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A Pilgrim's Progress in a Catholic University

Timothy O'Meara

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TIMOTHY O'MEARA

Marianist Award Lecture/1988

A Pilgrim's Progress in
a Catholic University



The University of Dayton

A PILGRIM'S PROGRESS IN
A CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY

by TIMOTHY O'MEARA

Marianist Award Lecture
1988

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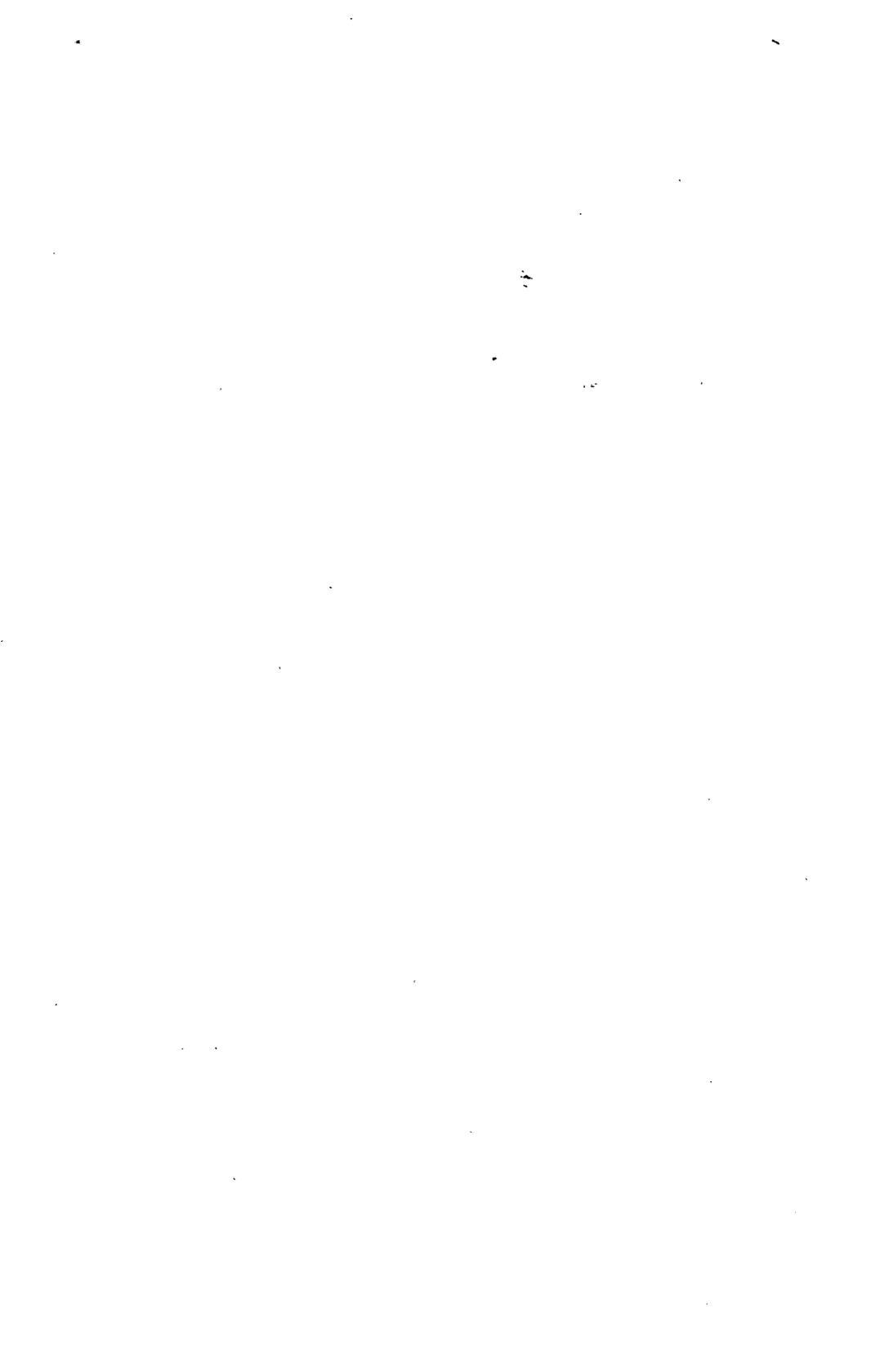
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DR. TIMOTHY O'MEARA, an internationally renowned mathematician with interests in modern algebra and the theory of numbers, is Provost of the University of Notre Dame.

