

(Address given by the Rev. Theodore M. Hesburgh, C.S.C., President, University of Notre Dame, at the 59th Annual Meeting of the American Council on Education, New Orleans, Louisiana, October 7, 1976)

THE PRESIDENCY: A PERSONALIST MANIFESTO

I have been asked to say something today about presidential leadership in the field of higher education. In view of the fact that this is my 25th year as President of Notre Dame, I assume that I am expected to be somewhat personal, philosophical, frank, even blunt about the possibilities and challenges of being President.

First, let me abandon modesty by saying that the presidency of a college or university can be a great vocation: exciting, demanding, surprising, at times very satisfying, and occasionally great fun. Of course, it is also very hard work, tiring to the point of exhaustion, repetitive, very often exasperating, but never really hopeless or dull, if you have the right attitude about it.

I suppose one can say the same thing of the presidency of any human organization. All presidents, because they are at the top of whatever organizational triangle they are asked to lead, have broad and diverse constituencies, all clamoring for attention. The president often pleases one of his constituencies at the price of alienating another. To paraphrase Lincoln, you can please some of the constituencies all of the time, and all of the constituencies some of the time, but you cannot please all of your constituencies all of the time. I believe that a failure to recognize this basic fact, and a futile attempt to

please everyone all of the time is the basic cause of most presidential failure. Clark Kerr in his 1963 Godkin Lectures at Harvard best described the difficulty facing the president:

"The university president in the United States is expected to be a friend of the students, a colleague of the faculty, a good fellow with the alumni, a sound administrator with the trustees, a good speaker with the public, an astute bargainer with the foundations and the federal agencies, a politician with the state legislature, a friend of industry, labor, and agriculture, a persuasive diplomat with donors, a champion of education generally, a supporter of the professions (particularly law and medicine), a spokesman to the press, a scholar in his own right, a public servant at the state and national levels, a devotee of opera and football equally, a decent human being, a good husband and father, an active member of a church. Above all, he must enjoy traveling in airplanes, eating his meals in public, and attending public ceremonies. No one can be all of these things. Some succeed at being none.

"He should be firm, yet gentle; sensitive to others, insensitive to himself; look to the past and the future, yet be firmly planted in the present; both visionary and sound; affable, yet reflective; know the value of a dollar and realize that ideas cannot be bought; inspiring in his visions, yet cautious in what he does; a man of principle, yet able to make a deal; a man with broad perspective who will follow the details conscientiously; a good American, but ready to criticize the status quo fearlessly; a seeker of truth where the truth may not hurt

too much; a source of public policy pronouncements when they do not reflect on his own institution. He should sound like a mouse at home and look like a lion abroad. He is one of the marginal men in a democratic society -- of whom there are many others -- on the margin of many groups, many ideas, many endeavors, many characteristics. He is a marginal man, but at the very center of the total process."

When my predecessor, Father John Cavanaugh, introduced me to the presidency, he gave me some very brief and very good advice that I will share with you today. May I say that I have tried to follow this advice and following it has in large measure accounted for whatever sanity and equilibrium I still maintain after all these years.

First, Father John said, the heart of administration is making decisions. When you make a decision, however large or small, do not ask, "What is the easy thing to do?" or "What will cost the least money?" or "What will make me the most loved or popular by those affected by the decision?" Just ask what is the right decision, all things considered. Once you have made that judgment, and you'll make it better once you have been burned a few times, then just do it, decide it, no matter how difficult it is, no matter how costly, no matter how unpopular. In the long run, whatever the immediate uproar or inconveniences, people, your people, will respect you for following your conscience, for doing what you thought right, even though they do not agree with you. No other position is in the least way defensible, even in the short run. As Churchill once said so well: The only guide to a man is his conscience. The only shield to his memory is

the rectitude and sincerity of his actions. It is very imprudent to walk through life without this shield, because we are so often mocked by the failure of our hopes; but with this shield (of conscience) whatever our destiny may be, we always march in the ranks of honor." Martin Luther said the same thing more briefly, "Here I stand."

Every decision is not, of course, a great moral crisis. But I have found few decisions that did not have a moral dimension that could only be ignored with considerable risk, not just for oneself, but particularly for justice whose final spokesmen all presidents are. When the president abdicates this fundamental responsibility, people are hurt.

