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# Theodore Hesburgh, CSC

*Bridge Builder*

Edward P. Hahnenberg



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*For my Notre Dame professors, with gratitude*



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# Preface

As this manuscript neared completion, two major contributions to the narrative history of Father Theodore M. Hesburgh, CSC (1917–2015), appeared—and they could not have been more different. The first was a 104-minute documentary, *Hesburgh*, produced by Christine O’Malley and Jerry Barca, and directed by Patrick Creadon. The second was a 442-page biography, *American Priest: The Ambitious Life and Conflicted Legacy of Notre Dame’s Father Ted Hesburgh*, written by Notre Dame history professor and Holy Cross priest Father Wilson Miscamble, CSC. Both attempt a comprehensive overview of Hesburgh’s life. Both leverage interviews and extensive research. Both draw on many of the same primary and secondary sources. Yet their tone and conclusions differ markedly. The documentary celebrates Hesburgh as a civil-rights hero, a visionary leader, and a consistent moral voice in tumultuous times—the conscience of a nation. Miscamble’s biography paints a less flattering portrait, downplaying Hesburgh’s influence and portraying him as a tool of the secular liberal establishment—“the accommodating and acceptable priest.”<sup>1</sup>

These recent works have sparked wide-ranging commentary, suggesting a renewed interest in the fascinating figure of Father Ted. Responses run the gamut, as the assessment of Hesburgh’s legacy often becomes a proxy for larger

debates about where church and society are headed. Unfortunately, such debate can stir up the toxic polarization that poisons so much of our public discourse. At the same time, it can bring to the surface a deep desire for the kind of leadership capable of overcoming such divisions, the kind of leadership that Hesburgh himself embodied.

Father Ted certainly had his flaws. He was not always a prophet. But he was not a partisan. And he was never a pawn. In this, O'Malley and Barca's documentary comes closer to the truth than does Miscamble's biography. In particular, the film's attention to Hesburgh's work as a mediator—a bridge builder who engaged people on all sides of an issue—captures the essence of Hesburgh's self-understanding and sense of purpose. As the journalist Ted Koppel, interviewed in the film, put it: "What made [Hesburgh] such an extraordinary figure was that he didn't really belong to any side. He belonged to the side of decency. He belonged to the side of a fundamental belief in the redeemability of mankind."<sup>2</sup>

The following story offers an introduction to the life of a priest who worked hard to bring people together. Like *Hesburgh* and *American Priest*, my more modest contribution relies on the prior research and careful records of a well-documented life. In the archives at the University of Notre Dame, Hesburgh's papers fill boxes that extend over 518 linear feet—not to mention extensive video, audio, and digital holdings that record over six decades of activity both on and off campus. My sincere thanks go out to the archive staff for helping me navigate this material and, in particular, to W. Kevin Cawley and Joe Smith for their concrete assistance. Two awards (2016, 2019) from Notre Dame's Cushwa Center for the Study of American Catholicism helped cover travel expenses for research. I want to thank Kathleen Sprows Cummings, Director of the Cushwa Center, for her support and insight.

Over the course of his career, Hesburgh wrote hundreds of essays, articles, and speeches and published five books. He was featured in dozens of magazine and newspaper articles and has been the subject of several biographies. Many of these writings appear in the notes and bibliography below. Two books proved to be indispensable in offering an orientation to Hesburgh's life. The first is Hesburgh's own best-selling autobiography, *God, Country, Notre Dame*, written with Jerry Reedy (1990). The second is Michael O'Brien's comprehensive volume, *Hesburgh: A Biography* (1998). I am indebted to these earlier narratives, as well as to the work of Charlotte Ames, Joel Connelly and Howard Dooley, John Lungren, Robert Schmuhl, and Thomas Stritch. In their biographies, the basic plot of Hesburgh's life plays out. What I hope to add is more insight into the main character of this story, and to do so by exploring the spirituality that sustained and inspired Father Ted.

