



BETHLEHEM UNIVERSITY

جامعة بيت لحم

**Office of the
Vice Chancellor**

مكتب نائب الرئيس الأعلى

**Report to ROACO Meeting
24 June 2010**

It is indeed a privilege and an honour for me to be here with you, and to have this opportunity to share with you some of what is happening at Bethlehem University – the Church’s apostolic ministry of higher education serving the people of the Holy Land -- which you, ROACO, have created, fostered and supported since 1973 as the first university in the West Bank and the only Catholic university in the Holy Land. The De La Salle Christian Brothers count it as one of our most significant apostolic ministries to be in partnership with the Vatican, our co-founder, the Congregation of the Oriental Churches – under the leadership of His Eminence, Cardinal Sandri.

Earlier this week, you heard about the need to “educate to freedom.” And you have read how schools and universities – with our mandates to promote justice and peace -- “are the greatest investment of the Church” in the Middle East. These words resonate in a particular way for us at Bethlehem University, where our work is nothing short of education in the service of nation-building.

I would like to thank Cardinal Foley and the Equestrian Order, the Custos and the Custody, as well as each of you, the members of ROACO, who make this investment in education on behalf of the Church.

During this past academic year for the first time the number of students at Bethlehem University reached more than 3000. On July 1st and 2nd, at the close of our 37th academic year, some 600 students will graduate. This brings to more than 12,000 the number of Bethlehem University alumni. Many of these graduates have gone on to become leaders in education, health care, business and development in their Palestinian communities, thanks to the world-class education they received in Bethlehem. Many others have earned terminal degrees at prestigious universities abroad and returned to train the next generation of Bethlehem University students.

With the steady increase in the number of students coming to Bethlehem University there has been a steady expansion of programs to meet the educational and developmental needs of those students.

Recently, we received word from the Palestinian Education Ministry that the University’s third master’s degree — in Tourism Studies (a backbone of the Palestinian economy) — was given provisional approval for accreditation, and is expected to begin with the 2010-2011 academic year. There are three other master’s degrees being considered: one in Palestinian studies; another in social work in conjunction with the University of Washington; and a third in public administration, which is being explored in the Faculty of Business. This will parallel the

master's in International Cooperation and Development already being offered to better prepare professionals working in the region's extensive network of NGOs.

Over the past three years, the Spanish government has provided our Education Faculty with a 300,000 Euro grant that enabled us to work with teachers in some 40 primary and secondary schools around Bethlehem to improve the quality of learning and teaching. When the Spanish government carried out a review of that project they were so pleased with what they found that they have provided a 3.5 million-euro grant for a four-year project to work with close to 150 schools, including the Patriarchate, Custody, government, UNRWA, and other private schools.

This project is a wonderful opportunity for us to have a significant impact on improving the quality of education available to students in primary and secondary schools across Palestine. It is yet another example of the way Bethlehem University fulfils its mission to serve and strengthen the capacity of the people of the Holy Land.

In addition to the education educational opportunities we offer, our campus is a living example and daily exercise in cross-cultural and inter-religious dialogue. Two-thirds of our students are Muslim, and two-thirds of them are women. Through formal classes and informal friendships – developed through extracurricular arts, music and sports in addition to academics – our students are forging deep and lasting bonds based on mutual respect and understanding of their respective cultures and beliefs.

Bethlehem University reaches out to improve and strengthen Palestinian society in other ways, as well. Through the Cardinal Martini Leadership Institute we offer programmes for a variety of groups around Bethlehem including the Latin Patriarchate Seminary. The director is now developing a programme for 80 church workers in Haifa to assist them in working for the church there.

Another example is our Gaza Student Initiative. In January 2009, our Chancellor, HE Archbishop Antonio Franco, issued a challenge to bring students from Gaza to Bethlehem University. We have steadfastly tried to do that. Bellanty Azzam epitomised the challenge facing us. Berlanty, a Bethlehem University business major, was just weeks away from completing her bachelor's degree when she was detained at a checkpoint in the West Bank because she had "Gaza" on her ID. She was handcuffed, blindfolded and returned to Gaza. Despite our best efforts we were not able to get her back to complete her degree. We were, however, able to help her complete her requirements and graduate.

We have enrolled other students from Gaza who, if they were in Bethlehem, would be attending the University. However, they are not permitted to travel. We have offered courses to students who are enrolled but cannot get out, as we seek every avenue possible to enable them to attend. We are grateful to Gisha, the Israeli human rights group, for working with us to enable these students to attain their right to an education.

