

C O N T E N T S

2

Letters

3

Newsbriefs

6

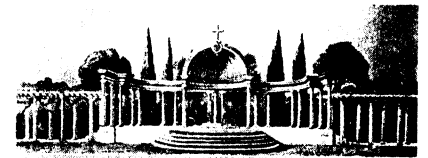
Milestones

As Fordham's Sesquicentennial begins, a look at past anniversaries reveals that they often coincided with important turning points—for the University, the Catholic Church and the nation.

10

What Makes a Catholic University Great?

Father Theodore Hesburgh on the future of American Catholic higher education



12

West Side Stories

The West End Intergenerational Residence is bridging gaps between young and old, black and white.



14

Denzel Washington: Glory Days

It's no coincidence that Academy-Award-winner Denzel Washington's repertoire consists largely of likeable characters.



17

Family Stories: Why They Matter

Tales about our ancestors can help us change our lives.

20

Ramifications

Has Fordham's evolving athletic program found a home in the Patriot League?

22

Commencement

24

Alumni News & Class Notes

COVER: faces from a recent commencement and the 1943 Maroon yearbook reflect the Sesquicentennial's theme of continuity and confidence. Background photo by Tom Sobolik.

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WHAT MAKES
 AN INTERVIEW
 A CATHOLIC
 WITH FATHER
 UNIVERSITY
 THEODORE HESBURGH
 GREAT

Rev. Theodore Hesburgh, C.S.C., president of the University of Notre Dame from 1952 to 1987, has been called "the most influential cleric in America" and is widely considered the "dean" of American Catholic higher education. In 1967, he was awarded an honorary degree by Fordham. To mark the beginning of Fordham's Sesquicentennial Year, Father Hesburgh spoke with FORDHAM magazine contributing editor Jerry Buckley (FCO '77) about Fordham and the future of American Catholic higher education. Excerpts:



Courtesy Notre Dame University

Why American Catholic colleges and universities have thrived

The vitality of Catholic higher education over the past generation is my biggest surprise. Many of the 800 or so private schools that are not Catholic are getting into hard times in attracting students. That hasn't happened to the 250 or so Catholic schools. They are not only prospering, but are growing in academic vitality with their alumni becoming increasingly distinguished. The key to our success is that we are directly committed to values – as well as intelligence.

Switching to lay control, as Notre Dame did in 1967 and Fordham in 1968, put us in a very strong position to maintain our academic freedom. That has given us a kind of strength that simply isn't possible if you're on a string to people who can tell you what to do – whether it's church or state.

Why the Church's view of the American schools is often mistaken

My biggest disappointment is that the church we serve doesn't always recognize our value or our particular nature and what it requires. I'm talking mainly here about freedom. I think we are totally dedicated to the Church, totally dedicated to being a place where the Church can do its thinking about a lot of things that need a great deal of thought, but which can't be easily done given the church structure or parishes and catechetical centers.

At times we are accused of not being Catholic. That's a pretty fundamental accusation. I've heard it a thousand times I guess, mostly not from the Church directly, but from groups within the Church, splinter groups, far right-groups that are hypercritical and not understanding. I would imagine bushel baskets full of mail go to the Vatican all the time saying that we're listening to people favoring abortion, that we're not strong enough on birth control. But the moral convictions we started with, without doing the research and listening to other people, wouldn't be very valid in our kind of pluralistic society. I tell Notre Dame's benefactors that if you're not



convinced we're a Catholic university, you ought to give your money to somebody else.

I think the Holy Father has a sincere interest in Catholic higher education and he has said some good things. The main objection from many of us in this country is the Vatican's current attempt to put out a universal document regarding Catholic higher education that has to be applied in the most diverse cultures and political situations. It would be a problem if they were to propose to tell us who can teach and who can't. They say everybody who teaches has to have some sort of mandate from Catholic authority, whatever that is. But you can't legislate for the whole world with strict regulations.

