

(Address given by the Rev. Theodore M. Hesburgh, C.S.C.  
President, University of Notre Dame, at the 75th  
anniversary of Assumption College, Worcester,  
Massachusetts, September 18, 1979)

I am both honored and happy to be with you today to celebrate the 75th anniversary of Assumption College. My remarks on this occasion speak to the reality of the Catholic higher learning in the modern context. While I speak most naturally of a Catholic university, since this is where I have lived and worked for all of my life, much of what I say has both application and meaning to the life of a Catholic college such as the one whose anniversary we are celebrating today.

If we were discussing the idea of a Catholic university in the 13th century, we could dispense with the adjective Catholic in the title, since to speak of universities in the first century or two of their existence in the Western world would be to speak of them as Catholic, since there were no others.

Today, of course, the situation is quite the opposite. Catholic universities are the exception, rather than the rule, in the world of universities.

In Europe, where universities began and multiplied, as Catholic, there remains just one of those great originals, Louvain. I say one, although it has recently separated by language, the French-speaking one becoming Louvain-la-Neuve.

There are five Instituts Catholiques, French Catholic universities in the country of the university's origin. Italy, the country that saw the first student founded and student administered university in Bologna -- the Italians will also say it is the oldest of all -- now has one true Catholic university, Sacro Cuore in Milan. I studied at the reasonably ancient -- mid 16th Century -- Gregorian University in Rome, but it and its ancient sister universities there have only ecclesiastical faculties -- theology, philosophy, Canon Law, etc. -- and would not be considered universities in the secular sense.

Spain and Portugal, the countries of ancient and distinguished Mediaeval Catholic universities, like Alcala and Coimbra, now have only newly-created Catholic universities, such as Salamanca, Navarra, and Lisbon, which count their life spans in decades, not centuries.

Holland has a Catholic university, also of fairly recent origin, at Nijmegen. Germany, alas, has no Catholic universities, nor does any other Western European country, although there are Catholic faculties -- mainly of theology -- here and there. There is surprisingly one Catholic university -- again limited to ecclesiastical faculties -- in all of the Socialist countries, namely the Catholic University of Lublin in Poland.

In all of Africa, there was one Catholic university -- Lovanium at Kinshasa in Zaire -- but that has recently been nationalized, now leaving none.

In Southeast Asia, there are no Catholic universities, with the possible exception of a fledgling institution in Jakarta, of recent birth.

Korea has Sogang University, less than twenty years old, Japan has Sophia in Tokyo, the Philippines a quite old Santo Tomas, and a few newer ones, Ataneo de Manilia, LaSalle, and St. Louis in Baguio. There are none, of course, in Mainland China; one Fu Jen in Taiwan.

Australia, New Zealand, and the Pacific Islands are without a Catholic university. This brings us to the New World where numerous Catholic universities were established in Mexico, Guatamala, Peru, and

Santo Domingo, most of them before our oldest American university, Harvard, founded in 1636. They, too, went the way of the earlier European universities. All of them were nationalized and secularized.

During the past half century, a number of Catholic universities have been established in most countries of Latin America with pontifical, rather than state charters, which they cannot be granted. Most of these are struggling for existence with insufficient funds and trying to be Catholic without great faculties of philosophy and theology -- an almost impossible task.

Unfortunately, the same story is true of our neighbor, Canada, which had two splendid Catholic universities, two of the very best worldwide, Laval University at Quebec and the University of Montreal. Within the past decade or so, both of these have been secularized. Neither are Catholic universities today.

One must certainly say at this point that Catholic universities are the exception, rather than the rule, in today's world of thousands of universities.

What about the United States, the only area I have not mentioned? There are more Catholic institutions of higher learning in the United States than in all of the rest of the world put together. Most of them, however, are colleges, such as Assumption, although there are a fair number of universities, too. Practically all American Catholic universities are chartered by the States, not the Church, a tribute to our tradition of religious freedom and a voluntary religious approach to higher education which characterized our early university history.