One sees easily that what this attitude often calls for in the president is personal courage, often lonely courage, because everyone else below has passed the buck. If a person does not have the courage to stand alone, quite often, sometimes daily during times of crisis, then the presidency can be an agony. Without courage, it is always a failure. Of that I am sure.

The president's situation is unique. Politicians try to please everybody; presidents must please their conscience, ultimately God. Budget officers understandably try to find the most economical solution. It is not always the right one. Cowards, of course, seek the easy, undemanding path. Pasternak said in Doctor Zhivago that "gregariousness is the refuge of the mediocre." The uncertain always walk in a crowd. The leader most often finds himself marching single file at the head of a thin column. If you are to be a good president, you will often

enough find yourself in that situation, which brings me to the second Cavanaugh principle for the presidency.

"Don't expect a lot of praise or plaudits for what you do. If you need continual compliments to sustain you, you are in for a great surprise and letdown, because you are not going to get many thanks, even for the best things you do, the best decisions you make." Face it. People, as a group, are fickle, often insensitive, and the academic community is made up of people. As the Congressman running for re-election was asked by a farmer he had helped greatly in the past: "What have you done for me lately, and what will you do for me tomorrow?"

In the last analysis, this second principle reverts to the first: you make a decision simply because it is right in your judgment, not because someone will be grateful to you for making it. I grant you this is a difficult truism to accept because we are all human beings who enjoy an occasional pat on the back. I must assure you it is more realistic to expect numerous kicks in another part of your anatomy when you make a mistake. Criticism will be a far greater part of your presidential life than plaudits and gratitude. As John Cavanaugh said, you will sleep better if you recognize that from the beginning and don't court disappointment and personal hurt by expecting what you will not get.

One of the best early decisions I made elicited one letter of thanks from several hundred faculty who were greatly benefited by the decision. I thought it might get better as the years passed, but,

believe me, it does not. Better to expect very little because that is what you will get in the way of praise or thanks. Once you accept this fact, then you can get on with doing what you do because it is the right thing to do. Besides, you get paid more than all the others and they may think that is thanks enough. Whether it is or not, it will have to do, so accept what is and don't be hurt.

The third bit of advice was very apropos because I was young and feisty at the time, also supremely confident as the young, thank God, always are. Cavanaugh principle No. 3 was, "Don't think you can do very much all by yourself. There are too many of them and only one of you. Leadership may appear to be a man on a white horse leading the multitude, but you'll do a lot better if you get off the horse and entice the best of the multitude to join you up front." Of course, every leader has to have a personal vision of where he or she wants to lead, but just having it won't do it. Effective leadership means getting the best people you can^{find} to share the vision and help in achieving it. Whether you are talking about being President of the United States or President of Willow Grove College, the principle is equally valid. You cannot do it alone, all by yourself. You may be very intelligent, exceptionally talented, good looking, charismatic, whatever. You still need help, the very best help you can find. The third principle says: find them quickly and invite them aboard.

I remember, after hearing this, picking the five best people available and making them all vice presidents. They were all older than I was. Some were more intelligent. They all possessed talents

that I lacked. They often disagreed with me and often they were right so I changed my mind. It was not always easy working with them, but it would have been impossible without them. They saved my life more times than I like to remember. My present associates are still saving my life today.

Cavanaugh added a few sub-thoughts to this third principle that one cannot be a good president all by himself or herself, making all the decisions unilaterally or intuitively, initiating everything all by yourself, always thinking and acting alone. Only God does that, and I believe even He is a trinity of persons.

Cavanaugh's three sub-thoughts were varied, but very valid in my later experience:

1) Don't think that you are the indispensable man (or woman). "The day you leave, someone else will be doing your job," he said, "and quite probably doing it better." That rankled my pride, but I accepted it. I still do. Humility is not just a nice virtue; it is the truth. The cemeteries of the world are full of indispensable men and women, but somehow the world goes on. So does the world of colleges and universities.

2) Be sure that all those who help you achieve your vision receive a large share of the credit. It should not always be, "The president announces." Let a few others announce, too, especially, let them announce what they do successfully, and let them get what credit goes with it. Don't be afraid to be off center stage once in awhile. And while you may not get many thanks, make a point of seeing

that all of those who work closely with you get thanked, at least by you. If there is any long range credit for what is well done in your institution, you will eventually get your share, maybe at their expense, so make sure that they get a good word of gratitude from you, right now.

