

COLUMNISTS

A birthday tribute to a priest

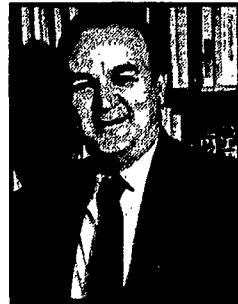
We tend to make much of birthdays and anniversaries that end in zero or five. A 70th or 75th is considered a significant milestone, but a 73rd or 77th is not.

Sometimes, however, it is better to ignore convention in order to honor greatness. This week's column takes that course.

On May 25 one of the U.S. Catholic Church's finest citizens turns 82. The leading Catholic educator of this century and one of the church's most dedicated and influential priests, Father Theodore M. Hesburgh, CSG, president emeritus of the University of Notre Dame, has not let up in his activities on behalf of world peace, human rights and social justice. He maintains a pace that men and women half his age would find grueling.

He was for 35 years president of the University of Notre Dame (1952-1987). By the time of his retirement, student enrollment had almost doubled, more than 35 new buildings had been constructed, the annual operating budget had increased from almost \$10 million to \$176 million, and the endowment from \$9 million to \$350 million.

The academic level of incoming students rose dramatically, as well as the scholarly credentials, achievements and reputation of the faculty. New graduate programs were initiated and research funding increased from \$735,000 to \$15 million.



By FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

essays in theology

Because of his successes at Notre Dame, Father Hesburgh was recognized as a national and international leader, receiving 15 presidential appointments and various assignments from popes. He was a charter member and chair of the Civil Rights Commission, and was the Vatican's representative to the Atomic Energy Agency for more than 13 years.

He has received 139 honorary degrees (with another coming next week) and more awards than one can list in a brief column, including the Medal of Freedom, the nation's highest civilian honor. At Notre Dame itself the main library and the Center for International Studies are named for him.

In one of the sweetest twists of history, Father Hesburgh became the first priest elected to the Board of Overseers at Harvard University and in 1994, at age 77, was elected its chair for two terms.

But as impressive as all of these bio-

graphical details may seem to the outsider, they do not begin to capture the essence of the person and the priest.

Father Ted Hesburgh is as great a man up close as he is from a Mount Rushmore distance.

He will not get on an elevator in the Hesburgh Library, on his way up to his office, without engaging in conversation with students taking the same ride. He is unfailing in his interest in who they are, where they're from, what they are studying, and what they hope to achieve after their years at Notre Dame. And he never leaves them without a word of encouragement.

His manner is the same with faculty, of whatever rank. He remains profoundly concerned with the academic quality and status of the university, which he had raised during his presidency to the level of some of the most highly ranked universities in the world. And he also continues to be deeply committed to the preservation and enhancement of its Catholic character.

Father Hesburgh was the subject of a cover story in *Time* magazine in early 1962, "God & Man at Notre Dame." It began with the famous quote from George Bernard Shaw, "A Catholic university is a contradiction in terms." Father Hesburgh acknowledged the Irish playwright's point, but without conceding it.

While it is true that religious dogma seems incompatible with the scientific spirit of free inquiry, he said, "We must cherish both values. We must reflect the 'ancient beauty, ever old and ever new.' There is no conflict between science and theology except where there is bad science or bad theology."

And that always remained Father Hesburgh's operating principle. "A great Catholic university must begin by being a great university that is also Catholic," he wrote in a book he edited in 1994, *The Challenge and Promise of a Catholic University* (University of Notre Dame Press).

For all of his extraordinary achievements over so long and distinguished a career as an educator and public servant, Ted Hesburgh has been, before all else, a priest. Ever since his ordination 56 years ago, the celebration of the Eucharist has been at the center of his daily life, no matter in what part of the globe he found himself. For so many of the powerful and the rank-and-file alike with whom he has come in contact, he has been confidant, counselor, confessor and consoler.

History will undoubtedly have other ideas, but no epitaph will serve him better than "Theodore M. Hesburgh, priest."

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

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