The Catholic university in the United States can be whatever it wishes to be, provided it can support its dreams with adequate private financial resources. The other great Catholic universities, such as Louvain, are almost totally supported by the state which puts them in a precarious position if the state decides to secularize them, as recently happened to Laval and Montreal in Canada, and Lovanium in Zaire. What might be seen in one way as our financial weakness, no state support, is in another more important sense, our existential strength.

Catholics in America can have as many and as great Catholic universities <sup>and colleges</sup> as they desire, provided that they are ready to support them as unique institutions, with a unique heritage in the total world of <sup>colleges and</sup> universities.

Following the above kaleidoscopic view of the Catholic university situation throughout the world, I need not insist that Catholic universities have had and, indeed, are having a precarious time growing to maturity after their second spring in the New World, and very sparsely in Europe and Asia. I suspect that Catholic universities have the very best opportunity for life and growth here in the United States, but this, too, is totally dependent upon how seriously we desire to create and maintain a few great Catholic universities. I do not believe we will ever have many, just as there will never be many really distinguished private secular universities in the land. They are both very expensive and very difficult to maintain in competition with the great public universities

who have vast state resources behind them. But if we care enough, especially if we understand their uniqueness, I am confident that we will have, happily, a few great and distinguished Catholic universities.

*the same may be said of Catholic Colleges*  
Curiously, in America, as distinguished from the rest of the Western world, only one Catholic university was founded by the Catholic Bishops. All the others were founded by religious orders, mainly the Jesuits.

Another special feature is beginning to characterize American Catholic universities.<sup>and colleges</sup> More and more, their governance is voluntarily passing from the hands of the various religious orders that founded them to a predominantly lay Board of Trustees. This move was mainly initiated following Vatican Council II which declared that in a largely clerical dominated Church, the laity should now be given responsibilities commensurate with their competence, dedication, and willingness to serve.

My own university has greatly prospered under this new arrangement inaugurated in 1967. When we first discussed the possibility of this new arrangement, some objected that we would no longer remain a Catholic university, following the path of most Protestant-founded private universities who no longer adhere to the religious traditions of their founders. It was surprising then, in view of this change, that at the first meeting of the newly-constituted Lay Board, one of the members, who happened to be a Presbyterian, asked: "What does it mean to be a Catholic university, and what are you doing about it?" This was a good question, one to which we clerics had paid all too little attention. I shall address the rest of my remarks in trying to answer it.

The original universities which, as noted above, were all Catholic, were organized around the great professions, theology for the clerics, civil and Canon Law for the lawyers, and medicine for the doctors. Soon enough, philosophy permeated all faculties too, since it was an age of great philosophical inquiry. The Liberal Arts, with their great tradition of the trivium and quadrivium, were increasingly in evidence too as years passed.

The modern Catholic university is not entering a world which the Church created, as it did create so many of the institutions and cultural practices of the Mediaeval period. Since then, we have seen the almost total demise or secularization of those original institutions. The world itself has successively passed through a whole series of intellectual revolutions, renaissance, reformation, the creations of nationalism, industrialization, and, more lately, the cold rationalism of science, including social science, and technology. We have been both thrilled and threatened by the advent of atomic power, the computer, and the space age. The sky is, finally, not the limit, but the beckoning challenge. We are on the brink of another round of biological surprises, heralded by cloning and artificial conception of human life.

It is in such a world, vastly different from Mediaeval times, that the Catholic university<sup>and college</sup> re-enters the scene in its quest for distinction and uniqueness in the higher learning.

The most important fact about the Catholic<sup>college and</sup> university is that it accepts the truth that God has spoken to mankind in the Old and New

Testaments, that the Son of God has entered history as the Son of Mary and that Christ, the Lord, has spoken, too, has given us His Gospel, the good news. He also founded a Church that has for twenty centuries cherished learning, fostered culture, and mediated divine grace. Take the Church out of Western history and culture and you are left with an almost empty shell, with diminished art and music, pallid literature and language, less rational law.

