

(Address given by the Reverend Theodore M. Hesburgh, C.S.C., President of the University of Notre Dame, at the meeting of the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, Conrad Hilton Hotel, Chicago, Illinois, February 23, 1961)

### THE CONCERNS OF PRIVATE COLLEGES

My remarks today concern about one-half of the institutions of higher learning in America. Numerically, private institutions of higher learning constitute much more than half the total. Their students, however, are less than half of the total enrolled in institutions of higher learning in America, since the public institutions are traditionally larger and, in general, the private tend to be smaller. While my title mentions private "colleges" much of what I say will apply equally to private universities. Within this broad category of private institutions of higher learning there are, of course, many sub-divisions such as Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish church-related institutions, non-sectarian institutions that formerly were church-related, and others that remain church-related, although in a most tenuous and almost non-discernable fashion. Finally, there are private institutions that are simply private without any historical or actual church-relatedness. One might distinguish other differentiating characteristics, related mainly to the varying purposes of the institutions, such as Liberal Arts colleges, technical institutes, teachers

colleges, and so forth. But despite all these different groups of private institutions, one might attempt to view them as a recognizable group or category. I grant the outlines of this total group are blurred, and even the title of "private" or "independently-supported" is less and less categorical as more and more direct and indirect public support is channeled into this group. However, before I destroy the subject to which I am to address myself, I trust you will, within the obvious limitations mentioned, allow me to attempt a few generalizations about the current concerns of private colleges.

The most basic concern of the private college today is for survival. This may at first sound facetious to a group of educators who realize that never before in the history of the world have so many private colleges existed within a single country as exist today in the United States. To speak of survival in this concrete situation might sound like speaking of starvation in a grocery store. My point will be better understood by looking at the relative rather than the absolute position of private higher education today. There was a time, roughly from the beginning of higher education in America up to a hundred years ago, when practically all of the institutions of higher learning in the United States were private. With the great growth of state institutions

following the Morrell Act, public education in relatively short order achieved a balance of equality in the numbers of students enrolled. As college education flourished with the GI Bill following World War II, and even more so under the Korean War GI Bill which favored institutions of lower tuition, the balance began to swing even more in favor of the public institutions. The percentage is presently about 60-40% in favor of the public institutions.

It takes no great imagination to predict the future. Put the obvious, compelling factors together: larger available numbers and larger percentages of students attending colleges each year, the attraction of lower tuition, the necessity of enormously costly physical plant additions to accommodate the larger numbers, the marginal financial position of so many private colleges, their general inability to meet the necessity of extraordinary capital additions. All of these add up to a further skewing of the percentages according to the trend already noted. I would not be surprised to see it move further away from equilibrium towards 70%-30% or even 80%-20% in public versus private college enrollments in the next ten years.

One might well suspect at this juncture that I am yearning for the good old days of 50-50, or preparing to decry public higher education as a

monster that is devouring our cherished child that once was king. Actually, I am trying to understand, not to rewrite history and historical trends. Facts, especially historical facts and trends cannot be wished away. If higher education becomes the legitimate desire of greater numbers of our young people, this is not an evil desire, and our society must be responsive to this fulfillment of the democratic ideal. If private higher education cannot muster the financial resources to maintain its relative traditional strength, public higher education cannot and should not be foreclosed from making the realization of this desire possible.

This brings us back to the concern that I have initially mentioned: will private higher education survive in this country, and what will be its role in a new position, vis-a-vis public higher education.

First, may I say a word about its traditional role. Our American system of higher education has been unique, and happily unique, in its balance of public and private education. To illustrate this fact, I would recall an incident that occurred at an international educational meeting in Mexico City some years ago. During the discussion of a principle important to higher education everywhere, the educators from everywhere seemed to be in substantial agreement. The American delegation, comprising presidents of public and

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private institutions, called for a vote to support the principle. To their surprise, only they voted for it. The others said, "We have to consult our ministries of education before voting." They all represented public institutions, in lands that had no private universities, or weak private institutions, and consequently were not free to take a stand on educational principle without political approbation. On the other hand, our public university administrators were free and independent, precisely because alongside of them stood private university administrators whose freedom they shared. But only in the United States has this happened. For this reason, I say that even though it may be due to a chance historical development, the American system of higher education has been happily unique. And I believe that our public institutions of higher learning will continue to be free and independent as long as there remain alongside of them, private institutions who are by their very nature, free and independent. But these latter must be strong to maintain this status, particularly if the numerical balance of enrollments is lost.

