

COLUMNISTS

Father Hesburgh merits praise

One of the greatest figures in the history of U.S. Catholicism turns 80 on May 25. Theodore M. Hesburgh, priest of the Congregation of Holy Cross (CSC), was for 35 years president of the University of Notre Dame. He "retired" in 1987.

The word retired is in quotation marks because Father Hesburgh has remained as active as ever during these past 10 years. Upon returning from a year-long sabbatical, he completed an autobiography, *God, Country, Notre Dame* (Doubleday, 1990), that reached 11th place on *The New York Times* best-seller list for non-fiction, and edited an important collection of essays on Catholic higher education, *The Challenge and Promise of a Catholic University* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1994).

On the national scene, he co-chaired the influential Knight Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics, 90 percent of whose proposals for reform have been adopted by the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA).

At Notre Dame itself, he oversaw the development of several institutes and centers that he was instrumental in founding, principally the Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies and the Kellogg Institute for International Studies. He chairs the advisory committees for both institutes, which are housed in the Hesburgh Center for International Studies.

Most remarkably, however, he was elected to the Board of Overseers at Har-



essays in theology

By FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

vard University and, from 1994 to 1996, served as its chair. Only someone with no idea of the bitter enmity that existed for so many years between "that place across the Charles (River)" and the Catholic Church could fail to appreciate the historic significance of a Catholic priest's not only being invited to occupy a seat on Harvard's Board of Overseers, but to serve two terms as its chair as well.

In 1967 he transferred control of Notre Dame from the founding religious community, the Congregation of Holy Cross, to a predominantly lay board of trustees, and in 1972 he took a second pioneering step by admitting women for the first time to the undergraduate program. He has always regarded these two initiatives as the most important achievements of his presidency.

Theodore Hesburgh's stature in the world community is linked with his tireless efforts over the years on behalf of peace and social justice. He served four popes in a variety of capacities, includ-

ing as permanent Vatican representative to the International Atomic Energy Agency in Vienna from 1956 to 1970, and as a member of the Holy See's United Nations delegation. In 1983 Pope John Paul II appointed him to the Pontifical Council for Culture.

His national stature is reflected in his 15 U.S. presidential appointments in such areas as the peaceful use of atomic energy, Third World development, immigration and civil rights. He chaired the Select Commission on Immigration and Refugee Policy from 1979 to 1981, and chaired the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights from 1969 to 1972. He had the honor of being the first major figure fired by President Richard Nixon before the beginning of his second, ill-fated term. Father Hesburgh had been critical of the Nixon Administration's civil rights record.

But he was honored in another way in 1964 when he received the Medal of Freedom, the nation's highest civilian award. On the occasion of the 50th anniversary of his ordination to the priesthood in 1993, he was invited to the White House to receive President Bill Clinton's personal congratulations.

Father Hesburgh's stature as the most influential leader in Catholic higher education is rooted in decades of achievements. In 1967 he led a movement among chief academic officers of Catholic colleges and universities to se-

cure the institutional autonomy of Catholic institutions of higher learning and the academic freedom of their faculties, culminating in the historic Land O' Lakes statement. From 1963 to 1973 he served as chair of the International Federation of Catholic Universities. The National Catholic Education Association recognized his contributions by bestowing on him its prestigious Elizabeth Ann Seton Award.

Not only is Father Hesburgh's name in the *Guinness*

Book of Records for his 134 honorary degrees (and still counting), but there is even a star named after him in the heavenly firmament, in recognition of his many contributions to the advancement of science.

The Faculty Senate of the University of Notre Dame recently passed a resolution honoring Father Hesburgh on the occasion of his 80th birthday for all that he has achieved on behalf of higher education, the church, the nation and the global community.

One would like to think that, at long last, the Vatican and especially the bishops of the United States might similarly honor Theodore M. Hesburgh, CSC, for what he is: one of the greatest figures, not only of U.S. Catholicism, but of the universal church.

History will so record him, in any case.

Father McBrien is a professor of theology at the University of Notre Dame.

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