

May 25, 2007 - Happy birthday to a visionary following his faith

By Eugene Cullen Kennedy, The Chicago Tribune, Commentary

At this time when many observers bewail the lack of great leaders, a truly great one marks a milestone. Father Theodore Hesburgh celebrates his 90th birthday Friday. Hesburgh, who led the University of Notre Dame for 35 years and is now president emeritus, could still take on the papacy or the presidency and lead the Catholic Church or the United States with great distinction.

He has built his service on the foundation of his faith. "Most of the things I have been a part of," he once told me, "I have not only been the only priest, but the only Catholic present. And my value ... came from trying to bring some deeper dimension of faith. These people did not expect me to express belief in the Trinity, I don't mean that. But they did expect that I would reveal the human values that the Gospel illumines for us."

He recalled what a fellow commissioner said to him when he served as chairman of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights. He was working on voter registration in the white-hot South in the 1960s, Hesburgh said, and the commissioner suggested: " 'Padre, give them a little Christianity,' and that was right. These people in the South remember their Bible and they would say to me, 'I know you're right but I just can't change my feelings.' "

It may have been that forthright commitment in faith to civil rights that led President Richard Nixon, immediately after his landslide defeat of George McGovern in 1972, to fire Hesburgh from the commission.

Hesburgh smiled a little ruefully as he reflected on that treatment by Nixon, who later resigned in disgrace from the presidency. "Thoreau once said that the best place for a man when the government is unjust is in jail," Hesburgh recalled. "Being cut off like this is a way of saying to me, 'You're not so bad.' "

Hesburgh has had 16 presidential appointments, giving him active roles in the battle for civil rights, immigration, Third World development, and peaceful uses of atomic energy. He was the first priest to serve on the board of overseers at Harvard University.

As president of Notre Dame, Hesburgh worked in his office well after midnight. The door was always open, however, to the many students who knew that they could come and talk to him at any hour about their troubles or dreams. Notre Dame theologian Richard McBrien has said, on behalf of all who know him, that "Father Hesburgh is as great a man close up as he is from a Mt. Rushmore distance."

Hesburgh remains vitally involved in bringing the light of his faith to bear on the great causes of our day. You never notice, when you are with him, that this man who sees so deeply into things has suffered the loss of most of his sight. He never complains about this.

Happy 90th birthday, Father Hesburgh. Let's blow out the candles for a great priest who may have lost some of his sight but none of his vision.

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