Rev. Hehir speaks on religion and public affairs

By Sarah Millerick

On Jan. 31, Rev. J. Bryan Hehir gave the annual Bishop Bernard J. Flanagan Lecture on religion and public affairs. Rev. Hehir is president of Catholic Charities USA and gave a lecture entitled “The Church and Public Life: A Pastoral Question.” Hehir took part in introducing the speaker, emphasized how fitting it was to have a lecture of this nature in the Rhem Library, part of the recently completed Smith Hall building. The Rhem Library is located at the center of campus and symbolizes the integration of faith and learning.

The lecture began with Hehir outlining the main issues relevant to the first part of his topic. These issues included looking at the resources that the Catholic Church brings to public policy, the Church’s sense of self, and the Church’s ability to face challenges in modern day culture, American life specifically. Hehir believes the Roman Catholic Church has a sense of itself, and “must be clear with its mission and resources as it engages in public life.” It is important that the church has a clear sense of itself and its mission because the Roman Catholic Church, possibly more so than any other, has been highly involved in public life throughout history to the present day.

Hehir explained that the Christian Church has never been content to live on the edge of society, referring to Greco-Roman Culture. Christians, he explained, must obey God, rather than man, putting their civil obligations under their obligation to the state. Augustine’s “City of God” in the fifth century was an admission of the church as a reflection of the Kingdom of God. All authority belongs to God and it is God’s will that the Emperor and Pope work together, yet the church is not part of the state. He explained that Catholicism is a worldly church, a Church that “sees the secular nature of the world as something the Church should collaborate with other agencies to advance.”

In order to support his assertion that Catholicism is a worldly church, Hehir gave a brief history of the church from 1850 to 1950 and the years following the Second Vatican Council. From 1850 to 1950, Hehir explained, the church in America was both public and political. The church was the focal point in many of its parishioners’ lives. In part this was due to the large number of Catholic immigrants who found their parish center to be a source of support, and greatly benefited from health care, social services, and education provided through the institutional Church. Many Catholics began to “gain public space” by taking on professional roles in society, such as doctors, lawyers, nurses, teachers and judges. Hehir presented the professional Catholic in a positive light, because “the public is to be loved, collaborated with, and lived in.”

The dominant sense of the Ecclesial Council during Vatican II was that “what was changed and reviewed,” in the church was internal. Hehir agrees that the internal nature of the Church needed to be reviewed, but he felt that this overlooked the external nature of the church in society. He explained, “The Church should not be simply inside the walls of the Church but in the human family.” However, the Document on Religious Liberty, written for governments of the world, did make a clear statement on the Church’s stance on democracy and freedom. The Document of the Church in the World is also an “explicit reflection on the Church in public life,” reaffirming the Catholic Church as a worldly church.

An important task of the Church in the public arena is to protect human dignity. The Ecclesial Council made the Church less political and more social, emphasizing the value and need of social ministry. Pope John Paul II has further extended Vatican II by bringing a style of concrete activism to public ministry. Hehir suggests that the Pope is “the most visible Pope since the Middle Ages,” and is “willing to engage in the concrete details of the world.” He explains that there is a call from Twentieth century Catholicism to the Catholic conscience, and that it is impossible to separate one’s professional life from one’s Catholic being.

Hehir addressed four structural elements of American society that provide challenges for Catholicism including the secular nature of the state, religiously plural society, capitalist society, and America as the world’s single largest superpower. Hehir briefly addressed on the public level are the return to foreign policy in light of Sept. 11 and domestic policy, including issues such as capital justice, religious pluralism, life agenda and bioethics.

Hehir presented a deep connection between Catholicism and public life, founded in a history of the Catholic Church and its teachings. He will return to the Rhem Library on Feb. 22 to address the moral issues surrounding the war on terrorism.