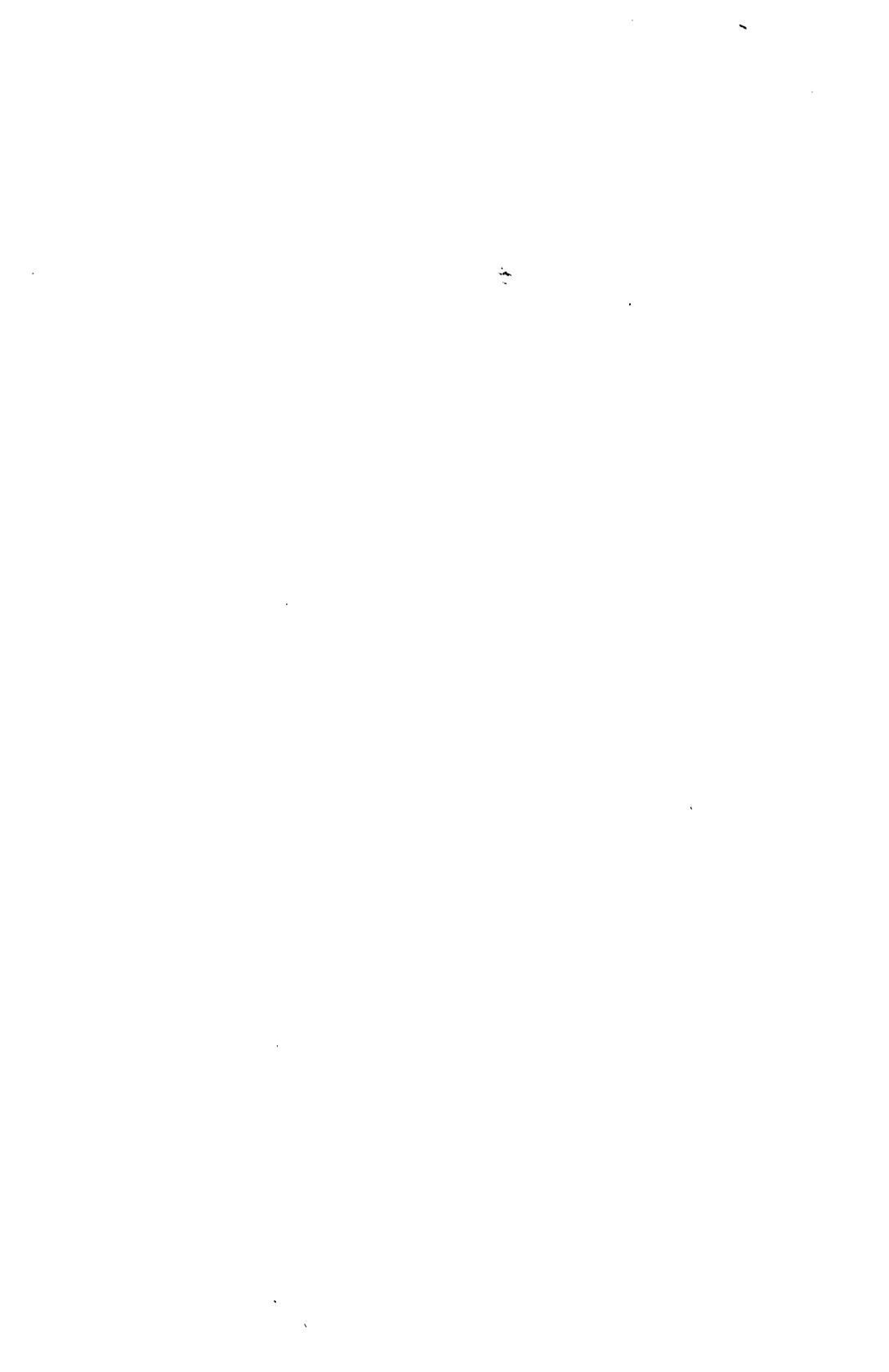
A native of South Africa, he took his baccalaureate and master's degrees from the University of Cape Town and received his Ph.D. from Princeton University in 1953. After teaching at the University of Otago in New Zealand for three years, he returned to Princeton and served on the faculty at Princeton University between 1957 and 1962. He was also a member of the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton in 1957 and again in 1962. He joined the Notre Dame faculty in 1962 and fourteen years later was named the Howard J. Kenna Professor of Mathematics. He was appointed Provost in 1978. He has held visiting positions at American, Canadian and European universities, including the California Institute of Technology, and has held the Carl Friedrich Gauss Professorship at Gottingen University.

