



GRAND MAGISTERIUM – VATICAN
EQUESTRIAN ORDER OF
THE HOLY SEPULCHRE OF JERUSALEM

At the service of the living stones in the Holy Land

Bethlehem University: an Oasis of Peace in the Holy Land

Interview with Brother Peter Bray, Vice Chancellor of Bethlehem University in Palestine



Brother Peter Bray is a De La Salle Christian Brother from New Zealand who is currently Vice Chancellor (President) of Bethlehem University in Palestine. He has extensive educational experience over more than thirty years of administration in educational institutions. He holds a doctorate in leadership from the University of San Diego and has taught and explored his field of leadership in Universities and other educational institutions in many countries. He moved to Bethlehem University in November 2008 and has been in the position of Vice Chancellor at Bethlehem University since the beginning of 2009.

Brother Peter Bray, what makes the Bethlehem University that you supervise an oasis of peace?

There is a concerted effort on the part of faculty and staff to create an atmosphere where people (students, faculty, staff and visitors) feel safe and are aware that there are people around them who really care about them. Many of our students come from backgrounds and environments which are harsh or dangerous, so it is important that when they step on campus they know they are respected, that there is a graciousness about the relationships that exist here and that as a Christian university we are seeking to live Jesus' command to love one another.

What is the history of this university? How was it founded? Why was it entrusted to your religious family? And how has it developed throughout the years?

Bethlehem University emerged from the visit of Pope Paul VI to the Holy Land in 1964. Pope Paul wanted to do something to support the Palestinian people, but it was not clear what that might be. In the early 1970s Archbishop Pio Laghi, the Apostolic Delegate to Palestine, wanted to follow up on this desire of Pope Paul, but there were difficulties in deciding on the best way to do this. Towards the end of 1972 and the beginning of 1973, Archbishop Pio Laghi called together some of the senior educators of Jerusalem and Bethlehem to discuss the possibility of an institution of higher education. At one stage the suggestion was to create a teacher training college to provide teachers for the Catholic schools. However, Brother Jean Manuel FSC, at that time Director of the Collège des Frères in Jerusalem, argued this was too limited a vision and he pushed very hard for a university. The reason for this was that at that stage there was no registered university in Palestine and any young people wanting a university education had to go outside Palestine, many never to return. As a way of moving things forward, Brother Jean, on behalf of the De La Salle Christian Brothers of the region, offered the site in Bethlehem where the Brothers' school was operating, as the place where the university could be situated. Eventually, this suggestion was accepted and with the help of Archbishop Pio Laghi, the support of the Vatican's Congregation for Oriental Churches, and the Superior General of the De La Salle Christian Brothers, an agreement was reached for Bethlehem University to be located in Bethlehem and to be a joint venture between the Vatican and the De La Salle Christian Brothers. Very soon after that agreement was signed some 112 students walked onto the campus, on 1 October 1973, to begin Bethlehem University.

How many male and female students do you welcome each year? Where do they come from and what are the courses they mostly attend?

The students at Bethlehem University come from a rather restricted area because of the difficulties the Palestinian have with movement. Before the Separation Wall was constructed in Bethlehem in 2005, there were students from Ramallah and north of Jerusalem coming to Bethlehem University. However, since the construction of the Wall, coming from such areas is very difficult, so the places from which students come are virtually restricted to Bethlehem, East Jerusalem and Hebron. About 45 % of our students are from Bethlehem, some 46% from East Jerusalem, around 8% from Hebron and the rest from various villages in the area. They come to Bethlehem University to study in five faculties and an Institute. These are the Faculties of Nursing, Education, Business, Science and Arts as well as in the Institute of Hotel Management and Tourism. Around 78% of the students at Bethlehem University are female.

Is interreligious dialogue happening among students?

I think one of the very important contributions Bethlehem University makes to Palestine is that it provides an opportunity where Christian and Muslim students are able to engage with one another in an atmosphere that helps them come to understand and appreciate one another. About 26% of the students are Christian and this means there is a significant body of Christian students on campus making it impossible for Muslim students to be here and not engage with Christians. A number of our Muslim students have not met a Christian until they come on campus and that engagement leads them to get to know and appreciate them.

As a Catholic institution, Bethlehem University was established in "the Lasallian tradition founded on excellence in academic programs, respect for the dignity of the individual, service to the poor, commitment to justice, all within the context of a safe, caring and well organized environment." The way it is organized and run reflects these principles. Accordingly, teachers and students, whether they be Christian or Muslims, are treated with equity and respect, and so they have every reason to live in harmony, respect and peace. It is normal to have differences in attitudes, in life styles or in

opinions, but these do not jeopardize the normal daily life on campus or disrupt relationships between Christians and Muslims.

Apart from their engagement with one another in class, particularly the classes on Religious Studies where together they explore Christianity, Islam and Judaism, the extra-curricular activities, athletics, the workshops and the colloquy that students have on campus, bring them closer to each other. They learn how to accept one another's point of view or how to counter argue and open their minds to the wider world. And so, the campus comprises an intellectual hub, an oasis of peace and a safe place where students enjoy their day in a beautiful atmosphere with attractive facilities.

How is student life in Bethlehem in the complex context of the State of Palestine where the university is located?

