Speech delivered on the occasion of the 24th Anniversary of the Liceo[1] de Hombres de San Bernardo. April 1937

Ladies and gentlemen:

Today, the Liceo de Hombres de San Bernardo celebrates its twenty-fourth anniversary. It is an abstract institution of complex character, yet one to which the youth of this town are bound by countless memories and deep affection, and to which they perhaps owe even more than they themselves realize.

Another year in the life of an educational institution is an event that, for those who enjoy thoughtful reflection, is by no means without significance. It invites us to consider certain questions that are of vital importance to all who long for a bright and prosperous future for our Pan-American homeland, and especially for Chile.

Ladies and gentlemen, we are living through one of those moments that mark an era in the history of humankind. We are witnessing the passing of a spirit and, with it, of the entire social order it brought into being. Yet it leaves us a valuable legacy: respect for the human person, a love of freedom in both the spiritual and temporal spheres, and the remarkable advances in science and industry achieved under the liberal individualist system.

Just as dawn first appears as a faint and diffuse light in the east before gradually gathering into the single point from which the sun rises to illuminate the day, so too do we now perceive the emergence of a new spirit. It is still too vast and undefined, but it has already begun to shed light upon society. It has not yet taken on a sufficiently concrete form to give rise to the social order that humanity will adopt in the near future. In contrast to the individualism of yesterday, we may say that this is a social spirit.

Now then, ladies and gentlemen, for nations with a long-established tradition and a clearly formed national identity, the challenge lies in adapting this new spirit to their national character. The closer the affinity between the two, the easier that task will be. Thus, although inspired by the same underlying spirit, the new social order will inevitably assume different forms in different countries, in keeping with the distinctive character of each people.

The situation is quite different in the nations of Latin America, which have only recently come into being. Do we, indeed, possess a clearly defined and enduring national character? Until we do, no form of organization in the Americas can hope to endure. We shall have to resign ourselves to living as we have until now—adrift amid the course of events, in a state of perpetual experimentation, governed

[1] Translator's note: In the Chilean educational system, a *liceo* is a public secondary school, equivalent to a high school in the United States or a secondary school in the United Kingdom. The "Liceo de Hombres" refers specifically to a public boys' high school. Historically, these institutions have played a foundational role in Chilean public education, providing academic preparation for university and civic life.

by leaders of greater or lesser cunning or by small-minded tyrants of greater or lesser power. It is futile to attempt to imitate the old nations of Europe. The garments we borrow from the wardrobes of France, England, or Russia, to mention only the countries that best exemplify the age in which we live, will inevitably fit us poorly. Before such garments could suit us, we would first have to fashion ourselves after the same mold as those nations.

And herein, ladies and gentlemen, lies the great task entrusted to education in this southern part of the New World: to shape a national character, to give the people who inhabit these lands a distinct and well-defined identity.

To achieve this goal—which might seem impossible in nations with centuries of tradition, but which, in our America, still too young for the few distinctive features of its psychology to have become a permanent national character, appears to me not as a Herculean undertaking but as an entirely attainable objective, provided we possess the determination to pursue it—to this end, I say, not only our educational institutions but also the family and religion must devote their greatest efforts, for they are undoubtedly the most powerful influences upon the young.

In the home, in places of worship, and in the school alike, every effort must be made to cultivate the character of the younger generations: to instill good habits in them and inspire them with ideals: “The highest purpose of education,” as Bunge so aptly puts it. I agree with him that "instruction is of secondary importance, because character depends more on what one feels than on what one knows."

Unfortunately, throughout Latin America this important issue has never received the attention it deserves. As a result, far from fulfilling the purposes I have just described, our educational systems concern themselves almost exclusively with instruction.

Rather than filling a child's mind with the subtle implications of every branch of human knowledge, in an attempt to turn him into a veritable encyclopedia, it is the duty of parents, educators, and all those who may have an influence on a child's spiritual and physical development to foster good health; to instill a sound moral conscience; to cultivate noble sentiments and lofty ideals; to teach an appreciation for beauty and respect for all that is worthy of human respect; to encourage honesty and tolerance; to instill a sense of personal responsibility toward oneself, one's family, and society as a whole; and to do everything possible to develop an entrepreneurial spirit and initiative. Until this duty is fulfilled, we cannot hope to build a healthy and idealistic nation, composed of upright and capable citizens, where good morals prevail and social harmony reigns.

A people who are not stirred by the pursuit of lofty ideals can never become powerful or admired. A nation whose citizens lack a sense of personal responsibility and a spirit of enterprise will never be capable of forging its own greatness. A State in which tolerance and good faith do not prevail, both in individual conduct and in public life, can never achieve true democracy, nor can it truly call itself Christian.

Now then, ladies and gentlemen, in this task of spiritual formation every American has a duty to fulfill, and parents, above all, bear a special responsibility. The school can accomplish nothing on its own. Yet today many seem to believe otherwise.

Many families would like to send to the *liceo* boys who are undisciplined, lazy, ill-mannered, and ignorant, expecting them to be returned disciplined, studious, transformed into perfect gentlemen, or even into scholars. That is to ignore their own responsibilities! That is to hold educators responsible for what only parents themselves are responsible for!

Above all, ladies and gentlemen, it is in the home that character, habits, and ways of thinking, feeling, and acting are shaped from childhood. For an adolescent, the finest lesson is the example set by his parents. The mother's role in this task is of the utmost importance, and it is regrettable that in this country so little has been done to prepare future mothers to shape the character of their children.

