
Providing an Environment for Peace to Develop in the Minds and Hearts of Students

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I stand here before you today representing Bethlehem University and thank you for the recognition through this ceremony, of what is being done there.

One of our biggest challenges at Bethlehem University is to keep hope alive. I have come to see that hope is something different than optimism. I believe hope is awareness among the people who are suffering, that there are people outside the situation who have some understanding of what the people are suffering and who are standing in solidarity with them. That awareness of their suffering is part of what keeps hope alive. I thank you, therefore, for your role in helping that to happen because of your presence here today. For me to go back to Bethlehem University and let people know that a group of people gathered in California to hear about Bethlehem University and are standing in solidarity with them, is a great source of hope, particularly for our students.

Bethlehem University is the only Catholic university in the Holy Land, and I am often asked what an unashamedly Catholic university is doing in a country where less than two percent of the population is Christian. What are we trying to do there with so few Christians? My response is to ask people to think back two thousand years to when Jesus was walking that land. There were no Christians there then. So what was he doing? I think the answer lies in the tenth chapter of Saint John's Gospel where Jesus mentions: "I have come that they may have life – life in all its fullness!"³ That is what Jesus was doing and that is exactly what Bethlehem University is doing – establishing an environment, creating an atmosphere, providing an opportunity for our students to gain the skill, develop the attitudes and acquire the values that will enable them to live life as fully as they possibly can, despite the restrictions and the occupation.⁴

As a Catholic university, Bethlehem University is embedded in the mission of the Church. However, as Father David Neuhaus⁵ says, in effect we have no power. We have no political power, no economic power. We have no real influence in the situation in which we find ourselves. However, we do have two important things. What we do have, firstly, are the words we say. We are working out of the Gospel message, a message of Love. So we cannot use some words. If we are Gospel based, we cannot talk about others being our enemy, we cannot talk about hating other people, we cannot use the word revenge. The second thing we have are our Church institutions. It is in these institutions that the words we *can* use are embodied: in our schools, in Bethlehem University, in our hospitals, in our clinics. In our schools and at Bethlehem University, everyone is welcome. In our hospitals, everyone is treated. In our clinics, everyone is listened to. The important word here is the word "everyone." It is in being open to everyone that Bethlehem University – and the Church – are pulling down walls, opening

windows, opening the doors to enable people to engage with others and to live life more fully. This is dangerous and risky, but this is what the Gospel calls us to do.

Bethlehem University is a Lasallian institution as part of the Church; and it is building relationships in line with the call of Saint John Baptist de La Salle, the Founder of the Brothers. At Bethlehem University, we are seeking to have the faculty and staff think of one another as brothers and sisters and relate as older brothers and sisters to the students who are entrusted to them. So, we invite Christians and Muslims, male and female, young and the not so young, to find ways to support one another to live life to the full.

The nature of those relationships is crucial; and in seeing their students as younger brothers and sisters, the faculty and staff are saying, by the way they relate, that these young people are precious, are loved beyond their wildest dreams by a God who is suffering with them, by a God who is walking with them, by a God who is calling them to live life as fully as they possibly can despite the occupation, despite the restrictions that envelop them.

These restrictions create a situation in which our students are limited in so many ways. Waleed, a twenty-two-year-old student, was part of the university's Ambassador Program. When speaking with a group of pilgrims who were visiting, he happened to mention in passing that he had never seen the sea. The people were a little shocked by this; but he went on to say he can stand on the steps of Bethlehem Hall, the Faculty of Nursing building, and look over the Wall into Jerusalem, but he had never been allowed to go there! His whole life, to that point, had been restricted to the West Bank and particularly Hebron. Another of our students, Al-Muataz, was from Walajeh; and his family home had been demolished by the Israeli military. His family and friends had rebuilt the house, and I was speaking to him shortly after his house had been demolished for the second time. He said: "They have taken my house, they have taken my land, they have taken my freedom, but they cannot take my education!" Another student, Rosan, is very conscious of the restrictions and the impact they have on her life. But, she mentions these are out there and while everything is compromised by the occupation, the restrictions are not eating away at her and she is not going to sit around and blame the occupation for everything and stop living! As she says, she is a twenty-year-old girl and she is going to do what she wants to do and live as fully as she can. This determination, resilience, and courage are inspiring. In this context, Bethlehem University is seeking to help create a quality of life that respects individuals, promotes dialogue, and engenders hope.