Unfortunately, these Gaza students are not the only ones who face difficulties and obstacles. In recent months alone, the Israeli military has increased restrictions on movement, which means it takes longer for some of our students, faculty, and staff to get through the checkpoints and to cross through the wall that surrounds the holy city of Bethlehem. It is increasingly difficult to get permission to take students through the Wall to see the holy sites

in places like Nazareth, the Galilee or Jaffa. These new restrictions are also causing problems for non-Palestinians, including the De La Salle Christian Brothers.

It is a tribute to the spirit of God made manifest through the faculty, staff and students of the University – as well as through the donors and friends of the University here in this room and around the globe – which we have grown and prospered despite these obstacles.

The new programs and activities have placed a heavier demand on our facilities, faculties and infrastructure. There have been no new facilities added since 2001, and as a result there is a real and immediate need for classrooms and laboratory space.

With the expansion of undergraduate programmes, the addition of graduate studies, and the larger student population, we have had to think creatively about how to better utilize our existing space. One outcome is that we have decided to extend the teaching day by one hour will give us the equivalent of 40 additional classrooms and 20+ multiple-use labs per day.

But our needs extend beyond these efficiencies. This spring, construction began on a new Education building which will provide a minimum of eight classrooms, a theatre, and shared office space for up to 16 faculty members, as well as a Dean's suite and a resource centre. There are several sources of funding for this, but a significant portion comes from the Spanish government through the Fundacion Promocion Social de la Cultura (FPSC). We are very grateful to Madame Pilar Lara Alén, the chair of the board of FPSC and a member of our Board of Regents, for the work she did in obtaining this grant. We are still seeking other sources of funding to complete this construction – and have not yet turned to ROACO for assistance as we know the many demands upon your generosity and take it upon ourselves to first seek alternative funding sources.

However, the financial situation at Bethlehem University is still fragile. Costs are increasing, in part through substantial increases in salaries. While these are a much-needed boost to the traditionally low wages paid at Palestinian universities, the challenge is in finding the resources to meet a \$2.7 million increase over the past two years – which was mandated by the Palestinian Authority without commensurate compensation to cover the difference.

More than 60 percent of Bethlehem University's operating budget comes from fundraising. So we must strengthen our endowment to reduce this excessive dependence on donations.

To address this need, as part of our Quality Assurance efforts, over the past year we embarked on an external assessment and planning study to consider how we can better support the teaching, research, and community service work of the faculty, staff, and students of Bethlehem University. What this study found was that Bethlehem University has the loyal support of many people throughout the world, and a strong platform upon which to build a major fundraising campaign. After considerable discussion, Bethlehem University has launched a four-year campaign aimed at raising some \$25 million. To support this effort we have added an executive director in our North American office in Washington DC, and we have restructured and expanded the development office in Bethlehem.

We have also benefited from the extraordinary volunteer support of 17 leading figures in seven countries around the world, who for the past four months have donated considerable time, expertise and energy by serving as our campaign cabinet – a body that is setting the course and pace for this campaign.

So, yes, there are many challenges facing Bethlehem University but there is also an amazing amount of good will and an incredible resilience amongst the students, faculty, and staff. When I reflect back over the time I have been at Bethlehem University and see the way the restrictions have been increased, I can not see a way for peace to come. There seem too many obstacles in the way. However, if we were having this conversation some thirty years ago I would have said exactly the same thing about Northern Ireland, about South Africa, about Germany. Somehow, beyond my understanding, peace did come to those places. This is the hope I hold onto now, that somehow, beyond my present understanding, peace will come. When it does come what we will need are educated, resourceful and creative Palestinians who will build the new Palestine. Bethlehem University is making a huge contribution to create that pool of people who will make this new Palestinian. I have great faith in God's Spirit at work in the people in Bethlehem, the place where the Word became flesh and where we continue to seek to live out the Gospel to which Jesus called us. I am very conscious of the need to realise, as did Saint John Baptist De La Salle did more than 350 years ago: "Lord, the work is yours." What is truly the source of our strength is this growing awareness that we are doing God's work and that we dare to believe God's spirit is guiding us. We thank you in ROACO for your continued prayerful and practical support. Please come and visit us in the holy town of Bethlehem – you are most welcome.



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