From 1960 to 1963, Dr. O'Meara was awarded a Sloan Fellowship which he held at Princeton and Notre Dame. He has published numerous research articles and three books with a fourth book completed and expected out in 1988. Two of his books have been translated into Russian. At the University of Notre Dame he twice chaired the Department of Mathematics and has served on several key University committees.

Dr. O'Meara has visited the People's Republic of China for each of the last five summers, to lecture on his research in mathematics, to establish relations with Chinese universities and the Chinese Academy of Sciences, and to establish a summer program for Notre Dame students in the Chinese city of Tianjin. On each of these occasions he has been accompanied by his wife, Jean, who has also taught English to Chinese scientists preparing to come to the United States. Jean is from Philadelphia and a graduate of Rosemont College and Villanova University. The O'Mearas have five children, all of whom have graduated from the University of Notre Dame.



*The following lecture was given at the University of Dayton
on the occasion of the presentation of the Marianist Award
to Dr. Timothy O'Meara, January 28, 1988.*



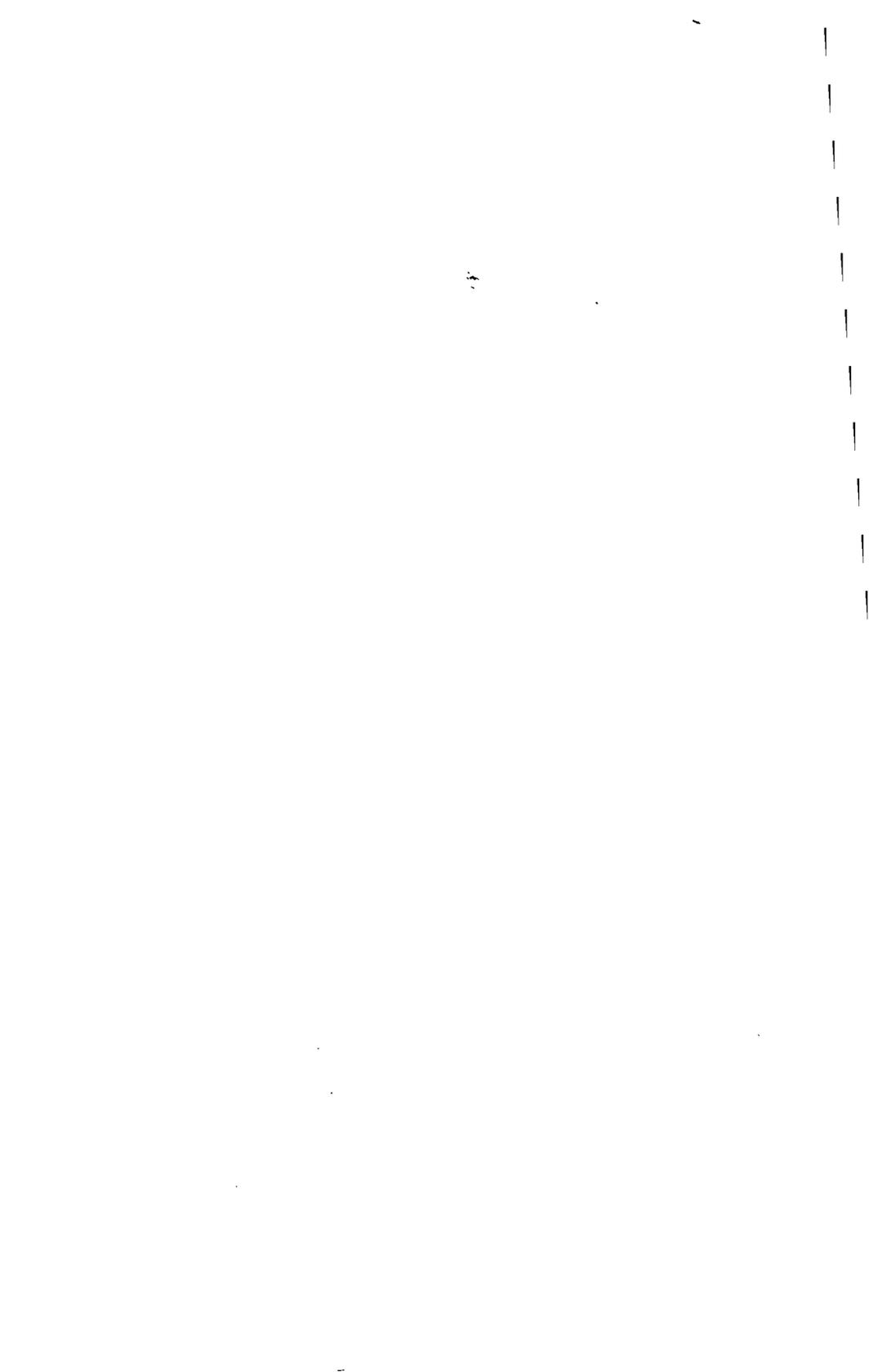
A PILGRIM'S PROGRESS IN A CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY

I would like you to know how pleased I was to receive a letter from your president, Brother Ray Fitz, last August informing me that I had been chosen to receive the Marianist Award for 1988, and how honored Jean and I are to be at the University of Dayton today.

I remember meeting Ray for the first time, perhaps a year or two before he assumed the presidency at Dayton, and I have always been impressed by the important role which he plays in Catholic higher education.

Even though I have never visited your campus before, I have a special affinity for the University of Dayton because of my association with Ray and because Notre Dame and Dayton are kindred spirits in their dedication to higher education and to Our Lady.

In his letter Ray also invited me, as the recipient of the Marianist Award, to give an address on a topic of my choice. He suggested that I might comment in some way on my journey—or you might say pilgrimage, for that is what it is—as a scholar and a Catholic, and how these two dimensions of my life have influenced my leadership in Catholic higher education at the University of Notre Dame. How could I possibly resist!



In early times in all cultures pilgrims went by foot to their spiritual destination. Many of the psalms in the Old Testament give witness to the pilgrims' journey to the Holy City of Jerusalem. In medieval times Chaucer framed his great masterpiece around a group of pilgrims journeying to the shrine of Thomas a Becket. In his famous allegory John Bunyan wrote of Christian, his hero, searching for the celestial city. In this poetic sense all of us are pilgrims journeying in search of our ultimate destiny.

