ESSAYS IN THEOLOGY

"Boston College vs. Notre Dame"
By Rev. Richard P. McBrien

Boston College and the University of Notre Dame have developed in recent years a keen rivalry on the football field. Lately, Boston College has gained the upper hand, but with the coming of Charlie Weis last year as Notre Dame’s new head football coach, the team’s fortunes look much brighter. Notre Dame fans are looking forward to the resumption of the BC rivalry in fall 2007, after a two-year pause.

Boston College and Notre Dame also have a healthy rivalry in areas where Catholic universities are really expected to excel, namely, theological studies and service to the Church. Notre Dame’s president emeritus, Father Theodore Hesburgh, C.S.C., once identified the role of a Catholic university as the place where the Church does its thinking. That’s the ideal, of course, but there have been occasional tensions between Catholic universities and the hierarchy.

Both universities have attempted to ease those tensions by doing something constructive to assist the Church and its bishops in addressing current pastoral problems. Boston College has had a special reason to do so because the sexual-abuse scandal in the priesthood first erupted with intense and dramatic force in the archdiocese of Boston at the beginning of the new century. It was a series of articles in The Boston Globe, beginning in January 2002 that exposed the depth and extent of the crisis, locally and nationally.

In football, Boston College reached a level of parity with Notre Dame several years ago and then moved slightly ahead, but Notre Dame fans are convinced that the tide is about to turn back in their favor. The situation is far different, however, in the matter of pastoral service to the Church.

Boston College is moving decisively ahead of Notre Dame and I acknowledge that as a long-time member of the Notre Dame faculty, but with an abiding respect for Boston College, where I also taught for 14 years; the first four as a visiting lecturer, and the last ten on the full-time faculty, including five as director of its nationally known Institute of Religious Education and Pastoral Ministry.

A story in the July 1st issue of the The Boston Globe by Michael Paulson, the Globe’s excellent reporter on religion, should have brought Notre Dame’s administration up short and, at the same time, given much encouragement to those Catholics who have been waiting so long for someone to deal with the Church’s acute management problems.

Readers are familiar with the cliché, “If I had a nickel for every..., I’d be a millionaire.” Nowadays, of course, one would have to substitute “a twenty-dollar bill” for the hapless nickel.

Whatever the going rate in the above cliché, how many times has it also been said, “Why don’t seminaries have courses on management and administration so that our priests and bishops would be better prepared to run our parishes and dioceses competently rather than into the ground?”

Many of those Catholics need to look up now and take notice, because last month Boston College announced the establishment of just such a program.

According to the Globe article, “Boston College is preparing to launch the nation’s first graduate program to train priests, nuns, and laypeople who manage Catholic parishes and organizations, an effort to help the Catholic Church respond to the widespread criticism of its administrative, financial, and personnel practices during the clergy sexual abuse crisis.”

“Starting this fall,” Michael Paulson’s article continued, “BC will offer a joint master’s degree
in business administration and pastoral ministry, which will take three years to earn, as well as a master’s degree in pastoral ministry with a concentration in church management, which will require two years of coursework. For either degree, students will take classes on both religion and management and participate in a new colloquium on the integration of religion and business.”

One can almost hear the sighs of relief across the country, “Finally!”

Boston College’s Jesuit president, Father William Leahy, deserves full marks for approving such an initiative. He had previously launched “The Church in the 21st Century” program, which became a permanent research center studying various issues facing the Catholic Church today. The Globe report indicates that the program has already drawn an estimated 36,000 people to 220 events. This past February, 6,000 people packed the university’s hockey arena for a panel discussion, moderated by Tim Russert of “Meet the Press” fame, on faith and public policy.

Things may be looking up for its football program, but the University of Notre Dame may soon be eating Boston College’s dust in this far more important challenge facing Catholic universities and colleges everywhere.

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