

Peace and Human Rights: Role of a University¹

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Introduction

I am humbled to receive this honor from Saint Mary's College and thank the Board of Trustees most sincerely for its gracious endorsement. Because of the privileged relationship Bethlehem University has enjoyed with Saint Mary's from its beginnings, an honorary doctorate from this distinguished institution is of special significance. Through the years Saint Mary's has been unusually generous to Bethlehem University, sharing some of its most gifted educators in the persons of Brothers Eric Vogel, Gus Rossi, Timothy Ford, John O'Neill (Academic Vice President), Donald Mansir, Ronald Gallagher (Vice Chancellor), Raphael Patton, Kenneth Cardwell, Myron Collins, Dr. Jacob Lester. Still very much alive in the hearts of our university family, these educators are gratefully remembered for their invaluable contributions to the development of our fledgling institution. In addition, other persons from Saint Mary's have come to Bethlehem rendering valuable service in both academic and nonacademic areas (Brothers Jerome West and Richard Lemberg, Claire Sheridan, Dr. Thomas Brown, Nushi Safinya). Still others have supported us financially. Therefore, it is in a spirit of fraternal gratitude that I represent another Lasallian institution here today and share with you a little about its faculty, staff and students and their courageous struggle for justice and human rights. And with your indulgence, it is in the name of these unsung heroes that I proudly accept this recognition.

I should like to direct my presentation as follows:

- a brief introduction to Bethlehem University and its role in promoting peace and human rights;
- some challenges the institution continues to face in the midst of the present political situation; and
- a few concluding reflections.

Bethlehem University

During the historic visit of Pope John Paul II to the Holy Land in March 2000 the Holy Father spoke of "the extremely valuable work of Bethlehem University." More recently, at the conclusion of a Conference in the Holy Land in January 2005, Bishops from North America and Europe stated that they would use every opportunity to share with their own communities and governments what they had heard and seen in parishes, and "in Bethlehem's wonderful university whose story is followed with great interest in many countries."³

Yes, the story of this University is one of remarkable perseverance: the development of an institution from modest beginnings in 1973 of some 100 students to a vibrant university today serving 2,100 students in five faculties and an Institute of Hotel Management and Tourism. The

University also serves several hundred nontraditional students: housewives, businessmen, ex-detainees, children who follow a variety of courses and programs in our Institute for Community Partnership. Christian and Muslim students come together to study on our campus from diversified backgrounds: from the cities, from villages and refugee camps, males and females; the very poor, most not able to pay an annual tuition of \$1,000. Over 8,000 graduates have received diplomas in our 31-year history. We have been closed 12 times, the longest closure occurring from 1987-1990 during the first Intifada. Especially difficult were the first three years of the present Intifada which began in Fall 2000, in particular the repeated military occupation of Bethlehem, the attacks when every building on campus was damaged and the long periods of curfew. Fortunately, this present academic year has been more normal thus far and, as a result, we were able to complete the first semester before Christmas for the first time in many years.

We are inspired and strengthened by the courage and commitment of faculty, staff and students, and by the generous support of individuals and groups the world over, without whose assistance higher education would not be possible for most young students of the area. In fact, the situation makes our work more valuable for our students and for our 500 employees who have regular employment in an area where unemployment stands at about 40 to 50%. And in light of continued Christian emigration, many look on the university as a beacon of hope for a diminishing Christian population in the Holy Land.

Peace and Human Rights

Our university is proud to be a part of peacemaking from its inception in 1973 as an agent of peace through its educational ministry to the youth of Palestine. Our very name recalls the Prince of Peace and the requirements of discipleship to “always aim at those things that bring peace and that help strengthen one another”⁴ Certainly, providing the young people of Palestine with a quality education, giving them the opportunity of self-discovery through learning, and the tools for creative life-building through knowledge, strengthens them intellectually, morally and spiritually. And it strengthens us all to be peacemakers of the world. When interviewed last October (2004) by an American Catholic journalist, a 2004-graduate emphasized that only educated people who can dialogue with the world can change the world. She added that despite tremendous difficulties in getting to the university each day, she and fellow students were persistent because, “we know that education is the only way to a future of peace.”⁵

It is our firm belief that peace is brought about by people meeting people, people talking with people, discussing differences, agreeing to disagree, learning to live and work together, not in uniformity but in unity. Since its inception, our university has fostered excellent relations between Christian and Muslim students and staff on campus. The administration, faculty, staff and students together have created a culture of acceptance and inclusion and have incorporated these concepts as part of the university’s value system. We are proud that our student body includes an annual average enrollment of about 68% young women in a country where women are still considered second class citizens in many regions. We are a Catholic/Christian institution administered by the De La Salle Christian Brothers, open to all Palestinians, where all students are treated equally, with respect and dignity and without discrimination. In addition, we try to promote a culture of peace and human rights through activities such as Student Senate elections,

required courses in Humanities, a satellite program with Mediterranean universities and joint research studies with Israeli professors.

