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### Dean Joseph O'Meara--A Personal Reflection

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## Dean Joseph O'Meara—A Personal Reflection

Father Hesburgh has described Dean Joseph O'Meara's role as the keystone in the building of a great law school. Dean O'Meara was a man almost totally consumed by the importance of legal education. He insisted on quality performance in even the most minor tasks and was intolerant of those who put forth less than their best efforts in their professional lives. As a result, he succeeded in accomplishing what he set out to do when he came to Notre Dame. He and the faculty built a reputation for the Law School as an institution with a "tough no-nonsense" curriculum, a strong teaching faculty, and a dedicated student body. Recently, a member of a prestigious law firm told me, "Do you know why we hire Notre Dame law graduates? They get the job done." The genesis of that firm's experience was Joe O'Meara's program. For the Dean there could be no excuse for not getting the job done, getting it done right, and getting it done without cutting corners.

Father Hesburgh's remarks document Joseph O'Meara's contribution to Notre Dame Law School. The *Law Review* asked me to comment on the Dean's effect on individuals. This is a most difficult assignment since he affected people in so many different ways. I can only hope that by reflecting on my own experience, I can somehow represent the depth of his inspiration to all those who studied under him.

Dean O'Meara was not only my instructor, but my motivator and eventually my mentor. His philosophy of law was simple: he expected everyone in the legal profession to be a fierce partisan for justice. A lawyer's responsibility to justice transcends his or her responsibilities toward any particular client or case or system. I never forgot that, and I dare say that no one who studied under him could. That philosophy permeated everything he said and did. I also cannot forget the words which Father Hesburgh quotes: "If the legal profession is not better, if justice is not better served because you became a lawyer and practiced and taught law, then you do not deserve to call yourself a Notre Dame lawyer." I vividly recall writing those words across my legal pad while trying to decide whether to take a leave of absence from a partnership in a law firm to spend two years teaching at my alma mater. Those same words continued to echo as I extended my leave of absence (now fourteen years). I have repeated those words to every graduating class since I have been

dean with the hope that all Notre Dame students will be guided by them.

After returning to Notre Dame as a faculty member, I frequently had lunch with Dean Emeritus O'Meara, and we would talk about the law, the profession, and legal education. There was never any time for small talk. One day at lunch he told me that it was my responsibility to allow my name to be placed into candidacy for the deanship, which was soon to be available. He made no attempt to talk me into it; he simply told me why it was my responsibility. I did as he advised, and after I was named dean, he became my mentor. He gave me advice on every aspect of the Law School. We talked of faculty and students, admissions and placement, alumni, the law building, the library, and even classroom chairs and decorating. Nothing was unimportant. He never pressed his advice but always made sure that I understood it. It was a banner day for me when he endorsed the plan which his successors had put into motion for establishing Notre Dame among law schools. While I was discussing the plan at a Town Meeting, a student accused me of being a "new Dean O'Meara," referring to Dean O'Meara's reputation for intransigence on curricular issues. That student, intending to change my position on a new policy, unwittingly confirmed it and paid me what I considered a great compliment. The greatest compliment to me and to the faculty, however, came about a year before the Dean's death, when he told me he thought the plan was working.

I believe the Dean was right: the plan is working. It owes much to Dean Thomas Shaffer, another of Dean O'Meara's students, who laid the groundwork for the present plan. Since Notre Dame has always been a team effort institution, the plan also owes much to the other deans, the present and past faculty members, and many students and alumni. The work and support of many University officers cannot be overlooked. But as Notre Dame moves from a great teaching law school to a great teaching and research institution, we recognize that the greatest contribution was by the man who would settle for nothing less—Joseph O'Meara, the Dean.

*Dean David T. Link*