

(Address given by the Rev. Theodore M. Hesburgh, C.S.C., President Emeritus, University of Notre Dame, at The Divinity School, Vanderbilt University, March 4, 1989)

Almost twenty-five years ago, I had a rather mysterious letter from Amleto Cardinal Cicognani, the Secretary of State in Rome, saying the Pope Paul VI wanted to see me. I had called a meeting, April in Paris, for the newly-elected Council of the International Federation of Catholic Universities, so it was no problem going there via Rome.

There was the usual snafu with Alitalia. We left New York at 9:30 p.m. instead of 6:00. I missed my morning appointment with the Cardinal at 9:00; and another with the Holy Father at 11:00. We arrived in Rome about 12:30 p.m. After a wild ride to the Vatican, I walked into the Pope's library around 1:15 in the afternoon. He simply said, "We've been holding lunch for you." In those days, lunch with the Pope and his secretary, Pasquale Macchi, was rather unusual. I still wondered what this was all about.

We had a pleasant and simple lunch. I began by saying, "Holy Father, I'm really beat after one hour's sleep on the plane last night. Couldn't we speak French instead of Italian?" His response: "I'm beat, too, after four hours of audiences. We'll talk Italian." That was that. As Cardinal Montini, he had been at Notre Dame for the Commencement sermon some years before in 1960, so he remembered that we had talked Italian then.

He soon came to the point -- in Italian. "My greatest experience during Vatican Council II -- which was the winding down -- has been the opportunity, after all these years, to

become friends with the many Protestant Observers. They are not only great theologians, but very holy men. What a shame that after the Council this great association of Protestant and Catholic theologians, discussing theology together daily, will be lost."

Then he shared with me another concern of his. "All my life I have dreamed of a place where this could happen and bring us into eventual unity -- not uniformity of liturgical practice, but unity of faith. The place can't be Rome -- too Catholic, except on an extraordinary occasion like a Council. Not Geneva -- too Protestant. Not Canterbury -- too Anglican. And not Constantinople -- too Orthodox."

"Then last year," he continued, "I met the Patriarch Athenagoras in Jerusalem, the first such meeting in 1000 years. We called each other Brother. It was the only place it could happen, where it all began, where Jesus lived and died and rose again. As a young priest, I thought it might be done in Assisi because everyone loves St. Francis, but again no. In Jerusalem, I found the answer, the place, only there."

"You are meeting with the Council of the International Federation of Catholic Universities. Could you persuade them to create such a center in Jerusalem for Protestants, Anglicans, Orthodox, and Catholic theologians to live and study together, to work for the eventual unity of Christendom?"

"Holy Father," I replied, "I've been involved in many endeavors, but ecumenism is not one of them, except in my personal life and

actions. However, I'll gladly talk to our Council members about your dream. If we can study the proposal, we will let you know what seems possible."

The Paris Council meeting went well. We discussed the possibility of a Jerusalem Ecumenical Center with the French theologian, Jean Danielou, who was, as usual, full of good ideas. We also called in a Benedictine monk (Bruno, I believe) from Chevtogne who also encouraged us. The upshot was a small preparatory commission which met monthly in Rome to hear and discuss reports from three of us who discussed the proposal with Protestants, Orthodox, and Anglicans around the world. I was responsible for North and South America which was facilitated by a large conference at Notre Dame. The other two, Charles Møller of Louvain and Pierre Duprey, now Undersecretary of the Secretariat for Christian Unity, traveled the rest of the world, Europe, Asia, Africa, and Australia.

As a result of all these meetings, we decided that the project, from the beginning, should be planned and executed by an ecumenical council of about thirty theologians from the main churches and countries of the Christian world.

We compiled such a list, convoked a meeting in late November of 1965 at the Rockefeller Foundation's Villa Serbelloni in Bellagio, Lake Como. Everyone came. We discussed the proposal as a joint effort. After some initial suspicion, I was elected Chairman, we elaborated a communique, and were under way.

The Holy Father at first said I had changed his original idea of a Catholic center to which others would be invited. However, after reviewing with him the basic idea that emerged from our worldwide discussions and the Bellagio meeting, he agreed that our scheme was the only unique and workable one.

The new preparatory Commission had meetings in Jerusalem, Istanbul, Thessalonika, Rome, Geneva, Westminster, Notre Dame, and Venice. Planning such a complicated venture with people of so many different national, religious, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds was not easy. Like good theologians worldwide, they were mostly penurious, so I had to raise the costs of the meetings, travel, and architectural planning. Fortunately, the Chairman of Notre Dame's Architectural Department helped freely with the latter. But still, hundreds of thousands of travel miles were involved. Only the airlines profited.

With the help of Pierre Duprey, we found a splendid site called Tantur between Jerusalem and Bethlehem. It took two years to negotiate its purchase from the Knights of Malta and permission to build from the Jordanian Government in Amman.