Challenges

With this introduction as background, permit me to reflect briefly on some challenges our university faces given the current political situation.

As an institution of higher learning we are being tested in many ways. Just to maintain the university in operation is one of the major challenges. To “maintain in operation” means trying to conduct classes when many faculty, staff and students must take circuitous routes, walk by foot for considerable distances and oftentimes be subjected to humiliation at checkpoints to reach the university even when there are no curfews or closures. And to worry about whether entry into the City of Bethlehem will be possible once the separation wall, which is moving irrevocably closer, is completed. Maintaining the university in operation is trying to find enough money in a destroyed economy to pay salaries; it is also making daily administrative decisions which require constant adaptation to unforeseen and uncontrollable circumstances. But on a deeper level, to maintain the university in operation tests the very values and principles for which the university stands.

Times of crisis and suffering also reveal the limits as well as the vocation of institutions. Universities are not political parties or instruments of them. We cannot pretend to respond to all demands of the cries for justice. Sometimes we are humbled before our own inadequacy to respond more concretely to all the needs of the suffering society of which we are a part. But this can lead us to recognize more deeply who we are, and what our limitations are. No one else can do what we do: the formation of youth for their part in the construction of society, by their academic and professional excellence and street smarts, i.e., way of mediating their abilities to the society such as it is, and such as it aspires to become. And how vitally important this is at this strategic moment in our country.

We witness to our principles on human rights, justice, and peace, and to our specifically Christian beliefs and convictions and hopes by means of our attitudes toward staff and students, and also toward ourselves, and sister institutions engaged in higher education. We must especially be careful and courageous in relating to the local and regional communities. Here is where the functioning of the cultural-social structure plays such important roles at times. For in a Muslim-Christian neighborhood there are certainly some complementary notions of rights and justice, but there are also profound differences. That some of our Muslim brothers and sisters have their own quite different beliefs about the suicide bombings or the concept of martyrdom also affects deeply the area where the principles and beliefs of a Christian institution are enunciated and carried out through policy and planning. The interreligious dimensions cannot be covered over with smooth talk, when it comes to the crunch of conflicting religious and ethical views on violence, rights, duties, vengeance and justice. A really Christian university in a largely Muslim cultural context such as ours is in a very challenging and sensitive position when it comes to articulating, facing, and resolving such justice-related issues when they arise in stressful times. It is our role to work toward deeper consensus with non-Christians and Christians on the issues implied in the underlying principles of the university.

Education or leading out: where do we come from, where are we going, whom do we walk with? We at Bethlehem University walk with Palestinians, from years of occupation to liberation and taking of national sovereignty, its rights and responsibilities. We are not only educating, in very stressful and violent times, but we are being educated. We have something to teach, and we have something to learn. To learn the truth, and to take the consequences of finding it. To learn what is good, and to take responsibility for sharing it. We are educating and learning for mutual trust, despite so many reasons and experiences of distrust, disloyalty and betrayal. With the late Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., we “refuse to accept the view that mankind is so tragically bound to the starless midnight of racism and war that the bright daybreak of peace and brotherhood can never become a reality.”⁶

In the meantime the basic issues remain. Jerusalem, the secure borders, the settlements, the suicide bombings, the targeted killings and destruction of homes, the refugees, the United Nations resolutions, the Wall. And then there are the graves. Much more numerous than the seats in Congress. One month ago, on January 16, Nadim Matar, a December graduate of the university with a critical heart condition needed to be rushed to Hadasseh Hospital in Jerusalem. His family applied for a permit at 10:30 that morning for him to go to Jerusalem. The family informed the authorities that Nadim had been in Hadasseh just two days before, that his health condition was very critical and that authorities at Hadasseh insisted that he be brought to the hospital immediately. At around 1:00 in the afternoon the family was told that the permit was not granted. Many parties intervened, including members of the Palestinian Legislative Council. Later in the afternoon at around 4:30 Israeli authorities allowed Nadim to be transferred in a Palestinian ambulance to the checkpoint in nearby Beit Jala, where he was moved to an Israeli ambulance to be taken to Hadasseh. Shortly before reaching the hospital Nadim died. It was just three days earlier, that his father had come to the university to get his son’s diploma, a BA degree in business administration.