So much for one important aspect of the traditional role of private institutions of higher learning. Will this role alone guarantee the survival of the private school? I doubt it. I do not think that any human institution will long survive unless it maintains a meaningful function that gives continual

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rebirth to its necessity for survival. This is another way of repeating: private institutions must be strong.

And now, let us honestly ask: What is the true and legitimate strength of private institutions of higher learning? This, too, is another way of asking: What should be our concerns?

To begin with, freedom and even survival are not ultimates. One must still ask: free for what, survive for what?

In answering these questions, I am constrained to center my interest in three directions: quality, flexibility, and commitment.

Private colleges have always advertised their product as quality education. Many reasons have been alleged to support this claim. Private schools are not obliged to take anyone, classes are generally small, there is an intimate association between teachers and students, the limited and often residential community of the private college provides an atmosphere of dedicated scholarship, and so forth and so on. May I submit that no one of these factors, or indeed all of them together, is either a guarantee of quality education, nor indeed are any or all of these elements unique or proper to private institutions alone. Quality of education is not the sum of physical factors

or of smallness per se. It is interesting to note that of the top eight institutions providing the largest number of Woodrow Wilson Fellowship winners among their graduates, six of them are private institutions, but all six of them are large private institutions. And the two public institutions are two of the largest, California at Berkeley and Michigan.

Quality must somehow characterize the whole attitude of an institution and become a style characterizing how it does everything that it does educationally. Any school that in fact accepts the majority of students applying for entrance will in vain protest that it cherishes quality in its student body. *And* Classes are not automatically good because they are small. I should rather listen to the electronically amplified voice of a stimulating professor one hundred and fifty feet away than be a member of a small class where a mediocre professor reproduces mediocrity in an atmosphere of intimacy. The real question is who is listening to whom. Education is the action of mind on mind. When a good mind addresses itself to other good minds, actively engaged in something worthwhile being said, education takes place. All the wholesome atmosphere of the world cannot replace this essential process. Atmosphere may help, but it cannot substitute. May I then make one generalization that

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private schools must scrutinize first and foremost their students and their faculties before making claims to quality of education. So must the public schools, but I am concerned here with the private school being what it claims to be, and must be, to merit survival.

Given quality in these two essential elements of faculty and students, I am sure the other landmarks will be present: a spirit of intellectual curiosity, a really vital and ongoing research for truth, beauty, yes, and goodness too in all its legitimate forms, a sense of values above the sensate, the purely emotional or the less than human level, and a cherishing of man at his best, which seeks the high level of his spiritual nature, his hunger for truth, and his commitment through love for all that is good and noble.

There will be a spirit of work and dedication too and, hopefully, the proper tools with which to work, books and laboratories, and the creative spirit which should animate the tools of learning.

My simple point here is that quality of education begins and ends with the quality of persons, and the quality of human spirit. Nothing less will inspire, sustain, or produce quality in the educative process. Some great physical plants are actually monuments to educational mediocrity. One

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small high quality school in the small country of Hungary produced three of our most distinguished modern scientists: Teller, von Neuman, and Szilard. Ten thousand mediocre schools have not produced as much.

I spoke earlier of the waning numerical balance between the enrollments of public and private schools. Should this concern us? Possibly not, if private schools are in general no better or no worse than public schools. In this event, survival would be merely problematic, but not a matter of ultimate concern. However, if private schools can maintain a fierce devotion to quality and find within their special constitution means of inspiring and maintaining quality, then the survival of private schools becomes enormously important to the whole of American education, however small the actual number of private schools within the total system. We shall always need Tellers, von Neumans, and Szilards.

