

ACCU Hesburgh Award

It is a great honor for me to receive this award. And I am certainly honored to be recognized this evening along with Sr. Amata Miller, who has done so much to enrich the faculty at St. Catherine University.

Like so many of you, I admire the many contributions that Fr. Hesburgh made for so many decades to Catholic higher education. I also think of other pioneers like Fr. Paul Reinart, Sister Madaleva and, in his own way, Robert M. Hutchins of the University of Chicago who decades ago challenged Catholic educators to draw more deeply on their distinctive intellectual tradition, and focus less on vocation training and athletic accomplishments. I can also think of others who deserve to be recognized, like Bro. Ray Fitz who led the University of Dayton for over twenty years, helped out other Catholic universities, and who mentored me in many important ways.

Political commentators, Church observers, and many ordinary citizens talk these days about the many polarizations that afflict our communities. In the Church, we certainly suffer from this now in a striking degree. People even sharply divide over what the mission of a Catholic college and university should be.

A few years ago at USC, in a conversation with President Sample, I commented that the University of Southern California seemed to be neither secular nor sectarian. It was not secular in the sense that it took the spiritual lives of the students and faculty seriously; it was not sectarian in the sense that it had faculty in many disciplines who studied many religions. I'd like to suggest that Catholic colleges and universities should be the same, with an additional qualification: while we also should be in dialogue with all religions, we should be doing so as scholars who focus on, critique, and develop the Catholic intellectual tradition.

Catholic colleges and universities are therefore special institutions. They build bridges where many institutions of higher education erect walls. State universities do not recognize theology as an academic discipline. At the same time, some religiously affiliated institutions require all their faculty, as a condition of employment, to affirm a common statement of religious faith. Catholic colleges and universities typically welcome people of different faiths into a conversation about the meaning of a particular faith-based intellectual tradition (I am speaking here, of course, of Catholicism), and learn from these representatives of other religions as well. These special institutions commit themselves to foster the interaction of the intellectual life and the religious life. John Henry Newman put it well when he wrote:

It will not satisfy me what satisfies so many, to have two independent systems, intellectual and religious, going at once side by side, by a sort of division of labor, and only accidentally brought together...I want the same roof to contain both the intellectual and moral discipline. Devotion is not a sort of finish given to the sciences; nor is science a sort of feather in the cap...an ornament and set-off to devotion. I want the intellectual layman to be religious, and the devout ecclesiastic to be intellectual.

The Idea expressed so eloquently by Newman was stated succinctly by Karl Barth who wrote, speaking of the task of theologians, that "they should have the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other." Or, as newly inaugurated president of CUA John Garvey put it last Tuesday, Catholic universities as a whole need to create a place "for the Bible and papal decrees between the telescopes and microscopes."

We are called, then, to create a bridge between spheres often separated in our culture, to demonstrate that polarizations rarely capture the rich complexity of reality, and to show that the intellectual life and the life of faith mutually enrich each other through vigorous interaction.

Dorothy Day once said: "If I have achieved anything in my life, it has been because I have not been embarrassed to talk about God." If we too can learn to talk without embarrassment about God, not as though giving a sermon in a parish, but as a clear affirmation of reality appropriate in a university, we will create a distinctive but genuinely open culture of learning, indeed, a Catholic culture, which more than anything else will ensure the vitality and future of our institutions. Thank you.

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