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AFI DOCS Film Review: Hesburgh (Creadon, 2018): USA

Description

Posted by Larry Gleeson

Viewed by Larry Gleeson as part of the 2018 American Film Instituteâ??s AFI DOCS.

Hesburgh is a biographical account of Father Theodore Martin Hesburgh, an ordained priest of the Congregation of Holy Cross. Hesburgh is widely known for his tenure, from 1952-1987, as President of the University of Notre Dame, located in South Bend, Indiana. Others knew Fr. Hesburgh as a confidante and as an advisor to American Presidents including, Dwight D. Eisenhower, John F. Kennedy, Lyndon B. Johnson and Richard â??Dickâ?• Nixon. But, Director Patrick Creadon and Producer Christine Oâ??Malley get behind the public persona and weave a story of mythic proportions.

Beginning with his ambitious plan to transform Notre Dame from an average academic institution with a great football team into a leading university for personal examination, exploration and learning, Hesburgh began wooing captains of industry for financial support and invited Fr. John Courtney Murray to lecture on the highly controversial tome *The Catholic Church in World Affairs,* at the University of Notre Dame. The voice-over narration and black and white still photos add a sense of historical significance and deification of what Hesburgh was engaging in. The Roman Catholic Church responded with an order to cease and desist from teaching such books ending with a formal â??Roma locuta; causa finita estâ?• (Rome has spoken; the cause is finished). Hesburgh defied the order arguing that it was the institution saying no and not him personally (as he had taken a vow of obedience to the Pope). According to Creadon, this sets a precedent for how Hesburgh navigated the world of power politics including the International Atomic Energy Agency, the Cold War, the Civil Rights Movement, and the student protests of the Vietnam and Cambodian Wars as well as his graceful transition from the University of Notre Dame.

Beginning with the International Atomic Energy Agency, Father Hesburgh emerged in Vienna, Austria, as a free-thinking clergyman who was respected by both sides of the Cold War without stirring up controversy. Hesburgh had a penchant for schmoozing with bourbon and cigars resulting in a detante allowing both sides to sit in a room at the same table.

Afterwards, Hesburgh was named to President Eisenhowerâ??s federal Commission on Civil Rights. As the University of Notre Dame was struggling to find a commencement speaker, Hesburgh called in a mark â?? President Dwight D. Eisenhower delivered the 1960 Commencement Address with Cardinal Giovanni Montini (later to be named Pope Paul VI and leader of Vatican II) in tow! Cardinal Batista and Hesburgh would become close friends in the ensuing years sharing a love for space travel during the Apollo era of the United States Governmentâ??s accelerated Space Program in the 1960â??s.

Sensing formidable opposing positions on the Civil Rights Commission, consisting of three democrats, two republicans, and Hesburgh, an independent priest. Hesburgh utilized his human touch, and the resources of a well-heeled Notre Dame philanthropist, to smooth out differences and gain a consensus resulting in a twelve point report recommendation to Congress. Hesburgh continued to serve on the Civil Rights Commission and was appointed chairman by his old friend, Richard â??Dickâ?• Nixon.

Uncharacteristically, however, Hesburgh dealt a stunning blow to Notre Dame student body curtailing student protests during the Vietnam and Cambodian Wars as he felt the protesting interfered with student learning. Later, Hesburgh would lament his decision to limit protesting feeling he had made an unfortunate decision that actually inhibited a studentâ??s experience but at the time felt it was necessary and proper to institute it in an effort to curtail violence and also to guarantee the rights of other students who wanted to partake in their own education. Meanwhile, Dick Nixon praised the move and used it as propaganda.

Nixon would later pressure Hesburgh to resign from the Civil Right Commission as part of Nixonâ??s Southern Strategy. So, Hesburgh turned his focus full force into the campus life of Notre Dame declaring it a co-educational institution in 1972 with overwhelming approval from the male students. On May 17th, 1987, Father Theodore M. Hesburgh received the University of Notre Dameâ??s highest honor, the Laetare Medal, an annual award given to honor and recognize an individual who has given outstanding service to the Catholic Church and society.

While I did find the historical moments of the film enlightening, what really caught me by surprise were the human elements; the relationships cultivated, the emotional warmth expressed, and the joy and love expressed by those who knew Hesburgh. What I was left with was a powerful human interest story that served as both a testimonial to a life well lived for the noble causes of justice and freedom and a welcome addition to the national historical archives.

Employing present-day narratives from family members, fellow clergy members and a highly effective first person voice-over narration, interspersed with an up-tempo musical score and flashing images, and coupled with historical black and white photos, archival film footage and newsreels, Creadon sets the tone, mood and pacing for nothing-short of a miraculous life with *Hesburgh*. Highly recommended.

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1. Fr. Hesburgh
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