I have said that our schools devote themselves solely to instruction. And regrettably, it must also be acknowledged that if Chile's educational system fails to fulfill its mission of educating the young, it performs its task of instruction no less inadequately. This criticism applies equally to public and private education, to secular and denominational schools alike. Chilean education, like that of every Latin American country, and indeed like that of Spain and France, is deficient: its weakness lies at the very foundation, in its methods.

Far from preparing people for life, it merely attempts to cram into their minds, as Le Bon[8] puts it, as much knowledge as possible, knowledge that is often useless and sometimes even harmful. Students generally fail to assimilate what they are taught, and even when they do, they often draw conclusions that lead them into error.

So long as education remains purely bookish and directed chiefly toward memorization, this problem will never be resolved. It is useless to keep reforming the curriculum; the continual revision of programs remedies nothing and benefits no one. On the contrary, it is detrimental to both teachers and students.

Vocational education, grounded in practical experience and designed for essentially practical purposes, is becoming increasingly necessary. But before it can be established, ladies and gentlemen, we must first cast aside the prejudice, both absurd and harmful, that certain kinds of work are incompatible with belonging to a particular social class. As though all honest and upright people, whatever their occupation, from the humblest position in society to the highest intellectual pursuits, were not equally worthy of the respect and esteem of their fellow citizens.

Our educational systems have their shortcomings, ladies and gentlemen! But they do not, in any way, justify the shallow criticism so often voiced by people who generally have little to do with education, nor the indifference, and at times even hostility, that some parents and guardians display toward the *liceo*.

I believe, and I trust none of you will deny it, that if a person is firmly determined to learn, then, even if his intellectual abilities are mediocre and despite the greatest obstacles, he or she will learn anywhere. And if a person has no desire to learn, the efforts of parents and teachers alike will be in vain.

Yet some guardians believe that the school has a duty to make their children learn, whether they wish to or not; some parents believe that the *liceo* is obliged to make their sons study, even when they themselves have no desire to do so; and there are, finally, parents who expect the *liceo* to ensure that their children pass their examinations, even when they have not acquired the necessary knowledge. And it is curious to see how such boys move from one school to another, without any institution ever succeeding in satisfying their ever-discontented parents.

Allow me, ladies and gentlemen, to conclude with a somewhat personal recollection. In doing so, I fulfill a duty that gives me great pleasure. The history of the Liceo de Hombres de San Bernardo has not been without its difficulties. Having been unjustly deprived of its upper cycle of Humanities, it is now gradually recovering its former standing. This year its final Humanities cycle is once again in operation; however, parents should know that it has not yet been formally established, but merely authorized. It has not been allocated funding under the national budget. It is not the first time that the teachers of our *liceo* have set such a noble and selfless example through their willingness to sacrifice!

As you can see, we have not yet reached our goal. Yet I am confident that the people of San Bernardo, recognizing the dedication of these teachers and safeguarding their own interests, will do everything within their power to secure the definitive establishment of the sixth year.

In the meantime, let us extend our congratulations and gratitude to all those who have contributed, directly or indirectly, to making this achievement possible: to the Director of Secondary Education, in whom this *liceo* has always found the utmost goodwill; to the faculty; and to the principal, Mr. Roberto Ochoa, whose efforts on behalf of both the establishment and the community cannot go unrecognized.

Unfortunately, those efforts have been hindered by regrettable circumstances. Human society has seldom known how to unite in support of those who undertake a worthy cause; on the contrary, it has all too often sought to harass them.

Here in this town, Mr. Ochoa has had to contend with the misunderstanding of some and the unmistakable ill will of others.

We Chileans have a deeply harmful habit, one that I do not know whether the rest of the world shares, of regarding everything that is our own as inferior of its kind, and believing that everyone else sees it the same way. This failing seems to be especially widespread in San Bernardo. For what else could it mean when people who consider themselves, and are indeed regarded by others as, cultured dare to speak of the notable inferiority of our Liceo and, regrettably, choose to distance themselves from it. For I refuse to believe, ladies and gentlemen, that those who speak and act in this way do so out of ignorance or passion. No! I cannot bring myself to believe it!
How gravely mistaken they are!

I, ladies and gentlemen, having experienced firsthand the differences of which so much is said, believe I have the right to declare, and I ask you not to be surprised, that the standard of education in the capital is no higher than that of San Bernardo.

I say the standard of education because I cannot deny that Santiago enjoys many advantages and conveniences we do not possess here. Yet the dedication of our teachers more than makes up for all that. I say this on behalf of the school's alumni, whom I have the honor of representing on this occasion. In their name, I once again express our gratitude to the Liceo de Hombres de San Bernardo, to its distinguished teachers, and to its devoted principal.

Those guardians and parents throughout our country, instead of engaging in the unconstructive conduct they so often display, should join forces with the teaching profession to improve our educational system and to bring about the reform of our outdated methods of instruction, a reform of enormous difficulty, requiring thoughtful and thorough study, as well as long and careful preparation, but one that is absolutely indispensable.

The political stability of the Americas, and with it, their greatness, will never be achieved until their peoples are educated. In this task, we all bear a responsibility, especially those who, as I have just said, are in a position to influence the younger generations: parents and educators.

The time has come for us to set aside our prejudices and passions, and, united by the broadest spirit of human solidarity, to assume our individual responsibilities and work together for the advancement of education and for the future greatness of our Pan-American nation.