The dead remain with us, and keep chewing up generation after generation, with thousands of innocent persons like Nadim numbered among them. But still, we must keep trying to lead beyond that, with our eyes and ears open, with every intention of reaching that just, compassionate peace, that is real politics, in negotiation, agreement, respect. The role of the university in war and in peace is to educate no one to be satisfied with that level of himself where he no longer sees in his enemies and his friends, a brother. A brother or sister with whom he may deeply disagree or by whom he was humiliated or harmed – heroic as it may be – a person he is called to forgive.

No Longer Enemies

I am touched by the poignant description of Russian poet Yevgeny Yevtushenko, who, with his mother, witnessed a procession of 20,000 German prisoners after World War II. Though reported over 50 years ago, the message is timeless:

The pavement swarmed with onlookers, cordoned off by soldiers and police. The crowd was mostly women – Russian women with hands roughened by hard work, lips untouched by lipstick, and with thin hunched shoulders which had borne half of the burden of war. Every one of them must have had a father or a husband, a brother or a son

killed by the Germans. They gazed with hatred in the direction from which the column was to appear.

At last we saw it. The generals marched at the head, massive chins stuck out, lips folded disdainfully, their whole demeanor meant to show superiority over their plebian victors. "They smell of perfume, the bastards," someone in the crowd said with hatred. The women were clenching their fists. The soldiers and policemen had all they could do to hold them back.

All at once something happened to them. They saw German soldiers, thin, unshaven, wearing dirty, bloodstained bandages, hobbling on crutches or leaning on the shoulders of their comrades; the soldiers walked with their heads down. The street became dead silent. The only sound was the shuffling of boots and the thumping of crutches.

Then I saw an elderly woman in broken-down boots push herself forward and touch a policeman's shoulder, saying, "Let me through."

There must have been something about her that made him step aside. She went up to the column, took from inside her coat something wrapped in a colored handkerchief and unfolded it. It was a crust of black bread. She pushed it awkwardly into the pocket of a soldier, so exhausted that he was tottering on his feet. And now from every side women were running toward the soldiers, pushing into their hands bread, cigarettes, whatever they had. The soldiers were no longer enemies. They were people."⁷

Concluding Reflections

In the Homily of Pope John Paul II on the 38th World Day of Peace on this January 1st, the Holy Father said: "Overcoming evil with weapons of love, educating in forgiveness becomes the way in which each person can contribute to the peace of all." Latin Patriarch Michel Sabbah at Christmas Midnight Mass this year at the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, entreated Israelis and Palestinians to conquer the evil of violence and give birth to a new society of brothers and sisters in which no one controls the other, no one causes insecurity for the other, no one takes liberty from the other. He concludes his message with these inspiring and challenging words:

Brothers and Sisters, we pray for peace and justice in the hearts of all, Israelis and Palestinians. We have prayed and fasted. The Churches of the world have also prayed and fasted with us. We have asked them to become aware of their responsibility to promote in this land, where every Christian has his roots, a reconciliation based on justice and equality. We believe that God is good and that someday his goodness will conquer the evil of war, hate, fear and injustice now prevalent in this land. We pray that all walls will come down, those surrounding Bethlehem and the other Palestinian cities, as well as those of hate in the hearts of people. We pray for the birth of a new human order in our land and in the world and that God's peace might reign upon us all.

I conclude these reflections with this excerpt from my Christmas message this year:

Let all who search for signs of a new dawn of promise and peace come to Bethlehem where Jesus, our Eternal Promise and Peace, was born. Come, look into the eyes of our students and let your hearts be touched by the goodness, courage and commitment of their vibrant young lives. Here, thanks to your friendship and support, I am confident you will find tangible signs of hope for the future and the vision of a land where someday justice and peace will flourish.⁸

With all our hearts, we yearn for this day.

Endnotes

1. These remarks were delivered at Saint Mary's College of California on 16 February 2005 when the college conferred on the author the degree Doctor of Educational Leadership, *honoris causa*.

2. Brother Vincent Malham, FSC (1934-2008), during a long and distinguished career, held the positions of provincial superior of the Saint Louis Province of the Brothers of the Christian Schools (1990-1995), vice chancellor & president of Bethlehem University (1997-2005), and president of Christian Brothers University (2005-2008). He held a doctorate in music education from Laval University (Quebec, Canada).

3. From Statement issued in Jerusalem, Thursday, 13 January 2005.

4. Romans 14:19.

5. *National Catholic Reporter*, 28 October 2004.

6. On the occasion of receiving the Nobel Peace Prize (Oslo, 1964).

7. Yevgeny Yevtushenko, *A Precocious Autobiography* (1963), as reported by Pax Christi USA.

8. Brother Vincent Malham, Christmas card, 2004.

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