

The Dragon and the Dome

By Dr. Merle D. Strege, Historian of the Church of God

I recently shared a conversation with a friend who teaches at the University of Indianapolis. Through a variety of channels he has become relatively well-acquainted with the Church of God and, more specifically, Anderson University. In the course of our conversation he commented on the fact that he and his ideas have been received better at AU than at some other nearby Christian colleges. He also noted the presence of Roman Catholics on the AU faculty where none would be found on those same nearby campuses.

The conversation reminds me of a profound moment in the history of the Church of God: the 1970 commencement exercises at then Anderson College. Earlier that spring President Robert Reardon had announced that he had invited Theodore Hesburgh, CSC, president of the University of Notre Dame, to deliver the commencement address. Reardon's announcement sent shockwaves through the Church of God. A sizeable number of ministers retained much of the anti-Catholic spirit that imbued the early movement. F. G. Smith's books were a principal source of this spirit, but he was by no means alone in this attitude.

Although not as virulent, John Morrison shared much of Smith's antipathy toward Catholicism. From several corners of the movement, then, objections poured into Reardon's office. Many demanded that he withdraw his invitation.

Robert Reardon remained steadfast. Hesburgh was a distinguished American with a long record of public service. Moreover, the invitation to a sitting Notre Dame president was Reardon's way of acknowledging the debt owed by Anderson for the assistance Notre Dame officials had generously provided during AC's drive to accreditation. So Commencement exercises would be conducted as planned.

Inside a packed Warner Auditorium, the evening of June 15, 1970 was one of those warm, humid Hoosier nights when, in the words of Neil Diamond, "You'd almost bet you could hear yourself sweat." The charge in the atmosphere intensified as the academic procession entered, first the graduating class, followed by the faculty and then trustees.

At last, in walked Reardon and Hesburgh, the latter wearing not an academic's mortarboard cap but his biretta, the four-cornered cap of a Catholic priest. Hesburgh began his address with the customary acknowledgments and then paused. As he looked out over 7,500 souls he added, "And my brothers and sisters." His greeting did not win over the hearts of all in attendance that night. For many weeks following the 1970 Commencement Robert Reardon received dozens of letters in reaction to Father Hesburgh's appearance. Some expressed appreciation, even pride, in Reardon's act; others were sharply critical. A few days after commencement Reardon also had to eat some humble pie in the General Assembly. (That, however, is another story.)

Then or now, Theodore Hesburgh's commencement address in 1970 marked a turning point in the life of Anderson College. It was a significant step toward the kind of institution described in the opening paragraph of this column.

Originally written for the Church of God Historical Society newsletter, *The Historian*, Winter 2013