Childhood Memories

My pilgrimage began sixty years ago tomorrow in Cape Town on the second story of the family bakery. My two brothers and I were fortunate to have been raised in a large family setting which included our grandmother and all sorts of cousins, uncles and aunts. My father was an Irishman, a businessman of integrity with a sense of humor and a great interest in people. My mother was of Italian descent, liberated without being combative, deeply spiritual with a slight air of the mystic. South Africa at the time was politically dominated by certain kinds of condescending colonial English, and by Calvinist Afrikaners who referred to Catholics as *Die Roomse Gevaar*—The Roman Danger. We were a minority within a minority, but I certainly didn't look upon myself that way at the time. We lived in a mixed neighborhood. On the second floor of the bakery's garage there was a large hall which we rented out as a Black Christian Church. Our house was always full of people: Italians, Irish, Cape Coloureds, Xhosas, English, Afrikaners, Portuguese and Indians; Catholics, Protestants, Jews and Mohammedans; bakers, plumbers, bookkeepers, carpenters, police, doctors, servants, lawyers and priests. Everyone was welcome: many came—some to stay, a few to die. If the sons objected to the traffic, my mother would simply say, "Then I don't understand what is meant by being a Christian." In this rich environment, the family gave us a great stability and intrinsic belief in our Catholic faith.

My school day memories go back to the Loretto Convent and the Irish Christian Brothers. My theological training—if I might call it that—started with the penny catechism; then the sixpenny catechism; then the New Testament, almost to the point of knowing it by heart; followed by *Fortifying Youth*, a book published by the Irish Christian Brothers; and finally two massive volumes of Dr. Rumble's *Radio Replies*. I spent a good deal of my youth thinking about doctrinal and moral questions, often trying to analyze them in a mathematical sort of way. Instinctively I believed that all of theology was already known. Somebody, somewhere, really understood it all. Perhaps it was that awesome figure, Father Gavan Duffy, the Catholic chaplain at the University of Cape Town, and the only Jesuit I ever saw in South Africa.

I also had the instinctive belief that mathematics was known once and for all, probably discovered by Euclid or Pythagoras. I still have vivid memories of learning algebra and geometry from the Christian Brothers. I can still see in my mind's eye the page in my geometry book with the proof of Pythagoras' theorem. I had an insatiable appetite for solving mathematical problems even to the point of doing them for fun during my summer vacations. My parents were proud of my ability in mathematics—and also a bit disappointed as they realized this interest would take me far from the family bakery.

Doctoral Studies

After graduating from the University of Cape Town, I left my homeland and started the second stage of my pilgrimage as a doctoral student at Princeton University. During my student days there I lived in the Graduate College, mixing with doctoral students from all disciplines and from all parts of the world. In retrospect I think that experience was as valuable, if not more valuable, than the mathematical training which I received at the university. At the same time, I cannot recall a single student or professor in mathematics at Princeton who was a Catholic. I did, however, seek out a very small group of

Catholics from other disciplines who lived at the Graduate College with me. I also knew that prominent Catholic and distinguished mathematician, Marston Morse, who was not at the university but at the Institute for Advanced Study. During those days I met and married Jean, whose influence on me and my thinking has been profound. Her first and most decisive move was to give me a choice—between her and my constant companion in Southern Africa, Europe and America—my 1.0 litre Black Shadow motorcycle. To this very day I believe I made the right choice.

It was not until my second year as a doctoral student that I began to understand that mathematics was an ever expanding universe. My thesis advisor at Princeton was Emil Artin, one of the great algebraists of the century. Unfortunately, or perhaps fortunately, he offered me no advice in the selection of a thesis topic. I think it was a fluke that I got started at all. But once I did, a whole new world opened up to which I would devote an incredible amount of time and energy for over a quarter of a century. In the 1950's and 1960's and even the 1970's I had a view of mathematical truth which I might call absolutist, in the sense that I viewed mathematics as the only branch of knowledge in which you could be absolutely sure of what you were talking about. Not even Jean could knock that out of me. It was not until I became a provost that I realized that there were areas of life in which logical thinking could prove to be disastrous. Nevertheless I found that my mathematical ways of analyzing, when properly used, was an invaluable tool in my job as provost.