Now a word about flexibility. This may be a matter of tactics rather than of substance, but it may provide private colleges with a key to special purposefulness within our total system of higher education.

Flexibility can be a great asset of private colleges if they have the vision and courage to use it well. Our total educational complex today is saddled with many assumptions that need challenging. It would be a travesty

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if the private colleges boasted of their freedom of action and yet did not use this freedom to cast aside the shibboleths and experiment boldly. For example, many private educators lament in public and in private about the requirements that State Departments of Education impose on teacher education, but how many of them are bold enough to experiment with new methods of teacher preparation. I fear that public teachers colleges may at times feel set upon by their private colleagues, but it has often been justly remarked that these teacher colleges would never have come to be if the private colleges had used their freedom to show greater concern in the past for the basic educational problem: the preparation and inspiration of great teachers on all levels. Private educators boast that unlike their public counterparts, they do not have to accept all applicants - but are the student bodies of most private schools indeed highly selected. Here again is a test of flexibility. Private educators are not bound to automatic levels of across-the-board salary increases, but do they always in fact make the difficult decisions about recognition of merit in their practices regarding salary levels and promotion. Private educators are proud of not having to teach everything conceivable, but are their curricula in fact always imaginative, substantial, and unmistakably geared to quality. And do the private schools use their flexibility often enough to throw away the catalogue where superior students are concerned.

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It should be remarked here that the best private colleges and universities are concerned with the fruitful use of their innate flexibility and have often set the pace in educational reform. But they are not alone in doing so, for the best public colleges have also presumed this flexibility to exist in some sense for them, too. The point here is that all of our institutions need freedom and flexibility in the quest for quality, as the flower needs sunlight. If private colleges everywhere do not cherish and profit from this great inherent and undeniable asset, then they will lose another claim to survival and the whole system will suffer. Private educators will legitimately sigh at this point: "But all these moves cost money." Let us remind ourselves again that while, of course, any pursuit of excellence costs money, money also follows excellence. No one backs a sinking ship or the stumbling horse. With all our financial worries today, we are infinitely better off than our pioneering forebearers. May we be as enterprising as they were, as visionary, and as courageous and zealous in promoting the cause of private education. Ours may be a different age, but it needs much of the same spirit and certainly as much, if not more, of the conviction they had for the inherent value of private education. But there is no great virtue in assumed value; it must ring true in

practice. Whatever else concerns us in private education, we may glory in freedom and flexibility only to the extent that we use these assets to achieve quality. I believe that in this endeavor, we are almost universally cheered on by our collaborators in public education, for we can be their strongest pledge for equal freedom and flexibility, qualities which I insist again are not only inherent in the nature of private education, but essential to every educational pursuit of excellence.

Lastly, allow me to say a few words about something special that may and should characterize that large segment of private colleges that are classed as church-related. Somehow, a religious spirit inspired the founding of these colleges and perdures to some extent in their life today. What it means to them might best be expressed by the word "commitment". This is not a strikingly popular word in educational circles today. Indeed, some rather wellknown educators have pointed to commitment as a deterrent rather than as an asset to good education. In a rather naive and simple fashion, some have said that commitment is the enemy of that free inquiry which should characterize the educational process and experience. What truth is there to this contention? First of all, one must ask: "Commitment to what?" I should say that the commitment

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of private church-related colleges is to a system of values, not alien to our society or to our culture or to man, but indeed it is commitment to those values that characterize all that has given the Western World a high and noble purpose in humanity's long history. Certainly, these values are rooted in certain philosophical and theological beliefs that relate to man and God and the world, and to the interrelationships between God and man, between man and man, between man and the society in which he lives. Western culture would be a dissipated reality if stripped of these beliefs or the values that derive from these beliefs. In our pluralistic society there are, of course, different varieties of beliefs and values, but all are agreed that two of the most basic human values are freedom of conscience and the primacy of the spiritual. No public institution in a pluralistic society can profess this or that specific faith exclusively, but freedom of conscience permits each specific faith to profess through its own schools its own commitment. I would strongly insist that no one of these faiths, freely professed and sincerely practiced, is either alien or inimical to the strength of either our republic or our educational process. Neither is this religious commitment detrimental to scientific inquiry, or growth in purely secular learning. What is important here is what