I am grateful to Father John Jenkins, CSC, for first introducing me to Father Hesburgh, and to Fathers Richard McBrien and Thomas O'Meara, OP, for sharing so many stories. Thanks to Kathleen Sprows Cummings, Bob Krieg, Ed Mish, Paul Murphy, and Sandra Yocum for feedback and encouragement on the manuscript. And thanks to Shannon Chisholm, Hans Christoffersen, Peter Dwyer, Michelle Verkuilen, Stephanie Lancour, Nancy de Flon, and the whole team at Liturgical Press for transforming it into a book. Finally, my deepest thanks go to Julie, Kate, Meg, and Abby for . . . well . . . everything.



# Introduction

There is no passivity in his contemplation, since the realization of God's will demands that the person throw all of himself into the cause. There is no gloom in his dedication, since it is sustained by a confidence that the Holy Spirit is at work in us all, in the world, and in the cosmos.

—Kingman Brewster, Jr.<sup>1</sup>

Anyone who ever met Father Ted Hesburgh walked away with a story. Here's mine.

When I was a graduate student at the University of Notre Dame, I had a small office on the twelfth floor of the library—a building named after Father Ted but better known as “Touchdown Jesus” for its huge mural of Christ looking out over the football stadium.

The office was small, just big enough for a desk. But it had a spectacular view of campus. It was the same view, I bragged to my friends, that Father Hesburgh had, whose much larger office was directly above my own.

Hesburgh had stepped down as university president several years earlier. During his thirty-five-year tenure he had

## 2 Theodore Hesburgh, CSC

become a national leader in civil rights, public policy, and education. He had advised popes and presidents, served on countless commissions and boards, and even earned the world record for the most honorary degrees received. Thus retirement was something of a relative term for Father Hesburgh. Well into his eighties, he still went into the office every day. And one of the best things about my time on the twelfth floor was that I often got to share the elevator with Father Ted.

Hesburgh loved to talk to students. Whenever students got on the elevator, he immediately asked what they were studying. When they said physics or history, Hesburgh would share some anecdote about his work on the Atomic Energy Commission or the time he marched with Martin Luther King, Jr.

Over the months we rode the elevator together, I had the same conversation with Father Hesburgh three times.

Every time, the conversation began with his question, “What are you studying today?”

And every time, I responded, “I’m working on my dissertation in theology.”

“*Really?*” he said, clearly not remembering our previous chats. “You know *my* doctorate was in theology. What’s the topic?”

“I’m writing on lay ministry in the Catholic Church,” I replied.

“*Really?*” Hesburgh said, as he looked up at me with new interest. “My dissertation was about the laity.”

“I know, Father,” I honestly answered, “I’ve read it. It’s very good.”

“Well, in those days, a dissertation on the laity was controversial,” he went on. “This was the early 1940s, remember. My advisor told me not to do it. He wanted me to pick

another topic. But I knew it was too important. And so I pushed ahead.”

“That doesn’t surprise me, Father,” I said, smiling.

“I finished the dissertation and got it published. Soon after, I received a letter from the Holy Office in Rome. They wanted me to send them a copy for review. I thought for sure I was going to be censured. It used to be called the Holy Office *of the Inquisition*, you know. In the end, I dutifully sent in the volume, and that was the end of it. I never heard back.”

He continued, “Eventually the pope died, and the cardinals elected John XXIII, who surprised everybody by calling a Second Vatican Council. And what do you know was on the agenda? The laity! The council dedicated a whole document to the laity!”

Then came the punch line.

“I’ll never forget reading that document when it first came out,” Father Hesburgh deadpanned, “they stole all my ideas.”