Arriving at Notre Dame

After my graduate student days at Princeton, Jean and I went to the University of Otago in New Zealand for three years, then returned to Princeton for several years where I was both a faculty member at the university and a member of the Institute for Advanced Study. Finally, thanks to the persuasion of Marston Morse and Father Theodore Hesburgh, and the two

mathematicians, Arnold Ross and Hans Zassenhaus, we came to Notre Dame in 1962. At last we were no longer in the minority!

My most productive days as a mathematician have been at Notre Dame and indeed I have kept my mathematics alive during my ten years as provost. I am not going to talk about my research except to say that it is in areas intersecting with modern algebra and the theory of numbers, and that the title of my new book with Alex Hahn is *The Classical Groups and K-Theory*. On the motivational side, however, I have been fascinated with the mysterious interplay between good mathematics and reality. Consider for example, the lines, triangles, squares and circles of Euclid. These are examples of forms that occur to us through our experience in nature. People—mathematicians—then study relationships among all sorts of these forms in increasing degrees of abstraction based only on the intrinsic harmony which is found in the relationships that unfold. Centuries later some of the relationships derived in total abstraction come back to earth and allow us to explain nature or even to change it. There is an intrinsic harmony then between mathematical forms, nature and the mind. That is what I find fascinating. That is what I find mysterious. Just take yourself back in time. Can you imagine the mathematics of the Babylonians, leading to the discovery of algebra by the Arabs in the Middle Ages, ultimately providing Newton with a framework for the calculus and his laws of gravitation which finally explained what held the heavens in their place? Who would have believed that mathematical logic, as abstract as abstract can be, would unlock the door to an instrument as revolutionary to our society as the computer? If these are not visible signs of the hand of God at work, then I would like to know what is.

Second Vatican Council

Our arrival at Notre Dame coincided with the Second Vatican Council. Little did I know at the time what impact the

work of the Council would have on the growth and development of the Church and the effect which it would ultimately have on our lives. In any event, I was a distant observer of the Second Vatican Council during the 1960's, occasionally wide-eyed at some of the developments, but always protected in my remote mathematical world. It was not until the 1970's that I began to appreciate the real questions that we as a Catholic people had to come to grips with—the role of the laity, the role of women in the Church, struggles for liberation in the Third World, questions of human sexuality. For the first time I realized what I had already realized twenty years earlier in the case of mathematics—that theology also was a process of growth and development. After all, how could the old theology of a just war have been applied to the nuclear age? Surely ethical questions had to be thought through anew in the light of advances in medical science. I attribute this growth of mine to various factors—an increased awareness in our society, in the Church, and especially at Notre Dame; vigorous discussions at the dinner table with our children who were now in their teens (we have four daughters and one son); and last but not least, the invaluable experience of serving as provost under Father Hesburgh, my greatest teacher, from whom I gained a sense of vision of the Church and of the university.

If I consider, on the basis of my experience as a scholar, as provost and as a Catholic, the most important areas for growth and development among Catholic universities today, I find two.

Catholics in Intellectual Life

First, I believe that it is essential that we take our place among the great and influential universities of our country. From their very inception, Catholic universities have been tied to the aspirations of American Catholics. During the last century and the first half of this century, these have been the aspirations of an immigrant people. Now as these aspirations are changing, we must be responsive to new challenges for leadership at a higher level of academe. We must become increasingly influential in

our society on the one hand and in the Church on the other, through highly creative contributions to the arts and sciences, technology, the professions and public service. We have a special responsibility to encourage increased participation of Catholics in the intellectual life. We still have to ask the rhetorical question posed by John Tracy Ellis in the 1950's: "Where are the Catholic intellectuals?" We must emphasize the fact that the quest for knowledge is part of our search for God and therefore a natural source for sanctifying our lives.

