

# OF NOTE

## CATHOLICS AND THE PRESENT

**I**N AN ADDRESS at the fifty-eighth annual convention of the National Catholic Educational Association, Father Theodore M. Hesburgh, C.S.C., president of the University of Notre Dame, discussed "Catholic Higher Education in Twentieth Century America." An excerpt from that address follows:

. . . I have always shared the honest pride that legitimately attaches to a proud intellectual heritage. I have likewise always been uneasy at the correlative pattern of looking backward more often than forward, of holding to the tradition of what has been, rather than striving mightily to make the traditional values more relevant, more vital, more meaningful today. . . .

Personally, I have no ambition to be a medieval man. I suspect that St. Thomas in his day had no hankering to be classified as belonging to the golden age of the Latin Fathers of the Church, then long past. Whatever the value of the various ages of Catholic higher learning, there is only one age whose value we can in any measure influence: our own. We can see ourselves as part of a long tradition. We can measure the vitality of our current contribution against the intellectual contribution of other ages, but one factor is absolutely essential to any judgment or any comparison: the vitality of Catholic higher learning in any particular age must be viewed mainly in relation to its intellectual influence and effectiveness in that particular age.

It is futile comfort for a Catholic university in the second half of the twentieth century in the United States of America to point with pride to the lively intellectuality and critical vitality of the Catholic University of Paris in medieval France. Let the dead bury their dead. We of the living have our work at hand. It is vital, intellectual, and exciting work that only a university can do. Perhaps the most exciting feature of all is the valid presumption that some of the work can most fruitfully be undertaken only by a Catholic institution of higher learning in the best tradition of the peak eras of Christian wisdom.

May I first be a little negative, and say clearly what I do not mean. The task for the Catholic higher learning will not be done if our philosophers and theologians continue to live among, work with, and speak to people and problems long since dead and buried. This inhabitation of a never-never world by those who speak for Christian wisdom would be bad enough in a day without problems of its own. But today we live in an age of monumental and unprecedented problems. This is no day in which to nit-pick among the problems of the past.

Here is an age crying for the light and guidance of Christian wisdom. What must future judges think of us if we live in the most exciting age of science ever known to mankind, and philosophize mainly about Aristotle's physics? We live today in the threatening shadow of cosmic thermonuclear destruction and often theologize about the morality of war as though the spear had not been superseded by the I.C.B.M.

If we are to create a peak for the Catholic higher learning today, two essential requirements at least are crystal clear: One, we must understand the present day world in which we live, with all of the forces and realities that make it what it is; and two, those two best and most unique assets we have, philosophy and theology, must begin to be more relevant to the agonizing, very real, and monumental problems of our times. . . .

The key word for the task, as I see it, is *mediation*. One could spend much time discussing this word, a good and priestly word, a word that speaks of the innermost reality of the Incarnation. Catholic higher education can, in our times, perform an important mediatorial function. Catholic higher education stands for something definite, definable, and, I trust, something true, good, beautiful, and timeless. The world is disjointed today in so many ways, fragmented into so many disparate parts, that one might look far to find a more inspiring, more important, or more central task for the Catholic higher learning than the exalted work of mediation in our times.

Allow me to illustrate this work of intellectual mediation. Many of our most pressing domestic problems today arise from the fact that we live in a multi-faceted, pluralistic society. How urgent it is that some institution attempt to bring together in more fruitful unity the separated and often antagonistic elements of this pluralistic society. Economically there is the pluralism of labor and management. Socially there is the pluralism of the two races, white and colored, with regional sub-problems for Mexicans and Puerto Ricans. Religiously there is the pluralism of Protestants, Catholics, and Jews, or perhaps more fundamentally the basic dichotomy between the religious and the secularists. Intellectually there is the pluralism of science and technology vis-a-vis the humanities—the C. P. Snow-described dilemma of two great intellectual currents that neither understand or speak to each other despite the fact that they live daily side-by-side in our universities.

What are we doing to mediate, philosophically and theologically, as only the Catholic higher learning can, between these various extremes that make up the divided fabric of our society? Here is an objective worthy of our most talented, most devoted, most inspired efforts. There is nothing humdrum, nothing prosaic about these most anguishing problems of man

in the twentieth century. Their solutions require the highest theological and philosophical principles, the deepest empirical studies, the most imaginative approaches, the most understanding directives—but what are we doing to bring intellectual and moral light to these regions of darkness?