This was a story that Hesburgh clearly loved to tell. Since those elevator rides, I’ve heard a number of his friends share some version of it. No doubt it got better over time. Hesburgh was the first to admit that one of the things he inherited from his Irish mother was a tendency to exaggerate or embellish stories—“piling it,” his father would say. So it may be too much to conclude that Hesburgh was the unknowing ghost-writer of Vatican II’s Decree on the Lay Apostolate. Still, his choice of a dissertation topic was prescient. His early interest in the active role of the laity anticipated themes that would burst out decades later at the council. Here we catch a glimpse of the young Hesburgh, already alive to new ideas and quick to see their practical implications.

The narrative that follows is an invitation to get to know a remarkable person. Father Ted was a towering figure—a

#### 4 *Theodore Hesburgh, CSC*

giant of twentieth-century American Catholicism. It is hard to exaggerate the impact he had on the academy, the church, and the broader society. A charter member (and later chair) of the US Civil Rights Commission, Hesburgh accepted sixteen presidential appointments over the course of his life. He worked on racial justice, nuclear nonproliferation, Third World development, immigration reform, international humanitarian aid, ecumenical dialogue, educational policy, and a host of other social issues—in addition to leading the University of Notre Dame through three and a half decades of extraordinary upheaval and unprecedented growth. The man left his mark.

In telling Hesburgh's story, however, I am less interested in charting his legacy or assessing his influence. Instead, I hope to introduce the man himself. I want to know Father Ted Hesburgh as a real human person, in order to lift him up as a compelling and credible witness of Christian discipleship in the world today.

In getting to know Hesburgh, the biographer faces a special challenge. Although Hesburgh was a prodigious storyteller, he was not particularly effusive in describing his own inner life. This is not the sign of a superficial personality or a shallow spirituality—far from it! Hesburgh's generous intellect, his courage in the face of obstacles, his compassion toward those who suffer, and his many close and loving friendships point instead to great depth of character. His complete trust in the work of the Holy Spirit and his dependable devotion to prayer indicate a profound relationship with God. Perhaps the reason Hesburgh spoke so little about his own inner life was because he embodied an activist spirituality, preferring ministry over contemplation, service to others over consideration of the self. Perhaps it was because he never suffered from a serious crisis of

faith—the “dark night of the soul” that so often illuminates spiritual autobiography. Perhaps it was because, as one fellow Holy Cross priest who knew him well put it, “he just wasn’t a complicated guy.” Hesburgh’s faith was simple, straightforward, and strong. The following story is based on the premise that we can get to know this faith—and thus get to know Hesburgh—by understanding the convictions that animated his life, convictions that are revealed in his words and in his deeds.

Of those convictions, none was more important than his own sense of calling. When asked what he would put on his tombstone, Hesburgh did not hesitate. It would be one word: *Priest*. From the age of six to the day he died, Hesburgh knew that he was called to be a priest. For all his accomplishments, what is most striking in the stories told about Hesburgh are the countless acts of priestly ministry that people remember—a hospital visit out of the blue, a prayer card sent with his condolences, a handwritten note of encouragement, a late-night counseling session, an intimate Mass celebrated in a living room, at a nursing home, or on the edge of a barrio. His one-time provost Nathan Hatch observed, “He never seemed to doubt who he was and was thus free to relate to people as they were—no condescension, no putting on airs.”<sup>2</sup> Hatch then recalled a story of Hesburgh blessing his pregnant wife and child—a gesture that the couple, who are not Catholic, found warm and welcoming. Hesburgh was a university president and committee chairman who often behaved like a small-town pastor. “Each time I am called ‘Father,’” he wrote in his autobiography, “I know that the caller owns me, as a child does a parent, and that he or she has a call on me for anything needed, especially compassion and understanding in the spirit of Christian love.”<sup>3</sup>

