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Faith Today

The woods are full

By Katharine Bird
NC News Service

While serving as chairman of the Select Commission on Immigration and Refugee Policy, Holy Cross Father Theodore Hesburgh delved into the murky question of what justice might mean in cases that involve refugees and illegal aliens.

With other commissioners, he participated in hearings in cities like Boston, Miami, Los Angeles, El Paso, Baltimore — cities with large immigrant populations, the president of the University of Notre Dame explained in an interview.

It was not uncommon at the hearings "to see a person come to the attorney general and say, 'I'm illegal and want to testify,'" said Father Hesburgh. Often the stories told by the illegal aliens followed similar patterns, he added. For instance:

A man from Mexico said he couldn't find a job in his village, which had a 50 percent unemployment rate. He had a wife and children he couldn't feed and knew that just across the border was the richest country in the world. So he walked over the border and got a job.

Often, Father Hesburgh continued, an illegal alien said he came to the United States because "there's no hope where I was." Even if he only worked a few days weekly at a semiskilled job, it meant his family wouldn't go hungry.

In such a complicated area with so many ramifications, the illegal aliens' willingness to testify in public helped to personalize the problem with which the commissioners were struggling.

After studying the issue for three years, the commission presented its recommendations for

reform of U.S. immigration policy in a 450-page report to Congress in 1981.

Many of their recommendations were incorporated into proposed legislation for immigration reform considered by the U.S. Congress and known popularly as the Simpson-Mazzoli bill. In 1984 it died in Congress.

Among his many other public-service roles, Father Hesburgh served for 15 years on the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights.

When he looks back over his academic career, "justice issues are a central theme," Father Hesburgh said. He traces his interest back to his graduate-school days when he met on Sunday mornings to discuss racism with other students at The Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C.

Those discussions led him to other issues, such as justice in the Third World and world hunger. A person with a reputation for taking action to solve problems, Father Hesburgh said he's served on 15-20 organizations over 30 years. For 15 years he was on the board of the Rockefeller Foundation, a philanthropic organization.

From his experience, Father Hesburgh is convinced that justice issues are close at hand. They can be found in the families, the neighborhoods and cities where people live.

"Ten times weekly," he said, "people write me to ask, 'How can I do some good.'"

His reply, after expressing surprise that people think he can pick out a justice cause

for someone else, is always the same: "Do it where you are. See how you can make a difference and do it."

"The woods are full of issues," he added. "The problem is doing something practical."

He explained that he is serving now on a committee to raise scholarships for blacks in South Africa. That country is highly criticized for apartheid, its system of racial segregation. He believes this kind of concrete action to aid South African individuals is preferable to calling on corporations to pull their investments out of South Africa.

Father Hesburgh is convinced that getting youths interested in justice issues early on means they'll be hooked for life.

At Notre Dame, students learn about social justice issues in their classes and at conferences on particular topics. Many volunteer their time to social justice concerns.

"One-third of the students work in neighborhoods" on a wide variety of justice projects, he noted.

Asked how he feels when a cause he has worked hard for is derailed, Father Hesburgh explained that he gets discouraged. But it's important to "keep plugging along, to be persistent," he concluded.

(Ms. Bird is associate editor of Faith Today.)



To Holy Cross Father Theodore Hesburgh, there is no shortage of justice issues which cry out for our attention. In an interview with Katharine Bird, the Notre Dame University president discusses his work on immigration reform and other questions. "See how you can make a difference," he urges, "and do it."