In today's secular society, it is at last possible for scientists and people of faith to converse in a civilized way. Unfortunately this is often accomplished by a sort of protocol which keeps science and religion in separate compartments. This has certainly been my own observation from my days as a graduate student at Princeton to the present time. But at a Catholic university we have a special challenge to make sure that the door between the life of the mind and the life of the spirit is kept wide open. In our tradition of faith seeking understanding, it is essential that we be engaged in and wholeheartedly committed to the creative process. We cannot simply be reactionary bystanders or critical commentators. We must reverse a cultural condition in which caution squelches intellectual curiosity. These are matters at the very heart of our existence as Catholic academic communities. Ideally, such growth needs not only the tolerance but the encouragement of the hierarchy. There will always be tensions between democracy and authority, between teaching and research, and between conserving and growing. It is how we resolve these tensions in our own universities that will determine whether we are reactive to society or progressive within it, and the extent to which our students and our ideas will influence American and Catholic culture in the 21st century.

Catholic Identity

Our second and more difficult problem, one that we will always have to grapple with, is how, in a pluralistic society

such as ours, we can be ecumenical in spirit while maintaining a predominant and articulate Catholic presence on the faculty. Without that presence it will simply be a matter of time before our Catholic universities follow the rest of American higher education on the road to secularization. I have no doubt that the surest way to maintain our Catholic identity is through a partnership between our founding religious orders and the laity. In the early American church lay people were loyal contributors, passive and defensive, but not partners. Now, thanks in large measure to generations of missionaries and religious, we have a well-educated Catholic population. Following the Second Vatican Council, vocations to the priesthood and religious life have decreased sharply, while the role of the laity has changed from one of dependency to one of shared responsibility, a shared responsibility which embraces women as well as men, theologians as well as scientists, and, in a search for unity, members of other religions as well.

Shared Responsibility

The potential of this shared responsibility derives, obviously, from the sheer number and expertise of the laity, and, more importantly, from a straightforward independent American way of questioning things and looking at the world. But shared responsibility requires active involvement as well as shared consequences. Therefore all of us, religious or lay, men or women, people of all faiths, must focus not only on our teaching and research, but on sustaining and deepening the religious character of our university communities as well as providing for their evolution and continuation.

In conclusion, let me mention two things. First, how satisfying I have found the experience of preparing for this Marianist Award lecture. And second, how rewarding it is to speak with you about the vision which is shared by the University of Notre Dame and the University of Dayton and which is so important to the future of Catholic higher education. As we at Notre Dame continue our pilgrimage under the leadership

of our new president, Father Edward Malloy, I find especially apt the words of T.S. Eliot:

*We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.*

Little Gidding

THE MARIANIST AWARD

Each year the University of Dayton presents the Marianist Award to a Roman Catholic distinguished for achievement in scholarship and the intellectual life.

Established in 1950, the award was originally presented to individuals who made outstanding contributions to Mariology. In 1967, the concept for the award was broadened to honor those people who had made outstanding contributions to humanity. The award, as currently given, was reactivated in 1986.

The Marianist Award is named for the founding religious order of the University of Dayton, the Society of Mary (Marianists).

The 1988 award, an original ceramic drawing with antiqued gold patina on a walnut background, was designed and executed by Brother Charles P. Wanda, S.M. It is entitled "Blessed Among Women." The award carries with it a stipend of \$5,000.

RECIPIENTS OF
THE MARIANIST AWARD

- 1950 Juniper Carol, O.F.M.
1951 Daniel A. Lord, S.J.
1952 Patrick Peyton, C.S.C.
1953 Roger Brien
1954 Emil Neubert, S.M.
1955 Joseph A. Skelly, C.M.
1956 Frank Duff
1957 John McShain
Eugene F. Kennedy, Jr.
1958 Winifred A. Feely
1959 Bishop John F. Noll
1960 Eamon F. Carroll, O. Carm.
1961 Coley Taylor
1963 René Laurentin
1964 Philip C. Hoelle, S.M.
1965 Cyril O. Vollert, S.J.
1967 Eduardo Frei-Montalva
1986 John Tracy Ellis
1987 Rosemary Haughton
1988 Timothy O'Meara