## 6 Theodore Hesburgh, CSC

To be a priest meant something more to Hesburgh than being a pastor. It also meant being a *mediator*. To be a mediator is to stand in the middle (*medium*) between two separated realities in order to span the gap, to unite what is apart. Hesburgh, who was trained in the hairsplitting distinctions of neoscholastic theology, knew that Saint Thomas Aquinas defined the priest as a mediator—a bridge (*pons*) between God and humanity. The ultimate mediator, of course, is Jesus Christ, the great high priest, who in his very person united humanity and divinity and who, through his death and resurrection, reconciled the world to God. The ordained priest participates in the priesthood of Christ, and thus the central purpose of his ministry is to continue Jesus' work of bridge building. "The priest tries to bring God's word and grace to humankind and strives as well to bring humankind to God, in faith, hope, and love."<sup>4</sup> But being a mediator is not solely the prerogative of the ordained. This was the great lesson Hesburgh learned from his doctoral dissertation. Every baptized Christian participates in Christ's priesthood in his or her own way. The laity, as well as the clergy, are called to be bridge builders. All are called into the breach, to overcome divisions and draw people together.

Hesburgh always placed himself squarely "in the middle." He always sought to mediate. According to Hatch, Hesburgh could not be put in a conservative or liberal box. "He clung to virtues on both sides of many modern debates. He was a huge champion of ROTC at Notre Dame and, at the same time, he championed peace studies. . . . He was friend of the Rockefeller brothers and of Martin Luther King Jr., confidant of Republican and Democratic presidents, champion of the Catholic character of a place like Notre Dame and of intellectual freedom and institutional independence."<sup>5</sup> Hesburgh's special charism was his ability to combine strong

conviction with grace and generosity to all. In our own polarized time, such saints of the center are in short supply. If there is a thesis in what follows, a slant I give to the story, it is this: Father Hesburgh is worthy of our attention because he models the kind of bridge building that our world needs now more than ever before.



## CHAPTER ONE

# Faith in the Family

When Ted Hesburgh was in the eighth grade, four Holy Cross priests visited Syracuse, New York, to preach a mission at his parish church, Most Holy Rosary. An altar boy at the time, Ted struck up a conversation with the friendly priests. When one of them, Father Tom Duffy, asked the boy what he wanted to be when he grew up, Ted replied with conviction, “I’m going to be a priest, Father. Like you.”<sup>1</sup>

Impressed, Father Duffy jotted down Ted’s name with a note (“fine boy, bright”), and later called on his parents to encourage them to enroll Ted in the high school seminary run by Holy Cross at the University of Notre Dame. Ted’s mother, who knew he had always wanted to be a priest, worried that he was too young to leave home. Father Duffy urged her, “If he doesn’t come and he goes to high school here, he may lose his vocation.” To this misplaced concern, Anne Hesburgh replied firmly, “It can’t be much of a vocation if he’s going to lose it by living in a Christian family!”<sup>2</sup>

Four years later, Anne, her husband Theodore, and their two oldest children, Mary and Ted, piled into a borrowed Hudson Essex for the six-hundred-mile drive to South Bend,

Indiana, where Ted would start classes at Notre Dame as a Holy Cross seminarian. As soon as he had said his goodbyes, Ted was overwhelmed with homesickness. “For one month I never unlocked my trunk because I didn’t know whether I’d stay.” Eventually, the gloom lifted as Ted settled into the routine of seminary life. But years later he remembered those first weeks away from home as a very difficult time. “Maybe that was the price I paid for having a good family.”<sup>3</sup>

It was, by all accounts, a good family. In addition to an older sister, Mary, who was particularly close to Ted, there were two younger sisters, Elizabeth (Betty) and Anne. For years Ted prayed for a brother, and he had just about given up hope when, at age sixteen, the prayer was answered. James, or Jimmy as they called him, was only nine months old when Ted left for Notre Dame—leaving it to later in life for the two brothers to become good friends.