The cable from our lawyers in Ramallah indicating approval to build the Center arrived at Notre Dame on June 4, 1967, the day Tantur was captured by the Israeli Army. Back to square one. In August, I renegotiated the matter with the Israeli Foreign Minister, Abba Eban. It was agreed that we would build the Ecumenical Center as an international, universitarian, non-political entity.

Then the next crisis occurred. Mr. I. A. O'Shaughnessy had agreed to give a million dollars for the project according to the bid of the contractor, Mr. Khoury. After the six-day war, the price doubled. With typical generosity, Mr. O'Shaughnessy agreed to double his gift to Notre Dame. The Holy See bought the 36 acre property for several hundred thousands of dollars and leased it to the University for fifty years at a dollar a year. At long last, we were under way. We began by demolishing the old hospital on the site. We did keep the crusader type crenellated wall at the entrance. Some of the old building stones were also reusable.

The building has fifty double rooms with balconies, a dozen apartments for families, a library with 35,000 books we bought from our Holy Cross Rome Seminary, and room for twice that number, a large conference room, seminar rooms, kitchen and dining rooms, a beautiful ecumenical chapel, quarters for monks from Monserrat, Spain, who would be our librarians and guest masters. It could not be reproduced today for twenty million dollars. The Israeli incorporated it into municipal Jerusalem.

There was great joy when the Academic Council dedicated the center and we began the first year of operation in 1970. Charles Moeller was the first Rector, although he could only commute a few weeks at a time from Rome and Louvain. Paul Minear was the Vice Rector and de facto Rector with the help of Panayotis Christou, former Rector of the University of Thessalonika. Paul Minear suddenly fell ill. Our Dean at Notre Dame, Charles Sheedy, who

was there on sabbatical replaced Paul. The building was not quite complete, but we were under way at last.

I should add here how indebted I was to the thirty members of the Academic Council who had helped so much to bring the dream to reality. I should mention the American members: Paul Minear of Yale, Joe Sittler of the University of Chicago, Albert Outler of Southern Methodist, Robert McAfee Brown of Stanford, and John McGill of Princeton and Harvard.

The only real failing of the initial Academic Council was that while they did provide superb ecumenical participation and advice, they were never able to provide ecumenical financial assistance. I was able to squeak by, thanks to O'Shaughnessy, the Eli Lilly Foundation which gave a million -- thanks to Landrum Bolling --~~for~~ an initial endowment. The Rockefeller and Pew Foundations gave a half million each ^{for} operating expenses, with the Hewlett and other foundations somewhat less. We established other relatively small foundations in France by the Catholics and in England by the Anglicans. Finances are still precarious with Notre Dame supplying the several hundred thousand deficit each year lately. All in all, from multiple sources -- all non-church -- we raised about six million thus far, with only two million in endowment. We are still squeaking by with a larger endowment the only ultimate solution.

We are grateful for a long list of Rectors, most of whom stayed two or three years: Kretchmar, Nicholl, Mac Rae, Bolling, Burrell, and mentioned with great affection and gratitude in this setting, your own Walter Harrelson, ably assisted at all times by his generous wife, Idella.

Early on, it became evident that the original idea: to have top flight theologians working together was not viable. We had a semester or two from many of those who formed the original Academic Council: Cullmann, Christou, Moeller, Skysgaard, Benoit, Congar, and others, but never enough to form a critical mass. We supported fully many theologians from the Third World, other Europeans who did not have sabbatical support. We published an Annual Yearbook, held many conferences and seminars, but the worldwide theological impact was much less than the original dream.

As the years passed, we tried a variety of schemes to fill the house with useful ecumenical activities: We have short courses of three months for pastoral renewal, we have continuing education and renewal groups, doctoral and post-doctoral students, even groups of undergraduate students for a year abroad.

All in all, we have in the last eighteen years touched more than two thousand Christians, clerical and lay, many of whom have returned to seminary and university teaching with a renewed and reinvigorated ecumenical spirit. We have worshiped together with deep devotion, visited together the inspiring sites of the Holy Land, formed deep and abiding interfaith

friendships, lived in almost total peace and harmony.

How does one measure that accomplishment? I do not know. In recent years, we have also provided fruitful Jewish-Muslim-Christian encounters, unique in the Holy Land of today, and desperately needed -- a broader ecumenism among the sons of Abraham, the believers in one God.

At this point, someone might legitimately ask: Why do you keep going? We do have a brilliant new Rector, Tom Stransky, who came aboard in August with a highly capable new team. Landrum Bolling, our outgoing President, and I are again making the rounds for new support for new programs. We had an exciting annual Council meeting last June at Notre Dame. Pierre Duprey and Bishop Robin Woods of England are still enthusiastic.

As for myself, now retired, I have a little more time to devote to the dream and its financing. Somehow, I think the next year or two will tell the tale. All along, I have felt the strong inspiration of the Holy Spirit to pursue the dream of Paul VI, although twenty-three years later it may have different lines of force than those he envisioned, but the same purpose that we may all be one in the Kingdom of Christ, Our Savior.