The assumption is if you put out a whole new schema of things it's going to make us more Catholic. We're Catholic within our circumstances. There's no conditioning of our commitment. We just have to exercise it in ways appropriate to our pluralistic culture.

It is worth noting that in general, the people who have produced these documents have never created anything in Catholic higher education themselves.

[The Jesuits] have responded to changes in [the] cities very well by opening their universities up, making a big effort to get minorities in and to hold high the Catholic concern. Loyalty is the important thing. Anyone who would ever accuse the Jesuits of being disloyal ought to have their head examined. Many of them have died for the Church, including the six in El Salvador.

Historically, the American Church hierarchy has been very supportive of us. At no expense to the Bishops, we educate 500,000 young Catholics every year and they appreciate that. But if they get orders from Rome, some of them are not going to stand up and fight, I'm afraid. It's like what Cardinal Newman said, "Great minds need elbow room and even lesser minds need elbow room." That's the ethos of a university and it takes a great deal of understanding, especially in a church that is by its very nature authoritarian. American Catholic higher education is a success story. We don't need to be reformed.

In vocations and the danger of secularization

The greatest challenge ahead is not money. If we're doing a good job, we'll be financed. The greatest danger is that we'll become secular. If that happens, we don't deserve to be financed. The great bulk of the people who contribute to Notre Dame do so because it is a Catholic university.

Vocations are important and fortunately they're leveling off. We need a really vital core.

People wonder why so many great universities founded by churches became so totally secular. The Methodists founded Syracuse University, Boston University, Duke, Emory, Southern Methodist, University of Southern California and Denver, and no one would claim that those schools, with the possible exception of Emory, now have much of a religious tradition. Catholic universities, when they went under lay control, didn't [become secular] because they had a strong religious affiliation and that is something that must be kept up.

You can't avoid secularization per se, but you have to constantly be alert to it and as much as possible, strengthen the Catholic core in the selection of faculty, including non-Catholics. I'm strongly of the opinion that lay people are the most important part of the Church. The Church is now more than ever the people of God. That was the big message of the Second Vatican Council. So we're not going to have as many priests as we had. But you can make the case that we had too many priests in the old days.

In Fordham and the Jesuits

If you mention five or six Catholic universities in America, you always have to mention Fordham because it has a history, a record of service to the Catholic Church in a bustling metropolis. Fordham has been a kind of beacon in New York and moving downtown strengthened it even more. It's one of the classic fine Jesuit institutions.

But I would have to say out loud and with some insistence that if Fordham had twice the contributions it now has it could be twice as good a university. Education today is enormously costly and

you can't price yourself out of the market. Fordham has consistently kept its tuition low compared to the public education competition and has continued to grow and be concerned about the great cultural questions. I think, for example, of Father Joe Fitzpatrick and his great work with Hispanics.

The Catholic community has to say these are gems in our crowns and they ought to have our total support.

In what makes a great university

My basic point is that university is the substantive and Catholic is the adjective. Small-minded people tend to put the Catholic first and the university second. As a result, it becomes not a great university, but a great Catholic center of some kind. It may do good work, but you're not going to mistake it for a university. A great Catholic university must be three things.

First, a beacon, because in addition to all the secular studies that all universities must do, it brings the light of philosophy and theology to bear on all of these other studies. Faith seeking understanding. Reason seeking faith. That is a function no other kind of university [has].

Second, it has to be a crossroads intellectually and morally. It has to be a place where everybody passes and where all points of view are seen and heard, even conflicting points of view that are argued with great fervor at times, and where there is a great tolerance and civility. You can learn a great deal from people who don't agree with you.

Finally, it has to be a bridge – between all the things that are separated in society – young and old, black and white, ignorance and learning, rich and poor, East and West, North and South. You can go down a whole long list of things that are disintegrating in society today and a Catholic university can be a bridge.

While you're becoming a great university, you're very conscious of what makes you a special university, that those influences are not just pasted on the front of the university, but they get into the laboratories, the library, the classroom and even the dormitory. □