The fact that the world has greatly changed since the high Middle Ages of our Western history does not diminish the need for a university that does its thinking and its teaching, its research and its service, in an atmosphere of faith in God and His word, aware of His Providence and His grace. The Catholic <sup>college and</sup> university should be such a place, a kind of spiritual oasis in a world that is so often in intellectual <sup>and moral</sup> disarray and doubt.

This basic presence of faith in truths beyond reason, grace beyond sheer natural power, does not mean in any way that the Catholic university should be any less a university in the full modern sense of that word. Like all modern universities, the Catholic university must be autonomous and free, a place where the human mind can range as widely as possible. All universities must be without walls, places where all the important questions facing modern men and women are plumbed to their depth<sup>s</sup>, where all manner of possible answers are freely examined without the debilitating exclusion of answers inspired by a firm faith in God and His word. Fullness of knowledge, knowledge from every

possible source, ancient and modern, must be the ideal of any great university. At least, in a Catholic <sup>Collegium</sup> university there is an assured presence of those great disciplines, philosophy and theology, that seek ultimate rather than merely proximate answers, eternal rather than solely temporal solutions, to the truly great questions and problems that have beset human beings since they began to think, to question, to reason on earth. I would submit that without a deep respect for these intellectual resources of philosophy and theology, without their presence among the other disciplines and ways of thinking and knowing that should characterize the universality of knowledge that is the goal of universities, wholeness of vision will not be ultimately possible, nor will a profound sense of human dignity and sanctity and integrity prevail. \*

One has argued at times that Catholic <sup>Collegium</sup> universities are impossible as <sup>Collegium</sup> universities because they are committed. I would answer, what does the commitment to exclude philosophy and/or theology do to the search for truth in its wholeness? Universities today are, through their distinguished faculty, committed to a wide variety of intellectual attitudes: agnosticism, scientism, relativism, subjectivism, with all their variations, too numerous to mention. I would submit that I can live with all of these commitments, freely chosen, sincerely embraced, but it would seem only fair that they also live with our commitment, freely chosen and sincerely embraced, especially since all of these other commitments are limited to one or another way of knowing, while



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All of this is to say that ideally, the Catholic University is a friendly <sup>collaboration</sup> crossroads where all the intellectual currents of our times, and the best traditions of our past, can meet and engage in friendly, productive dialogue.

There is no intellectual underpinning to the current discussion of human rights, here and abroad, if it is not found in the transcendental dignity of the human person. There is no way of establishing that transcendent dignity if not by philosophical or theological inquiry. All of the problems that seize the modern world---war and peace and disarmament, terrorism and refugees, drugs and disease, health and food and development, population and pollution --- all of these problems have an overriding moral dimension that can most conveniently be discussed without embarrassment, in fact, with enthusiasm, in a Catholic <sup>Institutional / Physical Learning</sup> University. The world today needs such intellectual crossroads where each of these modern problems may be fully discussed, with all of the underlying philosophical and theological dimensions elaborated, as well as the technical and secular details.

our commitment is open to all ways of knowing, science, theology, artistic or poetic intuition, hypothesis, analysis, and synthesis of all kinds, but each with their proper freedom and limitations.

Personally, I am happy to put the adjective Catholic before the name of our <sup>Collegium</sup> universities, since it is an adjective congenial to universities since Catholic, Katolikos, means "universal" as in knowledge, wholeness of knowing and teaching.

What might this practically mean in the life and spirit and conduct of a Catholic <sup>Collegium</sup> university?

