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President's Address, Founders' Day 1978

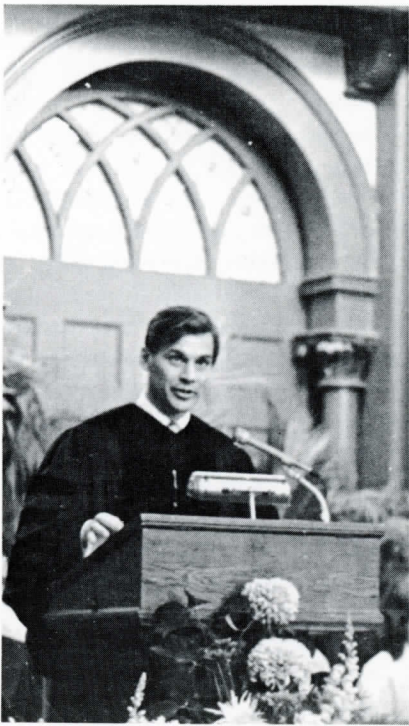
Richard P. Richter

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URSINUS COLLEGE
COLLEGEVILLE, PENNSYLVANIA

THE
PRESIDENT'S ADDRESS
FOUNDER'S DAY, 1978



Each fall Ursinus College commemorates its traditions in a Founders' Day Convocation. At the ceremony on October 29, 1978, Richard P. Richter, tenth president of Ursinus, shared the following thoughts on the heritage of the College, with special emphasis on the contemporary meaning of the character and career of Zacharias Ursinus, the man for whom the College was named at its founding in 1869. President Richter, a 1953 graduate of Ursinus, assumed office in 1976.

The following excerpts were taken from the President's address to the graduates given on Founder's Day, October 29, 1978:

Ladies and gentlemen, at each academic convocation it is the president's duty to express a farewell word to the recipients of degrees. It is also his pleasure.

You who have received degrees in course leave Ursinus not only with a piece of paper in hand but also a heritage that gives you a special place in the world and a special obligation.

What is that heritage? In very general terms, of course, it is the heritage of every educated person—a willingness to use a trained intellect as an instrument for a fulfilling and productive life. But you are graduating today from a specific college with its own origin, history and mission. This gives you and fellow Ursinus graduates before and after you a particular identity and ought to lead you to play your role with an emphasis somewhat different from that of graduates of other colleges.

If we look back upon the founders of Ursinus College, we see the sober images of committed men—men who were certain of themselves, filled with a parochial wisdom and with a zeal to inculcate their way of thinking and their way of living in the young people of the German Reformed denomination.

To our way of thinking, as we glimpse them across the years, they may appear to be too much bound by their times, focused too narrowly upon their segment of the world, somewhat inelastic or inhospitable.

Yet it was president Bomberger and his colleagues who in 1869 carefully nurtured an intellectual tradition that reached back three centuries before their time to the reformist Heidelberg University of the 1560s. This was not a reactionary exercise but a commitment to a style of thought which, at its core, contained some basic traits of modernity, seen most clearly in the work of Zacharias Ursinus, our patron.

In my weaker, promotion-minded moments, I sometimes wish that our founders had hit upon a more pronounce-able and hence more attractive name than "Ursinus." In this un-Latinical age, one

weeps to think of the puns, barbs and mispronunciations to which our hallowed name is prone. It sometimes seems that we should adapt the slogan of Smucker's jelly: "with a name like Smucker's, it's got to be good".

The truth is, however, that we can be fundamentally grateful that our founders chose Zacharias Ursinus as their scholarly patron or symbol...because the man's qualities of mind give us a substantial foundation upon which to stand proudly as contemporary teachers, students and citizens.

In essays about Zacharias Ursinus, including one soon to be published by our own colleague, Professor Visser, one can glimpse a precocious fellow with an excellent memory, committed by conscience to the unremitting search for underlying truth. Despite physical problems and excessive shyness, Ursinus sought through his writings as professor at Heidelberg the conciliation of ideas beneath differences of language or style; he sought the accommodating formula that would avoid needless polemics and allow freedom of interpretation. He distrusted authoritarian control and preferred to see church polity lodged with those who made up the church—a seed of democratic insight.

We see a careful scholar, attentive to the various meanings and interpretations of words, anxious to find the truth for himself and not to be a follower of any other thinker, even one—such as Philip Melancthon—for whom he had the greatest respect. And, finally, we see a rather courageous man who, despite a private desire for living in obscurity, felt compelled to remain in the very middle of the action swirling about his patron, the Elector Frederick III.

If we were to try to characterize in so many words the philosophic temper of Ursinus people today, most of us surely would be happy to find such qualities as these. And we might see that the debt we owe our founders goes well beyond gratitude for bringing this legal and physical entity, this college, into existence. We owe them our deepest debt for planting the intellectual roots of the college in the life and thought of a hard-working scholar with whom we are more compatible than we may think—compatible not necessarily with the theological content of his work but certainly with the style and the principles

which easily operate in the humanistic, social and scientific arenas where we expend our energies today.

And surely most of us would like to believe that Ursinus College graduates will bring to bear upon the issues of our own day the integrity of thought and the sense of duty that motivated our shy patron in his turbulent and dangerous lifetime.

And it would be good to believe that as each person from the College adapts himself or herself to this tradition, they in turn will have their own effect upon it, making it more and more the unique possession of the Ursinus College community operating within the worldwide community of responsible thinkers.

I trust that you, the graduates on this Founders' Day, will sense this tradition in your education here and will not only meet the special obligation it places on you but also make your own private contribution to its shape and its feel.

Well, all of this may suggest a kinship with a tradition that some of you may not be prepared to acknowledge in full without further examination. But I do recommend it to you for further examination.

As you graduate today, my friends, at least let me urge you to be more sensitive to your scholarly training and your mission in using it than an alleged English major from the University of Pennsylvania. Penn's esteemed commencement speaker last spring was the erudite professor of things in general and nothing in particular, Art Buchwald.

The famous humorist told his audience of encountering this alleged English major just before coming over to make his speech and he said they got to discussing Hamlet, and Mr. Buchwald said to him, "Suppose you were Prince of Denmark, and you came back from school to discover your uncle had murdered your father and married your mother, and you fell in love with a beautiful girl named Ophelia and mistakenly murdered her father, and then Ophelia went crazy and drowned in a brook: What would you do?" And the English major thought about it a moment and then said to Mr. Buchwald, "I guess I'd go for my master's degree."

Wherever you go, graduates, and whatever you do, please realize that you have our good wishes, as you go and do, and we bid you farewell.