

(Homily delivered by the Rev. Theodore M. Hesburgh, C.S.C., President, University of Notre Dame, at The Catholic University of Leuven, Leuven, Belgium, on Candlemas Day, February 2, 1978)

This is a very special day for you and for me. If you will permit me to mention first the personal specialness of this day for me, may I share with you the fact that I would not have had the wonderful opportunity to be with you today, if my father and my mother had not pledged their love for each other in marriage, on this day, sixty-five years ago, at St. Augustine's Church in New York City. I pray that they, too, may celebrate that love today, on their anniversary, in Heaven.

For the great University of Louvain, the oldest existing Catholic university in the world, this is, if my mathematics are correct, the 553rd year of its founding by John IV, Duke of Brabant, and Martin V, on December 9, 1425. This day, of course, is very special as the Feast Day of the University, and a wonderful Feast Day it is for a Catholic university, Candlemas Day.

The theme of the day, as all of you have perceived from the liturgical texts, is LIGHT. We recall especially in the Gospel, the marvelous canticle of the faithful Simeon: "Lord, you now let your servant go in peace; your word has been fulfilled; my own eyes have seen the salvation which you have prepared in the sight of every people; a light to reveal you to the nations and the glory of your people, Israel."

Who can give a better explanation of the *raison d'être* of the Catholic university than to be a light to reveal Jesus Christ, the Lord and Saviour of all the world, to the nations? We also read today in the first lesson from Isaias: "I will make you the light of the nations, so that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth." What better prophetic calling forth of the exalted mission of the Catholic university?

I need not emphasize to this congregation that we live today in a world of darkness: the ultimate darkness of ignorance and illiteracy that afflicts a fourth of humanity; the inner darkness of life without faith that afflicts other millions; the darkness that is born of pride and its offspring, intellectual blindness; the darkness of sin and greed and cupidity; the darkness of sloth, and anomie and of indifference to both the good and the true, not to mention the beautiful. My friends, there is no end to the darkness that surrounds and almost engulfs us all. It is all pervading, enticingly packaged, and depressingly present. Few, if any of us, are strangers to darkness.

We tend at times to think that our age is the worst ever, but I would rather believe that perhaps in this we are unduly pessimistic because we read and see and hear more of the messages of darkness today. Darkness was abundant enough in 1425, and precisely because it was abundant then, the University of Louvain was born to become a center of light. We can also attest to the

presence of darkness in the early part of the Nineteenth Century when Louvain, alone among the earliest of Medieval universities, was reborn as a Catholic university. We need not propose a superabundance of darkness in the world today, but there is certainly enough darkness to justify the strong and vital presence of this superb Catholic university. The world still needs an institution that is a light to reveal Our Lord and Saviour to the nations.

How precisely can the University of Louvain be this light? Because I began my university profession as a theologian, I think primarily of theology, the ultimate light in the intellectual order, the illuminating presentation of the Word of God, the light of eternal truth shining on the ambiguities and uncertainties of time. This can be done well or badly, but I think there are few institutions in the world who profess theological truth as clearly or as lucidly as does Louvain. It is in places like this that the Church does its thinking, not just about theological truth in the abstract, but as a bright light shining through the special darkneses of our age and times. Louvain has ever coped with the specificity of darkness, be it literary, scientific, aesthetic, or existential. In this, the philosophical faculty has been a valiant companion to the theological. Together they have understood that the light of intelligent inquiry is only effective if it shines on the specific darkness that bedevils mankind in each successive age. Together they have pinpointed the light of faith and reason

to the heart of the current darkness, and in this Louvain's theologians and philosophers have been masters of light to all the nations that languish in darkness.

There was, of course, a day when the light of a university was mainly theological and philosophical. No more. Human knowledge has grown so widely, especially in the natural, biological, and social sciences and in technology, that the present spectrum of light from the modern university must be correspondingly broad. Unfortunately, the expansion of knowledge is, in our imperfect world, also an occasion for the expansion of error. The power of knowledge can be used for evil, as well as for good purposes. To cope effectively with error and this evil, monumental in our times, the university is the only potent intellectual instrumentality in the Church, for both the error and the evil must be deeply understood if they are to be exposed and corrected. The light of the Catholic university in our times must be cast as broadly as the expansive empire of darkness, and with no less intelligence than that which espouses error and promotes evil. We of the Catholic university world must undertake this mission with confidence, for as John reminds us in the beginning of his Gospel of Light: "The Word was God...through Him all things came to be, not one thing had its being but through Him. All that came to be had life in Him and that life was the light of men, a light that shines in the dark, a light that darkness could not overpower."

One should also mention this day that the brilliant light of Louvain University does not only shine from here, the center in which it was born and in which it has grown so splendidly over more than five and a half centuries. Like all great universities, Louvain has produced a wondrous progeny, who in turn have carried the light of wisdom and learning to all the nations of the world. I must testify to the many brilliant scholars and professors at my home University of Notre Dame who have derived their learning and their doctorate from here. We would have been less a Catholic university without them. We have also been illumined by visiting professors from Louvain. Hopefully, we will continue to benefit from them as part of a continuing exchange that will also send a few of our professors this way, to illumine and be illumined as our mutual mission of light is intertwined.

As we celebrate Candlemas today, the Purification of Our Lady, the Feast of Light, which is most appropriately the Feast Day of this great University, may I ask all of you to join me in the prayer that this University of Louvain, and all Catholic universities, will continue, through all the centuries to come, to be a light which reveals Our Lord and His Word to all the nations, especially as they sit in darkness. May we continue to reveal Him as our Way, our Truth, and our Light, which is

also theirs if they will have Him. May we join in prayer particularly today to the Holy Spirit so that our mission will be effective: Veni Sancte Spiritus, et emitte caelitus, lucis tuae radium....O lux beatissima, reple cordis intima, tuorum fidelium....da virtutis praemium, da salutis exitum, da perenne gaudium. Amen.