3) Never pass off on your associates all the dirty work of administration. Never let them pass their less tasty tasks to you either. As a general rule, you will and should take the blame in public for the large mistakes that would not have happened if you had been better informed, more involved, even more decisive. On the other hand, don't baby your associates when they tend to hide behind you, or get you to do what they find unpleasant. Tell them that you will handle your own unpleasant duties and that they will handle theirs. I once had a doorman who couldn't bring himself to tell people not to park in front of the University Inn where there was a large "No Parking" sign. After I chided him, his way out was to say to all comers, "Father Hesburgh doesn't want you to park here." After I heard of this, I said to him, "I'll make a deal with you. I won't interfere with the parking, if you don't use me to do it right."

The fourth principle was not spoken as much as lived by my predecessor. When an author in Renaissance Italy, around the time of Machiavelli, wanted to write about the science of governance, he asked the best governor he knew, the Duke of Mantua, what was the most important quality of the person who governs well. The Duke quickly answered in two words: essere umano, to be human.

That may seem to be an oversimplification at first glance. After thinking about it, in the light of much experience, I would say that it strikes to the heart of what a good president should be, simply human. Those presidents who are generally unsuccessful fail often from lack of humanity. They lose the loyalty of those with whom they live and work. All our dealings are with people, all kinds of people: people who are intelligent and not so intelligent; people who are good or bad, but generally a mixture of both; people who have hopes, dreams, feelings, frustrations, people who are happy or unhappy, people who are satisfied or dissatisfied, people who generally want something that we can or cannot give. All of them deserve something from us that we can give, no matter what the outcome of our decisions, namely to be treated as human beings, to be understood, even when that is difficult, to be accorded basic human consideration and compassion, even when they abuse our human dignity. In a word, people deserve to be treated with humane sensitivity, even when all our inclinations push us towards brusque rejection, not only of their proposals, but of themselves, as persons. The president has to suffer fools, if not gladly, at least patiently.

Animals govern by growling or biting; human dictators rule by sheer force, terror, or quick punishment, even death. That is not what is or should be expected in a community of learners and teachers who have long been characterized by rationality, civility, urbanity, friendship, but, especially, humanity towards one another, even when they are intellectually or morally in disagreement.

There is a humane way of saying no, of denying an impassioned request, of telling someone that he or she has failed and will be terminated. There is a humane way of upholding a deeply-held conviction, even when it is under brutal attack. One can be forceful and humane at the same time. But it is not easy.

It may be that the most difficult problem for a president is to be humane while doing many unpleasant, but necessary things that seem to others to be inhumane. Essere umano, to be human, a great quality in anyone having power over others. Power will not corrupt such a person.

I would now like to declare myself on some very specific opportunities and challenges that face every college or university president. The easiest way to do so is to discuss in some detail the relationships between the president and his central constituencies: the trustees, the faculty, the students. You have all heard the facetious comment that a successful president gives each group what it wants, the alumni -- championship teams; the faculty -- parking; and the students -- sex. I find this cynical, as well as bad policy.

The trustees are in a juridical sense the most important constituency since they have, in our American structure for higher education, the very important task of setting basic policies for the administration of what is essentially a public trust. The trustees do not administer the institution, but their most important task is to see that it is well administered. Having selected and appointed the president, the least they should expect of him is honesty and clarity

of purpose, even when the trustees may not agree. Disagreement there often may be between a president and his trustees, but never deceit.

There are times when a president will have to try to change trustees' minds regarding basic policy. At least he should leave no doubt about where he stands. Trustees often need to be informed clearly and forcefully, on a continuing basis, regarding the institution's most basic needs. The president must resist when trustees interfere in the administration, attempting to govern rather than insure good government. I have found that this stance is both appreciated and supported by trustees. A spirit of confidence on the part of a president begets confidence on the part of trustees.

Trustees should share bad as well as good news, problems as well as successes. Sometimes a president should simply admit that he or she has made a mistake. Most of the trustees I know do not expect perfection of a president, just competent effort and honest accounting of stewardship. In occasional times of great crisis, trustees must be reminded by a president that they are the court of last resort, that they must take a corporate stand, that no one is going to follow the sound of an uncertain trumpet.