Ted’s mother and father were a study in contrasts. His father was German, taciturn and sober, a serious businessman who took great satisfaction in his family and his work. “He felt deeply,” Betty later reflected, “but he never quite let you know.”<sup>4</sup> The man read extensively, obsessed over crossword puzzles, and loved drubbing his children at Scrabble. Shortly after the younger Ted became president of Notre Dame, his father beat him once again at the game, wryly commenting, “They just don’t make college presidents the way they used to.”<sup>5</sup> Ted’s mother, born Anne Marie Murphy, was Irish through and through. “An aura of joy and merriment seemed to surround her all the time.”<sup>6</sup> She laughed and sang often and loved being with people. She also loved to travel and dreamed of living in New York City in order to enjoy its theater, opera, and culture. Her husband, who got his start as a traveling salesman, hated the city and wanted nothing more than a quiet night at home with a

good book. Ted thought his parents complemented each other well and appreciated what he inherited from each. “My German side gave me a sense of order and discipline; my Irish side gave me the ability to understand people [and to] get along with them.”<sup>7</sup>

Ted Hesburgh described his childhood as a normal one. Born on May 25, 1917 (four days before the birth of John F. Kennedy, he liked to point out), Theodore Martin Hesburgh grew up through the boom and bust of America between the two world wars. When Ted was eight years old, his father—by then a manager for the Pittsburgh Plate Glass Company—moved the family out of their apartment into a new two-story, three-bedroom colonial on the edge of Onondaga Park in the Stratmore section of Syracuse. The children enjoyed sledding, skiing, and skating in the winter. In the summer, the family would picnic on the weekends and spend two weeks every year at a cottage on Lake Ontario. As the Depression set in, Ted’s father kept his job, but money was tight. The eldest son helped out by cutting grass, hauling coal ashes, and delivering newspapers. By his senior year in high school, Ted was working forty hours a week at the local gas station.

Ted was a Boy Scout who built crystal radio sets and model airplanes—developing an early interest in aviation, which was only heightened by a short ride in an open-cockpit barnstormer when he was ten. He was a voracious reader, devouring all kinds of literature—especially stories of adventure, romance, and travel. He loved tales of heroic priests, such as Father Bernard Rosecrans Hubbard’s *Mush, You Malamutes!*, about a missionary in Alaska. In an editorial he wrote for the school newspaper in his senior year, Ted challenged his classmates to raise the bar in their own literary pursuits. Drop the stupid “dime novels,” he exhorted, and start reading books

“that will elevate your ideas, enlarge your vocabulary, and widen your perspective.”<sup>8</sup> Ted dabbled in sports, playing baseball and serving a brief stint as lineman on the neighborhood football team (“I wasn’t very good”), but he never developed an interest like that of his father, who was an avid sports fan. Ted did love to hunt and fish—so much so that, during his senior year, the star student skipped classes on the first day of pheasant-hunting season. It may have been the only time he ever got in trouble with his teachers.<sup>9</sup>

The center of this happy childhood was Most Holy Rosary School, which Ted attended for twelve years. Most Holy Rosary Parish was founded in 1913 and immediately put up the school, before it had even begun construction on the church. Ted grew up going to Sunday Mass with his family in the school auditorium. The Roaring Twenties had fueled the ambitions of the founding pastor, Father George Mahon. When the Depression hit, his plans remained unfinished and his bills remained unpaid, leaving the parish half a million dollars in debt. Ted remembered how weary he grew of the constant plea from the pulpit for more donations. “All we heard about was money.”<sup>10</sup> In fact, one of the things that attracted young Ted Hesburgh to a religious order rather than the diocesan priesthood was—irony of ironies for the future college president—the thought that he would never have to do any fundraising!

The genius of the Catholic schools of that era was the way they served as a hub for the whole of Catholic life. Families revolve around the children, which means they revolve around the school. This was certainly true for Most Holy Rosary and for the Hesburghs. All of the children attended Holy Rosary from first grade through high school. There, and at home, they were encouraged to be “religious.” They never missed Mass, never ate meat on Fridays, and

often prayed the rosary together as a family. Ted did his best to avoid lying, stealing, cheating, and a whole list of other sins. “And we never, never talked about sex—in any way, shape, or form.”<sup>11</sup> When he fell short, there was always confession and the regular grace of the sacraments.