One of the aims of Bethlehem University is to create a climate, an environment, a context here on Campus which is an Oasis of Peace for our students. Many people who walk onto this campus make comment about what a peaceful place it is. To help create this atmosphere, there is an emphasis on building relationships, being respectful and gracious. The Lasallian ideal is often invoked for faculty and staff to "be brothers and sisters to one another and older brothers and sisters to the young people entrusted to them." In addition, there are activities on campus which bring students together to celebrate various occasions and to enjoy being together. The faculty, staff and students face the reality of the occupation everyday, particularly in relation to the restrictions on movement. Our students from East Jerusalem have to come through the Wall each day and experience the humiliations and delays associated with that. People from Bethlehem or Hebron face difficulties in getting permits to travel into Jerusalem and are not allowed to leave the country through Ben Gurion airport, but must go across the Allenby Bridge to Jordan which can take them from two to eight or nine hours. There is, however, a resilience among our students that brings them together and leads to a deep identification as Palestinians striving to live life as fully as they can. Bethlehem University is an educational institution and, therefore, despite the restrictions and implications of the occupation, the focus is on learning. There is a strong desire to ensure that what the students experience in learning is of the highest quality. There are five faculties (Nursing, Business, Education, Science, and Arts) and an Institute of Hotel Management and Tourism where students have the opportunity to study. Faculty members are looking for ever better ways to educate our students and ensure their time at Bethlehem University is an excellent educational experience.

For you, as a religious man, what does this experience in the Holy Land represent? What are the most significant moments you lived? May you give us a testimony?

Over the time I have been at Bethlehem University, since the end of 2008, I have come to really treasure the opportunity I have to be here in the Holy Land. There is something special about celebrating Christmas here in the city where Jesus was born, to celebrate Easter in Jerusalem and reflectively wander that city where Jesus suffered and died. I have some favourite places where I find it uplifting to reflect on the fact that Jesus walked these hills and is calling me to walk in his footsteps. I can do that literally and spiritually.

Some of the most significant moments for me have been in relation to students here at Bethlehem University. I have been incredibly inspired in walking with students through some of the challenges they face. I found it inspiring to sit and listen to a student talk about the fact that his house had just been demolished for the second time and to have him reflect on the fact that the Israelis have taken his house, they have taken his land, they have taken his freedom, but they cannot take his education! It is this resilience that I see in so many students who deal with the implications of Occupation and

still live a full life. I find it uplifting to hear a student talk about the fact that she is a twenty year old girl and she wants to live life to the full. She is aware of the Occupation, the restrictions, the challenges, but states strongly that it is not inside her, she is not going to be dominated by them in terms of how she thinks about what she will do. She will make her own decisions about living life to the full in the context in which she finds herself.

I also find it encouraging to engage with the people with whom I work for the welfare of the students entrusted to us. There are some wonderful people here prepared to stay here in Palestine and work to provide the best opportunities for our students.

I am very aware that, as Saint John Baptist De La Salle, the founder of the Brothers, said, "Lord, the work is yours!" I am an instrument of God in this place and am often confronted by my limitations in dealing with very complex, unpredictable issues. Knowing that what I am involved in is bigger than my agenda, bigger than my prejudices and desires, leads me to develop a trust in God's providence and an awareness that I live in the presence of this God the whole day. It is God's agenda that I am committed to. It is God's call that I am responding to and for the time that I am working here, it is God's work that God is doing through me. It is a faith building experience for me to be able to look back on so many occasions when it is so clear to me that it was God at work when I walked through some difficult challenges.

I am fortunate to live in a community of ten De La Salle Christian Brothers who share my faith, my commitment to Bethlehem University, and my desire to serve the Palestinian people through education. I find it incredibly supportive to share my faith with these men, to eat with them, to share their joys and challenges, to laugh with them, to sit quietly in prayerful silence as well as engage in liturgical prayer with them. To live with these men and preach the Good News at all times, as Saint Francis urges, and sometimes use words, is a faith building and life-giving experience for me.

The Order of the Holy Sepulchre is committed next to you so that the University of Bethlehem may respond to contemporary challenges in giving an education of quality. What is the field in which Knights and Dames supported you the most and what message do you want to send them?

Bethlehem University is financially always in a difficult position. The students contribute only about 36% of the operating budget and so the Development Office at Bethlehem University has to find some 64% of the \$13 - 14 million annual budget. One of the miracles of Bethlehem University is that somehow for over forty years it has been able to raise that portion each year to enable Bethlehem University to survive and prosper. In the struggle to find that 64% of our operating budget, the Order of the Holy Sepulchre, as an international body, is the most supportive of any such group in the world. We are deeply grateful to the Knights and Ladies around the world for that support. This comes from various parts of the world and since 1995 the Order has contributed more than US\$6.6 million to Bethlehem University. There are a variety of ways this support is given: as scholarships and students support; as Faculty and Department support; for capital projects; to help with the purchase of the Mount David property; for equipment and books; and particularly for the unrestricted gifts, which enable us to respond to the unpredictable needs as they arise. Bethlehem University is very grateful for this amazing support.

We are an unashamedly Catholic University seeking to live out the message of Jesus. He came, as he says in Saint John's Gospel, "that they may have life and have it to the full!" That was Jesus' mission and that is the mission of Bethlehem University in this land where he walked and ministered. We want to create the environment and provide the opportunity for our students to live life to the full, to face and overcome the challenges they face, despite the restrictions, despite the suffering they endure. The support of the Order is enabling us to do this and for that we are deeply grateful.

Interview by François Vayne

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