We are doing something about labor-management problems, but mostly on a pragmatic, non-intellectual level. As to civil rights and equal opportunity for all races, we have been almost universally destitute of intellectual leadership in our colleges and universities. I know of no research in this area. Factually, the worst educational problem at the moment is in a section of the country predominantly Catholic. Despite the central Catholic doctrine of the Mystical Body, the pronouncements of our Holy Fathers and our hierarchy, there are Catholic schools and Catholic parishes and Catholic lay organizations, and Catholic orders and Catholic neighborhoods that do not only not welcome, but which positively repel Negroes from their midst. . . .

And what is the work of mediation in the field of religious pluralism? Again we live in an ecumenical age. Our Holy Father says to a large group of Jewish visitors to Rome: "I am Joseph, your brother." How many of us have extended that welcome within our institutions and have tried to understand our differences in our research and studies? A new Ecumenical Council looms before us. In Europe, for many years since they were brought together in the crucible of common suffering during the war, Protestant and Catholic theologians have discussed their differences and merged their common strengths against their common enemies of secularism and Communism. Why have we been so timid here in our American institutions of higher learning? Must we always be the last to initiate anything imaginative and intellectual, the first only in those obvious causes like anti-Communism, super-patriotism, and old clothing drives? Here is another urgent work of mediation long overdue.

I hesitate to undertake the discussion of the intellectual mediation needed between science, technology, and the humanities, because here I easily become vehement, almost in an apoplectic manner. We took the wrong turn in science as far back as Galileo, and while the roadmaps have been officially corrected since, we are still lagging far behind the main flow of traffic in the area of science and technology. I need not document this assertion for there has already been enough public breast-beating in the matter. Besides, I am interested here not so much in diagnosing the past as in charting a present-day and future course.

That the roads of science and technology may lead to fruitful human goals is obvious enough to anyone who understands or appreciates the new vistas opened up by science and technology. Science is our potent key to the noble modern human quest to eliminate il-

literacy, needless poverty and squalor, hunger, disease, and homelessness in our times. Science can help man achieve the basic material conditions essential to a life worthy of man's inner and God-given dignity. Science can have true cultural and spiritual overtones, too, may indeed contribute mightily to the good life, if only we provide for it the ultimate meaning, direction, and human significance that it must seek outside itself. . . .

The main reason that we have not mediated in the Catholic higher learning between science and the humanities is that we have generally neglected science and have not particularly distinguished ourselves in the humanities either. Perhaps the latter fault is greater, for here was our true and most obvious heritage. We must redouble our efforts today in both areas if they are mutually to enrich each other in our total perspective of higher learning. Without this particular mediation between science and the humanities, and all it implies, there really will be no truly significant or relevant Catholic higher learning in our times. These are hard words, but, I believe, true ones. *Qui potest capere, capiat.*

There is another whole area of mediation that is open today to the Catholic higher learning, if we would find the courage to climb the peak. I refer here to the opportunities for intellectual mediation in a pluralistic world. Catholics belonging to a universal Church should be at home in international affairs, but I fear that the American Catholic spirit, somehow untouched by our higher learning, has traditionally been characterized by a narrow parochial spirit, an isolationist complex, an anti-United Nations urge. What has the Catholic higher learning in America done to mediate understanding of the great world cultures, the important emerging areas—even the Catholic ones like Latin America—the dichotomy between cold war and international law? Here is a challenge that we can hardly avoid and hope to be relevant in our times.

By now, I am sure that you all see, upon reflection, that here is much of Newman in modern dress. May I conclude by hoping that all engaged in the important work of our Catholic colleges and universities see the importance and the urgency of my dual thesis: first, that the Catholic higher learning must ever strive to make the ancient wisdom timely today, relevant to our current problems, and, secondly, that the road to this accomplishment, the simple word that sums up a modern and thrilling objective for the Catholic higher learning in our times is mediation—mediation that understands both extremes that must be brought together, mediation based upon empirical current fact, as well as timeless principle, mediation that is not afraid to blaze new trails in new wildernesses: that both God and man may be well served in our times and in this new world that so needs new applications of the ancient Christian wisdom.