There may even come a time when the president must say to the trustees, because only he or she can, "Here I stand." It may be the end of the relationship, but rarely is. Even trustees, or maybe especially trustees, respect integrity.

All in all, this has not been in my experience a difficult relationship, even though the president is always in the middle, between the trustees and the rest of the institution. He must

interpret both sides to each other, preserving the confidence of each side. I should admit that I have always been blessed by intelligent and competent trustees, well versed in the problems of higher education. Had it been otherwise, I might be telling a different story, although I believe my principles of operation would be the same.

The faculty are, from an educational point of view, the most important constituency of the president. Educationally, the faculty make the institution what it is, good or bad or in between. The faculty are also the president's most difficult constituency. He is their leader, but the trustees appoint him. Every day of every year, year in and year out, the president must prove himself to the faculty. Especially in a large institution, there is no such thing as a completely cordial and trusting relationship. The president is, in some sense, the symbolic adversary, since he is ultimately the bearer of whatever bad news comes to the faculty these days.

On the positive side, and more importantly, he must proclaim to them, in season and out, his vision of their institution, what it is and what it might yet be. Only they can make his dream come true, and only if they are convinced will they cooperate in the venture. In a word, he must create trust, no easy task, given the climate.

There is no leadership here by edict. All faculty consider themselves his equal, if not his better, intellectually. Persuasion is the best mode of leadership where the faculty is involved. They must be part and parcel of the total educational process.

There are no easy answers here. Most presidents have been members of a teaching and research faculty and thus are fully conscious

of the hopes and aspirations, as well as the very special nature of that body called faculty, made up of people who think otherwise.

And yet, they too must be led by the president. He must find a theme of unity in their diversity. He must inspire them, challenge them, question them, reason with them, occasionally say "no" to them, but, above all, he must persuade them to give their best talents and their most creative efforts to the realization of his educational vision.

This assumes, of course, that the president does have a clear vision for the institution, a vision that is educationally sound and integral, given the available resources. You cannot turn Pugwash into Princeton overnight. Whatever else he is clear and enthusiastic about, the president must most of all elaborate his specific vision, rethink it as times change, perfect it as he learns from experience or develops new resources. He may be the best administrator in the world, but without a clear and bright and, yes, beautiful vision, he is leading nowhere. Without a vision, the people perish. Each president will have his own style, no matter, but beyond all style must be substance. If a president cannot intelligently discuss education with his faculty, nothing else he discusses will matter. He will simply lose the faculty and he will be unable to lead them anywhere, certainly not to the promised land.

The normal faculty criticisms of a president are many and varied, often contradictory. If he is always home, he is a nobody; if he is often away, he is neglecting his homework. If he spends little time with faculty, he is aloof; if he spends much time with them, he is

interfering in their proper business. If he balances the budget, he is stingy; if he cannot balance the budget, he is irresponsible and incompetent. If he is big on fringe and retirement benefits, the younger faculty can't meet their expenses; if he stresses faculty raises, the older faculty are impoverished on retirement. If he spends much time on fund raising, he is a huckster; if he doesn't, the financial situation gets worse. In a word, it is Scylla and Charybdis every day. We might as well admit that willy-nilly, the president will always be between the rock and the hard place.

Having admitted this, let us also admit that there is no better association in the world than a good academic relationship where civility rules disagreement, and comradeship is very real in an endeavor as fundamentally exalted as higher education. Despite all the normal and natural tensions between good faculty and good administration, this is in itself a healthy tension productive of an unusually good symbiotic effect -- better governance by mutual understanding of the tasks proper to each.

I could understate the situation by saying that administrators should mainly administer and professors should mainly teach. When either intrudes unnecessarily upon the other's task, both tasks are unduly complicated and rendered impossible. There are many other schemes of governance discussed widely and promoted actively today. In fact, sandbagging the administration by a constant threat of collective bargaining has become a popular indoor sport in colleges and universities. Despite this, I have yet to hear of any form of

governance as good as what we generally have, especially when intelligently and competently administered, with the faculty deeply involved in the formation of educational policy and the administration sensitively and forcefully administering this policy, even prodding occasionally for a change of policy. Both functions are indispensable, the forming and the effecting of educational policy mutually agreed upon. There are, of course, many other tasks that faculty and administration must do separately. Here, mutual understanding and cooperation are the order of the good day in academe.