In dealing with these young people, I am aware of the context that is making it a challenge for them to live life to the full. The unpredictable nature of their lives – the random nature of the things that impact them – leads to a situation of institutionalized, chaotic structures that are deliberately orchestrated by the Israeli military. When students get on the bus in Jerusalem to come to Bethlehem University, they do not know if they will get there on time for class. They do not know if their bus will be stopped by the Israeli military once or twice or even three times or not at all. They don't know if they will be interrogated or have a gun put in their face or whatever. Our students don't know if the Israeli military will break into their homes in the middle of the night or whether they or members of their families will be questioned or arrested. It is this random, unpredictable behavior of the Israeli military that is leading to the chaos that surrounds our students' lives. This culture of chaos and disruption creates uncertainty in thought

and action, and this combination of chaos and the pervasive poverty that exists creates a toxic fusion for any person or society. I believe that it is out of this experience of chaos that significant challenges emerge for our students as they resist this and seek to gain some control of their lives.

So, the question we are wrestling with is how Bethlehem University can respond to this experience of our students. I believe education holds the key to bring a sense of hope into this world of turmoil. In light of this, there are three things we are doing at Bethlehem University that are enabling us to respond in a creative and positive way. When students walk onto our campus I want them to know they are safe, that no one is going to threaten them or put a gun in their face while they are on campus. Secondly, I want them to know that there are people on campus who really care about them and want what is best for them, who are really looking out for them – being older brothers or sisters for them. Thirdly, I want them to know that they are walking into a predictable environment where classes take place at certain times, where there are expectations of them in their courses as far as work in class and assignments are concerned, where there are exams at set times, where there are expectations for their behavior in class and on campus. I want them to know that, somewhere in their day, their life is predictable and safe. What we are seeking to do is provide a framework – an environment – for peace to develop in the hearts and minds of our students. Out of that experience we expect and hope that peaceful people will emerge who will be able to contribute to the establishment of peace in that land. So we see education as a crucial part of bringing about peace, an education based on love, hope and justice.

There is a challenge for our students at Bethlehem University. It is the same challenge for each of us as we celebrate this week here at Saint Mary's. That is, not to let the situation in which we find ourselves define who we are. You are more than that, whether the situation be good or bad. You students are more than the degree you will get at the end of your study here. You are more than the challenges you face. You are more than the job you will get, or the house you will buy, or the suburb in which you will live, or the car you drive. An infinite God who loves you beyond your wildest dreams also holds you in the embrace of infinite love. One of your challenges in life is to grow in awareness of that and, as Pope Francis is keen to say, to experience the joy that comes from that awareness, despite the situation.

You students came here to Saint Mary's to learn, and you have been so fortunate to have such a wonderful context in which to do that. When you graduate, I hope you leave here to serve. I encourage you to embrace the challenges that come your way and use what you have gained to give back, to serve other people and help them live life to the full. I pray God's blessing upon each one of you here. I pray that as you serve others, you use your gifts and abilities for others and that you may find ways to live life to the full as Jesus wanted.

So, as you celebrate this week, I ask you to keep the students at Bethlehem University in your prayers. Find out more about what is happening to them, and stand in solidarity with them as we work to bring about peace with justice in the land where Jesus walked.

I am often asked how I see that the conflict can end and the Holy Land become a peaceful place. The longer I am at Bethlehem University the more difficult I find it to see how peace can come. There seem to be so many obstacles, so many fixed, hardline positions, that I cannot see how peace can emerge from such a situation. However, if I think back forty years I said exactly the

same thing about South Africa, about Northern Ireland, about Germany, about East Timor. I could not see how peace could come to those places. Despite that and beyond how I could see it could happen, in each of those places peace did come! That is the hope I hold onto. Beyond how I can see it can happen, peace will come to this troubled land. And when peace does come, what is Palestine going to need? Educated, resourceful, creative Palestinians, and that is why Bethlehem University is so important because we are helping to create that pool of people who are going to create the new situation where people will be able to do what Jesus wanted, that is, live life to the full.

I thank you for standing in solidarity with us as we move in that direction.

Shukran.⁶ Thank you.

Endnotes

1. These remarks were delivered on 26 April 2017 during the annual De La Salle Week Convocation on the campus of Saint Mary's College of California. On this occasion, the College awarded Brother Peter Bray the degree of Doctor of Educational Leadership, honoris causa. He addressed his remarks to the "distinguished guests, board of trustees members, administrators, faculty, staff, graduates, students, ladies and gentlemen" in attendance at the convocation.

2. Brother Peter Bray serves as the vice chancellor of Bethlehem University in Palestine since 2009. Prior to Bethlehem, he was the director of the Wellington Catholic Education Center in New Zealand. Brother Peter holds a doctorate in leadership studies from the University of San Diego with a focus on leadership approaches that facilitate change in educational institutions.

3. *John* 10:10.

4. The phrase "the occupied Palestinian territories" is a way of describing "the West Bank and the Gaza Strip that are occupied or otherwise under the control of Israel."

5. David Neuhaus "is an Israeli Jesuit and Patriarchal Vicar for Hebrew-speaking Catholics in the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem."

6. An Arabic word meaning "Thanks!"