First, by including a philosophical and theological dimension, the Catholic university should insure a timeless and a deeper look at all of the problems of our times. At base, all human problems have a philosophical and theological dimension, if one plunges into them deeply and not superficially. Human happiness and unhappiness are not merely matters of biology, chemistry, or political science. Human destiny is more than history or geography. Love and hate, war and peace, freedom and bondage, compassion and brutality are not merely a matter of genes. Family and parenthood, fidelity and dedication transcend sociology. Values do not emerge from science and technology. Even law must look beyond itself for its reasoned ordinances and civilizing mission. <sup>\* Insert (over)</sup>

If a Catholic university were to be fully what it purports to be, then it would indeed be a light in the present darkness, a surer step into the ambiguities of our times, an anchor for the current anomie, drift, and rootlessness, perhaps also a source of humility for all we do not yet know, even with philosophy and theology, naked indeed without them.

Secondly, it would appear to me that in today's world, the Catholic <sup>College</sup> university is in a position to mediate between the great polarities that separate mankind: the East and the West, the North and the South, men and women, workers and managers, scientists and humanists, cultured and uncultured, rich and poor, believers and unbelievers, Christians and non-Christians, young and old, black and white, urban and rural. Why can the Catholic university bridge these chasms that so separate mankind with fury and strife and misunderstanding today?

Because the Catholic university partakes of the oldest intellectual tradition of the West, it inherits a spirit of universal concern that has worked on each side of these great divisions, that has kept a foot, perseveringly though often precariously, in both worlds, committed to truth, justice, and human dignity for all, despite our share of aberrations along the way.

We have had our scientists and our humanists and have abused them both on occasion. We have both rich and poor, but certainly more of the latter. We have agonized about belief and its meaning as long ago as the Councils of Nicea in 325 and Ephesus in 431. We have saints and sinners, men and women, young and old, black and white, East and West, North and South, country and city dwellers, labor and management in our company, together with an ancient and now greatly revived family spirit of ecumenical hospitality. Almost fourteen centuries ago, the Benedictine monks were saying: receive the guest as you would Christ, hospes ut Christus.

In a true Catholic<sup>university</sup> university, all the doors should be open, and the windows, too. We should listen to everyone and be ready to discuss anything with anyone. Especially, we should respect everyone's intellectual sincerity and hope for open-mindedness, not necessarily agreement, with what we and they have to day, what we<sup>as they</sup> also believe or doubt. Openness to all is the best way of bringing all together across the gulf of deep-set misunderstandings and prejudices. Enlightenment, sweet reasoning, patient listening, honest but modest statement, free and broad inquiry, understanding of personal difficulties, and, finally, love of persons, learning, and teaching, peace and serenity of soul, these are the characteristics that should illuminate a truly Catholic university community.

It is perhaps too much to ask of those who live and learn and teach in Catholic<sup>colleges and</sup> universities, but one cannot strive for a lesser ideal, pray for a lesser set of virtues, if we are to be true to our highest calling. The strident divisions of our day, spiritual, intellectual, cultural, ethnic, political, economic, social, and geographical, call for nothing less than priestly mediation if human peace and understanding are to be born and broadened in our times.

All<sup>Catholic colleges and</sup> universities must in a very real sense engage in this mission as they continually mediate between knowledge and ignorance, civility and incivility, rationality and irrationality, understanding and blind prejudice. But the Catholic<sup>colleges</sup> university is even more committed because of its faith and search for grace. The Catholic university must

be and do what every great university is and does. Beyond being a house of the intellect, the Catholic university must also be the intellect searching for faith and values and deeper meaning, faith searching for greater understanding and grace, closed to none, open to all, seated in time, yearning for eternity, a pilgrim institution with a pilgrim's faith and hope and love.

This is what we celebrate when we celebrate Assumption College's 75th anniversary today. We do not celebrate our accomplishments, as much as our yearnings and our strivings during seventy-five long years. And we commit ourselves today to continue yearning and striving for a dream ever ancient, ever new, ever a goal worthy of our best efforts, not unrelated to that ultimate transcendent goal which is the Kingdom of God.