

## **Opening Remarks**

**By: Dr. Joseph A. Varacalli, Ph.D., Professor of Sociology and Director of the Center for Catholic Studies, Nassau Community College-State University of New York, Garden City, New York.**

On December 5, 2000, three days before he went into an irreversible coma and five days before he died, Bishop James T. McHugh sent me the following message, typed by his own hands: “Dear Joe, Congratulations as you look to opening the new Center for Catholic Studies at Nassau Community College! You are in my prayers. Please continue to pray for me. With prayerful best wishes, I am, Sincerely in Christ, Most Reverend James T. McHugh, S.T.D., Bishop of Rockville Centre.” Along with innumerable others, I have continued to pray for the soul of the dearly departed Bishop McHugh. And I would like to think, hubris notwithstanding, that the substantial progress of the Center, to date, has something to do with the Bishop’s intercession.

A short time after receiving this letter, I found myself, with thousands of others, at the funeral mass of Bishop McHugh held at the impressive Saint Agnes Cathedral in Rockville Centre, New York. I participated in a ritual whose majesty and power

constitutes proof that the Catholic Church is the real thing. I witnessed an incredible outpouring of love and respect for Bishop McHugh. There was also a palpable sense of regret and of thanks. There was regret for a vital and selfless life of service ended, many thought, prematurely; there was thanks for a job done well, nay, make that a life performed with conspicuous gallantry. Bishop McHugh served as an exemplar of how Christians should live and, as testified by the courage, dignity, and faith he manifested as he suffered through his own crucifixion at the end of his worldly existence, he showed Christians how to die. As Archbishop John Myers recently put it to me in another letter, “Bishop McHugh is one of the real heroes of the Catholic Church.” And so he is.

At the end of the ceremony, I was unexpectedly jarred out of my deep reflections and flood of emotions and sensations when the faithful in attendance erupted in deafening applause as the casket with Bishop McHugh was led out of the Cathedral to its final resting place at the Seminary of the Immaculate Conception in Huntington, Long Island.

A moment of inspiration suddenly seized me. I made a vow that if the Center for Catholic Studies was still in existence a year later, there would be a conference honoring the moral and intellectual contributions to Church and society of Bishop James T.

McHugh. And so,-- with a generous grant of financial support from the national office of the Knights of Columbus, courtesy of Supreme Knight Carl Anderson—it has come to pass.

The purpose of the Nassau Community College Center for Catholic Studies is to bring Catholic social and intellectual thought into the academic and social policy missions that constitute the head and heart of the university and the academy. Bishop James T. McHugh was a preeminent Catholic intellectual and scholar who not only wrote and lectured about Catholic social thought, but tried courageously to implement it through his work for the Holy See at the United Nations, with the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, through various state Catholic conferences of Catholic Bishops, in the Archdiocese of Newark, in the dioceses of Camden, New Jersey, and Rockville Centre, New York, and through many other organizations and venues like that of the Knights of Columbus and the Society of Catholic Social Scientists.

I am confident that today's audience will both emotionally enjoy and, more importantly, intellectually profit from the commentaries afforded by Bishop McHugh's worthy successor, His Excellency Bishop William Murphy and the principal speakers,

Richard Doerflinger of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, and Richard Hinshaw of the *Long Island Catholic* and formerly of the New York State Catholic Conference.

Today's conference proceedings will be published (and hence preserved) in a future volume of *The Catholic Social Science Review*. I thank the members of the audience for attending today's event; you honor the Center through your participation and support and, more importantly, the memory and legacy of Bishop McHugh. I hope to see you, again, in the not too distant future at another event sponsored by the N.C.C. Center for Catholic Studies.