In a time of widespread religiosity, Catholics still stood out. To their Protestant neighbors, Catholics seemed clan-ish and odd, even a little suspicious. They clustered in immigrant enclaves. They established separate schools (and hospitals and credit unions and clubs) and had large families. They worshiped in an ancient language, filled their churches with statues of strange saints, followed the direction of celibate priests and enigmatic nuns in peculiar clothing, and gave their allegiance to a foreign authority in Rome. In return, Catholics—convinced that theirs was the “one true church”—looked out on the world with their own suspicions. Daniel J. Curley, the bishop of Syracuse when Ted was in grade school, urged Catholics not to associate with non-Catholics. “We are bound to regard all other conceptions of God as false, an insult to his divine majesty.” In a 1930 pastoral letter, Curley railed against the “pagan morality” of contemporary society, condemning, among other things, the “putrid stream” of lewd literature and pictures that were “debauching the minds and morals of the young.” He denounced the “neo-paganism of birth control,” which was based on a degrading self-indulgence that led to “a lustful perversion of the marital relationship” and the “prostitution of motherhood.”<sup>12</sup>

To protect themselves from such threats, seemingly coming from all sides, immigrant Catholics in places like Syracuse had worked hard to build up a parallel set of institutions, which kept outsiders at bay and sustained a distinctive Catholic culture in the midst of Protestant America. Ted’s

childhood was happy but homogenous. Growing up in Syracuse, he never knew a black person. He knew very few people who were not Catholic. He had a vague idea, for example, that Jews were “somewhat different” and that being different was a “bad thing.” As an adult, Hesburgh admitted that his thinking as a child was something like this: “They’re not like us. . . . Why can’t everybody be like us?”<sup>13</sup>

Ted enjoyed a kind of privileged innocence that was complicated one afternoon when he arrived home from grade school to find his mother comforting a neighbor woman sobbing in their living room. Embarrassed, Ted slipped into the kitchen to make a sandwich and later asked his mother what happened. His mother explained that the woman was Jewish, that she had lived down the street for two or three years, and, in all that time, Ted’s mother was the only one who had ever talked to her. Unable to take it anymore, the woman had finally decided to move away and had stopped in to say goodbye. Ted didn’t understand, so his mother explained that they lived in a segregated neighborhood—almost completely Protestant, with just a few Catholics and no other Jewish families. The only reason the Catholics were tolerated, his mother said, was because they had a little money. When Ted asked his mother why she had befriended this woman, Anne replied, “I talked to her because I grew up in New York. In our building, we had Jews on the right and Jews on the left, Jews upstairs and Jews downstairs. . . . We learned to understand each other, and we supported each other. Otherwise, we would have gone down the drain together. There’s no way on earth I could be prejudiced against Jews.”<sup>14</sup> It wasn’t an earth-shattering revelation, but Ted never forgot his mother’s words.

If the downside of the Catholicism of Ted’s youth was its tendency to look inward, to circle the wagons, to condemn

“the world” beyond its walls, the upside was its ability to foster community, a sense of belonging, and a thick religious identity. In his impressive history of the Diocese of Syracuse, David O’Brien observed, “The Church, then, was a source of truth and grace and at the same time a set of associations, family, friends, companions.”<sup>15</sup> Clearly this world was the soil that nurtured Ted’s vocation. “I *always* wanted to be a priest,” he claimed.<sup>16</sup> There was simply no higher calling, no more challenging, more rewarding life than that of a priest. If Theodore and Anne had hoped their son would pursue such a path, it doesn’t seem to be something they pressed upon him. They didn’t have to. It was in the air. Indeed, for its thirtieth anniversary in 1943, Most Holy Rosary School boasted that thirty-six of its graduates had become priests and twenty-eight more were vowed religious.