Having already specified two constituencies as most important, do not be surprised if I declare that the students, as the main reason for which our institutions exist, are also, in that sense, a most important constituency of the president. Their needs and desires do not always coincide with those of the trustees and faculty, but they, too, must be heard. Let us admit that it took a recent student revolution for us to involve them more integrally in the total life of our institutions. Personally, I believe that the students have generally reacted well to this new responsibility, as new members of most of our academic councils and committees.

The greatest gift a president can give his students is the example of his life. One could say the same of faculty, but the president is in a highly visible position. He must be a kind of super professor to all the students. Young adults are, whether they admit it or not, looking for public models of the kind of person they would like to become. While the president cannot be a super "in loco parentis person," he cannot

avoid transmitting to students the fact that he does or does not care deeply about the kinds of persons they are becoming, the interests and attitudes they presently portray, the concerns that bite deeply into their youthful hopes.

Despite anything he says, the president will declare much more by how he lives, the concerns he exemplifies, the causes he supports, the public service he renders. There are great moral issues facing young and old alike today. In an educational setting, one would hope that values would be all important and that the young would perceive clearly where we elders stand on issues like human rights, world poverty and hunger, good government, preserving the fragile ecosphere, strengthening marriage and family life, to mention a few issues.

The president should also be deeply concerned that his students are being educated for tomorrow, not for yesterday; that they do emerge from the whole process knowing how to think, write, speak, and organize themselves effectively; that they have a sense of values and judge their world by reason and justice with love and not by blind emotional instinct; finally, that they have situated themselves and are at peace with themselves as they are and are becoming, as men and women, as Protestants, Catholics, or Jews, as members of a Western World that is part of a much poorer, less human, underdeveloped, and increasingly interdependent world. One would hope that beyond competence in doing something to earn a living, students would emerge from our institutions with some compassion for and commitment to the improvement of the

larger less favored world around them. If we, as presidents, do not show these concerns in our own lives and works, then I doubt that our students will take any of our words very seriously.

Each president will have to find some realistic and personal way of maintaining a continuing conversation with his students, not only for their benefit, but mainly for his own. Students will keep a president alive and honest for they have an extraordinary radar for detecting double talk and the irrelevant. One must always level with them.

Again, I believe that under the pressure of the student revolution, there were too many concessions made to the bohemian type of students. It is time and overtime to revert to a student way of life that is more wholesome and less unstructured. I know of no way of building character without adhering to a definite set of moral standards and values that make for the good life. We have cast aside too many of these standards and values, like honesty, sobriety, fidelity, justice, and magnanimity. I believe many students, quite different from those of the late sixties, would welcome a change, a re-establishment of student standards. Change will not come without presidential leadership.

I could, but will not, speak at length of other constituencies of the president: the alumni who are the best evidence of our productive and continuing efforts, the public who largely gave birth to our institutions and generously support them when we win their appreciation of our work. Both are important. I could also speak of the government,

local, state, and federal, that today has such impact, maybe too much, on our institutions. However, I have said enough in these personal reflections on the presidency.

I will only say that I am concerned that so many recently-appointed presidents are fleeing a task that could be very fulfilling and greatly productive if approached with vision, hope, and reasonable confidence. I have seen the presidency in its best and worst days. I did not enjoy the troubled times, but the good years before and since have more than compensated for that agony. I only regret that we lost so many good and stalwart presidents who were caught in a vortex for which there were no set rules of procedure, only improvisations, many of which simply did not work. Higher education must still produce a whole new generation of presidents who are their equals. It was a sad commentary that when Change Magazine identified by popular poll last year the forty leaders of higher education, so very few of them were presidents of colleges and universities, only one of the top four.

I would like to close on a very personal note which I trust you will indulge me. Over the years, I have stood at the graveside of many of my University colleagues and have contemplated the quiet nobility of their lives, so totally and unselfishly given to the higher education of young men and women. Some day, some of my lifelong associates will stand at my graveside. At that time, I would feel greatly honored if they will say, "Well, we worked together for a long time. We didn't always agree, but that never bothered our

friendship or our forward march. At least, he was fair and tried to make the place better. Now he can rest in peace."

I'm not anxious for that day to come soon, but when it does, I would settle for those final sentiments. Who among us would ask for more. The respect of our colleagues is quite enough, assuming God's blessing, too. We won't get the one without the other.