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commitment adds to the stature of man and society and education. One might best say that what it adds is wholeness, and inspiration and strength. Many kinds of different knowledges are learned by many different ways. No one of them can be neglected without loss to man, and what is true of the secular sciences that are learned by various rational processes is also true of religious and moral knowledge that is achieved by faith. And let us remember that science and the secular disciplines have their commitment, too.

Here, then, is something that is very special to private education - commitment to religious, spiritual, and moral beliefs and values. But once more, this commitment, proudly professed, must be practically judged by what we make of it. Take a case in point. One great religious and moral commitment at the heart of Western culture is recognition of the spiritual dignity of every human person. No church-related college could deny this in principle, but in practice there are private colleges that will not accept otherwise qualified students, simply because of their race. This practice of compulsory educational segregation, this denial of equal opportunity, is bad enough in public colleges operated by public funds, since it is unconstitutional, but the same practice is scandalous and horrendous in private colleges which are

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supposedly free to exercise spiritual and moral leadership in human affairs. One more question: Are students always more honest, more just, more devoted, more dedicated to higher values in private colleges? If not, the commitment professed by the founders has somehow been diluted along the way.

I realize that again I must sound very negative in all of this, but I do so advisedly, because I believe that private educators must be interested in these, their special strengths, if they are to merit survival and an honored place in our society. I believe that private education has much to offer, but must not offer theory without practice, promise without fulfillment. Certainly, we are free to make religious commitment a vital force in society. How well we use this opportunity, how truly a vital intellectual and moral influence is exercised by religion on the campuses of our church-related colleges, and in the lives of our graduates, certainly should be one of our great concerns. We cannot escape strong judgment in this matter.

In summary then, may I say that I believe fiercely in the place of private institutions of higher learning in modern American society. I believe just as fiercely that if private institutions develop their special strengths through a dedicated, intelligent, and courageous use of their inherent freedom, flexibility, and commitment, not only they, but public institutions as

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well will profit to the betterment of the total spectrum of higher education. But let us admit the fact: Many private colleges and universities are in dire difficulty today. They are attempting to market, at a rather high cost, that which is practically being given away down the street.

In this dilemma, the public institutions may take one of two attitudes: they may stand by, fattened by their increasing legislative subsidies and student bodies all on built-in scholarships, and allow the private schools to wither and die from practically unbeatable competition. That is what is actually happening if you look at the percentages. Or, public institutions may say to themselves (and this may call for educational statesmanship of a high order) these private schools are an honored and integral part of the American tradition in higher education. They have in a very real sense been the guarantors of our educational freedom and political independence; they have traditionally set standards for us to aim at; and they have been good friends and collaborators in a common work of high endeavor. If they now need new help to survive, if tax credits attached to their high tuitions might help, or if scholarship assistance from the state or federal government, or building grants or loans might keep them from disappearing from the scene of American higher education, well, then, we are not going to play the dog in the manger, for



upon their survival in the best of their tradition depends our own survival in the best of our tradition, which unlike public education in other lands, has been a tradition of politically free and independent public institutions of higher learning.

Strangely, in the last century, the positions of public and private higher education in this land have been inextricably interwoven - to the mutual benefit of both. What was once all private is now in danger of becoming all, or mostly all, public. I submit that while there are challenges, severe and pressing, to the private institutions to be worthy of survival, their survival is vitally linked to the best interests and inner welfare of public institutions, too. And this is not to be seen as merely a question of percentages of students enrolled here and there. It is more vitally a question of keeping alive, vital, and side-by-side, this dual current of higher education that has indeed been uniquely fruitful in our nation. I submit, in conclusion, that the ultimate outcome depends upon the educational statesmanship of public as well as private educators. Time may be running out on both of us. The next ten to twenty years will tell the tale: of wisdom or of folly.