When the US Vice President Joe Biden told Fr Thomas Hesburgh at a Capitol Hill party celebrating his ninety-sixth birthday that Hesburgh was "one of the most powerful unelected officials this nation has ever seen", he was not exaggerating. No one has had a more profound influence on both higher education and civil rights. Everything Fr Hesburgh did was done with an unparalleled sense of righteousness. In all he did, he served God.

He was a brilliant strategic thinker with a rarely seen ability to mediate among disparate parties in a way that made both sides believe they were the winner. A humble and down-to-earth man, he would tell students – as he told me when I interviewed him for the Notre Dame student newspaper – to be grateful to their parents for all the blessings in their lives, including, if not especially, for being at Notre Dame.

Theodore Hesburgh was born on 25 May, 1917, in Syracuse, New York, one of two sons and three daughters of Anne and Theodore Bernard Hesburgh. The seeds of the young Theodore's priestly vocation were sown early. It is reported that in his early teens he was inspired by Holy Cross missionaries who talked about Notre Dame University. He went on to study at the university and to be ordained as a priest of the Congregation of Holy Cross at the church on its campus in 1943. He studied for his doctorate in sacred theology (STD) at the Catholic University of America in Washington DC, and then returned to Notre Dame to serve as chaplain to Second World War veterans on campus in addition to teaching in the religion department. He then worked his way up the administrative ladder finally becoming the fifteenth president of Notre Dame in 1952. He was just 35.

From my two periods of study at Notre Dame I recall how, whenever time permitted, he could be found out and about on campus, engaging in conversation with students, faculty, visitors and workers. It didn't matter who you were or what you did, he believed everybody had a story to tell and he was interested in hearing it. He was accessible and had an open-door policy: literally, if the door was open, you were welcome to come in. He remained president of Notre Dame until 1987, but then continued to work on an office on the campus near the library that was named after him.

In July 2000, President Bill Clinton awarded Fr Hesburgh the Congressional Gold Medal – making him the first person from higher education to be so honoured. He also received the Medal of Freedom, the nation's highest civilian honour, from President Lyndon Johnson in 1964. In addition he received numerous awards from education groups, including the prestigious McKelvey Award of the American Association of University Professors in 1970. Fr Hesburgh transformed Notre Dame from a relatively small Catholic college known mostly for football into one of the nation's premier institutions for higher learning and research. The accomplishments of the Hesburgh era at Notre Dame are reflected in often-quoted statistics from the time he became president to his retirement. The annual operating budget went from US$89.7 million to $176.5m (€66.6m to €119.3m), the endowment from $9m to $350m (€56m to €236.6m), and research funding from $735,000 to $15m (€497,000 to €10.1m). Enrolment increased from 3,793 to 9,600, faculty from 389 to 950, and degrees awarded annually from 1,212 to 2,500.

He oversaw two major changes during his presidency; the transfer of governance in 1967 from the Congregation of Holy Cross to a two-tiered, mixed board of lay and religious trustees and fellows, and the admission of women to the undergraduate programme in 1972. In 1967, Fr Hesburgh assembled a group of Catholic academic leaders who collectively issued the so-called "Land O'Lakes" statement which insisted upon true autonomy and academic freedom in the face of authority, lay or clerical. That powerful statement forever changed the future of Catholic higher education.

While Fr Hesburgh may or may not have endorsed certain issues, he would always endorse another person's right to listen, study and form their own opinion. He taught, mentored and made better people. He touched the lives of thousands, and I am glad he touched mine.

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