution by securing for it the co-operation of additional forces? Such co-operation must be established in advance and must have all the force of a legal bond.

There are already supplementary agreements or treaties for settling this essential aspect of the problem - and we can create more - without necessarily excluding such other reforms as may be deemed desirable and found to be expedient. None will deny the necessity of securing for the basic work of conciliation the help of great countries whose absence impairs the universal character of the League and weakens collective security.

All our hopes, all on which this admirable institution is founded, the statutory provisions which we feel need improvement - all that can be condensed into a synthetic whole; and its evolution on the moral plane is as necessary as the dynamic impulse that actuates all the springs of a mechanism. It can be summed up in two words; co-operation and solidarity.

By a happy coincidence I am presiding over this Assembly on the eve of my participation in the discussions of another Conference, convened on the initiative of President Roosevelt, to consolidate peace between the countries of America. I refer to this circumstance as being a privilege the value of which I fully appreciate. I hope, both here and at that other Conference, to serve the same cause, a common ideal, aspirations which are shared by all and which, at this anxious hour of world history, are calling more than ever for universal action.
These Conferences, which will be linked by a similarity of aim, will deal with analogous, if not identical, problems. They will seek means to attenuate the clash of interests between peoples and to convince them that the progress of each nation can only be advanced by international collaboration, replacing threats and violence by mutual understanding. It will only be possible to build up the work of our civilisation on a foundation of justice and right, thus upholding the freedom and dignity of mankind.

Politics and economics are intimately linked one with another. As long as we fail to secure a stable peace, we shall neither be able to rid ourselves of Customs barriers nor to overcome monetary fluctuations and anarchy, nor yet to reduce economic nationalism. A far-reaching restoration of trade, such as we considered in America at the seventh Montevideo Conference—the general growth of commerce—the increase of human welfare—all that these imply—can only be attained if we overlook continental divisions and recognise the necessity for world co-operation.

Law can only be the expression of a moral reality. We may amend the Covenant according to forms of law, but its efficacy will depend above all on the weight of the moral forces to which it owed its origin at a moment when civilisation, in a great spiritual awakening, reacted against the barbarism of war.

The League of Nations has been the subject of many criticisms and many reproaches, and it has been made to bear alone the weight of many responsibilities. It is justified in turning upon its critics and claiming before the world the moral contribution, the gift of good faith, solidarity and even of sacrifice, which was promised to it at its birth, and with which it cannot dispense unless it is to fail in its mission.