For Ted, the thought of becoming a priest—of standing between God and humanity, with the “traffic going both ways”—was romantic and adventurous.<sup>17</sup> Throughout high school, Ted dated and danced, attended parties, and stayed out late with friends. During his junior and senior years, he spent a good deal of time with one classmate in particular, Mary Eleanor Kelley, who thought the world of him. But Ted felt called to something more than an active social life. And everybody knew it. When the high school put on a production of Christ’s passion, titled the “Mysteries of the Mass,” two hundred students took part. Ted played the lead, earning accolades in the local Catholic press. The review, which singled out Ted’s portrayal of Jesus as “particularly commendable,” described the play as a “magnificent religious spectacle . . . So dramatic was the performance that it thrilled the hushed throng for nearly three hours.” “You would think he was Christ!” recalled a classmate. “He *was* the play. After the play, everybody thought for sure he would

[enter the priesthood].”<sup>18</sup> When the class of 1934 compiled their predictions about where each of the graduating seniors would be in ten years, they pegged Ted: “Pastor of St. Peter’s in Split Rock.”

Hesburgh never made it to Split Rock. Instead, he slung south along the shores of the Great Lakes Ontario and Erie to the flat cornfields of northern Indiana. In mid-September of 1934, Ted fulfilled “the dream of practically every Catholic schoolboy in the country” and enrolled at Notre Dame.<sup>19</sup> That first year, he lived and took most of his classes at Holy Cross Seminary (later Holy Cross Hall), a stone’s throw from the impressive neo-Gothic Church of the Sacred Heart and its famous grotto. Though technically Notre Dame students, the seminarians had little to do with campus life. Indeed, they had little to do with anyone other than their fellow seminarians and their priest-professors. No dating. No clubs. No letters to old girlfriends. No trips home for Christmas.

Hesburgh threw himself into his studies. Alongside compulsory courses, he signed up for extra electives in Latin and Greek. He tolerated his science classes and enjoyed studying philosophy, literature, and languages. He fashioned himself a strong student, and he was. However, on one “A” paper, his professor, Father Leo Ward, a Holy Cross priest who would later help to shape Hesburgh’s idea of a Catholic university, jotted down a warning: “If you don’t learn to simplify your style with simple words, you will wind up being a pompous ass.” Ted took the advice to heart, noting that his professor’s own style was simple and direct.<sup>20</sup>

The summer after their first year as postulants (the first stage of joining a religious order), Hesburgh and his twenty-eight seminary classmates began a year-long novitiate (stage two) at Rolling Prairie, a dilapidated six-hundred-acre farm

about thirty miles west of Notre Dame. The novitiate was intended as a break from the strictly academic curriculum of seminary formation—a time, right before taking vows, to pause and reflect on God’s will for one’s life. As Hesburgh later learned, the novitiate had another purpose: “to indoctrinate the incoming class of seminarians to the discipline and rigors of priesthood by exposing them to hard physical labor.” It was, as Hesburgh put it, a kind of boot camp, “complete with rigorous physical training and a hard-nosed drill instructor.”<sup>21</sup> The sergeant was Brother Seraphim, a former German soldier who immigrated to the United States after World War I, and who—in Hesburgh’s estimation—seemed especially creative in finding ways to make hard work even harder.

The Holy Cross Fathers had purchased the farm just a few years before Hesburgh arrived, and it needed a lot of attention. With his classmates, Hesburgh cleared rocks, built a barn, painted a fifty-foot-tall silo (after moving it, cement block by cement block, from a nearby farm), felled trees and chopped wood for the furnace, cleared sumac brush, collected honey from angry bees, picked lice off sheep, shoveled manure, planted corn, harvested wheat, and washed thousands and thousands of dishes. The year left an impression on the young Hesburgh. In his autobiography, he dedicated ten pages to Rolling Prairie, including a two-page, stomach-turning account of butchering a pig. If one of the goals of the novitiate was to weed out those who didn’t have the discipline to meet the demands of religious life, then the year seems to have been a success. The following summer, only nine of the original twenty-nine seminarians remained. Hesburgh was one of those still standing. For the most part, he found the manual labor a distraction from what he thought most important, their studies (despite the oppressive

schedule, Hesburgh claimed to have read over a hundred books during his novitiate year). But he didn't complain or question. "I just knew I wanted to be a priest. I figured that if every priest I knew in the order went through that I guess I could go through it." He did come to an important realization, however. "I also learned I didn't want to be a farmer."<sup>22</sup>

