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Fr. Hesburgh at 93

by Richard McBrien

Essays in Theology

On May 25, Holy Cross Fr. Theodore M. Hesburgh or Fr. Ted as he prefers to be called, will be 93 years of age. Apart from macular degeneration, which requires that everything be read to him, he is as mentally sharp as ever.

And on June 24, he will observe the 67th anniversary of his ordination to the priesthood in the Congregation of Holy Cross.



When he was born in 1917, World War I was still raging, and when he was ordained in

1943, we were in the midst of World War II. Is there any wonder that Fr. Ted has devoted most of his life and all of his priesthood to the pursuit of peace among nations?

Soon after ordination, the young Fr. Hesburgh asked his religious superiors for permission to serve as a chaplain in the U.S. Navy. But they had other plans for him. He was sent instead to study for a doctorate in Theology at The Catholic University of America in Washington.

Although he had excelled in his studies there, he had difficulty obtaining approval for the topic he had

chosen for his doctoral dissertation: the theology of the laity. Some of the professors at CUA balked, dismissing the topic as insufficiently academic.

This was still a time, almost 20 years before the start of the Second Vatican Council in 1962, when the laity were regarded as second-class citizens in the church. The "real" church consisted of the hierarchy and the so-called lower clergy. Religious women and non-ordained religious men were in there somewhere, too, but only a notch or two above the laity.

There was a movement at the time known as Catholic Action. Its strength was that it found a place for the laity in the life of the church, but only as helpers of the hierarchy.

The young Fr. Ted Hesburgh already knew in the mid-1940s that there was much more to the role of the laity in the church than even what Catholic Action allowed for.

After a bit of a struggle, and with the dogged support of his dissertation director, Paulist Fr. Eugene Burke, Fr. Hesburgh produced his theology of the laity. So popular, in fact, was the finished product that the university bookstore could not keep printed copies in stock.

Soon thereafter Fr. Hesburgh received a request from the Vatican for a copy of the dissertation. He sent it off to Rome, but heard nothing more about it until two decades later when he read the Second Vatican Council's Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity and recognized his ideas incorporated in the document, but without a single footnote of attribution.

It was, after all, prescient of this young priest to have realized so early on in his ministry that priests exist for the sake of the laity, not vice versa.

When in July 2000 he received the prestigious Congressional Gold Medal, that had first been conferred on George Washington, President Bill Clinton noted at the award ceremony in the Capitol rotunda that, among all the honors Fr. Hesburgh had received in his life, "The greatest honor you'll ever wear around your neck is the collar of a priest."

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Fr. Hesburgh readily agreed. He said at the award ceremony, and repeated on so many other occasions, that the most significant day of his life was the day of his ordination to the priesthood. For years he has made the point to his many friends and countless audiences that he will require no better epitaph than "Theodore M. Hesburgh, priest."

Fr. Ted served for 35 years as president of the University of Notre Dame and as president emeritus ever since. He retired in 1987, after the university's Board of Trustees had given him a five-year extension, to age 70.

He considers his greatest achievements at Notre Dame to have been the transfer of governance from his own Congregation of Holy Cross to a lay board of trustees in 1967, and the admission of women students to the university in 1972.

In retirement, however, Fr. Ted remained active. He was elected to Harvard University's Board of Overseers -- the first priest to be so honored -- and in 1994, at age 77, became chair of the board for two terms.

His national stature is reflected in some 16 U.S. presidential appointments. In addition, he was a charter member and then chair of the Civil Rights Commission.

His other accomplishments are too numerous to list here. He is simply the greatest educational leader of our time and the greatest U.S. church leader of the 20th century.

A happy 93rd birthday and 67th anniversary to Fr. Ted!

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