In August of 1936, Hesburgh returned to Notre Dame to take his temporary vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. He continued his studies, moving to the major seminary that stood on the banks of Saint Joseph's Lake. His priestly formation during this time—before, during, and after Rolling Prairie—could fairly be described as monastic. This may seem strange, considering that he was preparing to join an active religious order founded in the wake of the French Revolution for the purpose of preaching parish missions and educating the young. The Congregation of Holy Cross was established to serve the world, not to separate from it. However, Catholic theology at the start of the twentieth century emphasized the sacred identity of the priest as a man "set apart," standing as "another Christ" (*alter Christus*). Thus a monastic—almost cloistered—seminary experience seemed to be the logical way to shape such an identity. At Rolling Prairie, the seminarians worked like monks. They observed silence twenty-two hours a day, communicating at meals through hand signals. They sang the Divine Office at set times, just like in a monastery. They meditated, prayed, and listened to obscure religious texts read aloud while they ate. It was a structured spiritual life built around that ancient monastic motto, *ora et labora*, "pray and work."

Back at Notre Dame the same medieval rhythm continued. An article on life at the seminary several years later described a pattern that had been in place for generations. "There is Mass and Communion and meditation every

morning; there is the recitation of the Little Office of the Blessed Virgin during the day, as well as spiritual reading and rosary; there are the countless reminders of his obligation such as the prayers before and after meals, the silence, the regimented schedule, and the bells which signal the end of one activity and the beginning of another.”<sup>23</sup> Hesburgh grew to hate those bells commanding him to do this or do that, to go here or go there. “I never gave voice to those thoughts, you can be sure, because I had taken a vow of obedience, and mine was not to question my superiors.”<sup>24</sup>

Hesburgh did not question his superiors’ decision when, in July of 1937, on the cusp of starting his junior year at Notre Dame, Hesburgh was summoned (likely by a bell) to the office of Father Ted Mehling, the assistant superior. When Hesburgh walked into his office, Mehling looked up, handed him a piece of paper, and said, “This is for you. You’re going to Rome to study next year.”

Ted was stunned.

In the preface to his autobiography, Hesburgh reflected on the vows he had professed as a young man all those years ago. The most difficult of the three, he admitted, was neither poverty nor chastity, but obedience. “The vow of obedience is the hardest in that one gives up that most precious of divine gifts, freedom.”<sup>25</sup> When Hesburgh and his classmate Tom McDonagh met with the provincial, Father James A. Burns, to ask why they were being sent to Rome, he told them that they were to earn doctorates in philosophy and theology. Burns acknowledged, “It will take some time, but you’ll be able to do it because you’re going to be there for eight years.”

Eight years. Ted was excited about the prospect of going abroad. But the thought of being away from his family for so long gave him pause. It was hard to imagine. “When

you're twenty years old, eight years is almost half your life."<sup>26</sup> But there was nothing to do. He had taken a vow of obedience. His path was set, and he accepted it. Despite the anxiety he felt at the time, in retrospect, Hesburgh saw the freedom that came with surrendering his freedom. "My whole life as a priest would have been vastly different, and probably less productive, had I been able to do what I wanted to do, instead of what I was assigned to do."<sup>27</sup> And so, eight weeks after meeting with Burns, Ted and his friend Tom boarded the SS *Champlain* and steamed across the sea to Rome.