

The Emergence of Bethlehem University as a Leader in Global Lasallian Higher Education

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First, please allow me to express my gratitude for your gracious welcome back to Bethlehem University, in this my fifth visit to your beautiful campus. Thank you for the great honor of the De La Salle Award, given to me as a representative of the more than 500 Lasallian educators and 5,000 students at Lewis University in a far-off Chicago suburb in the United States. We are privileged to be in partnership with you, especially in the preparation of dedicated and competent faculty and administrators for this very impressive University. Moreover, we are in solidarity with you in our common Lasallian heritage, the enriching potential impact of which we all continue to explore and apply in our respective cultural settings.

Bethlehem University is an amazing story and a remarkable achievement. In barely three decades, you have gone from about 100 students to nearly 2,500. Your distinctive De La Salle Hall building, once the Provincial Center for the De La Salle Brothers of this region of the world, and later an elementary and secondary school, today is being wonderfully renewed for another century of service. The entire campus is so much more beautiful and inviting than when I first came in the mid-1970's. Moreover, your very fine educational reputation is reflected in the credentials of your faculty, the quality of your academic facilities, the breadth and depth of your curriculum, the integration of your teaching with your research, and your concern for assessing and advancing good teaching. In addition, your nearly 9,000 graduates are having a significant impact on the quality of life and the economic progress of much of Palestine and also in other parts of the world.

I noticed in one of your publications that you recently had a site visit by Dr. Barry Stierer from the United Kingdom, who applauded you for "the creativity, enthusiasm and dedication of (your) faculty members and (your) efforts to improve teaching for the benefit of the students." Similar to all truly fine universities worldwide, you are concerned about student learning; their preparedness for later careers and graduate studies; participative learning; assessment processes; indicators of achievement and teaching effectiveness; and the preparation of departmental development programs. Moreover, as a Lasallian and Catholic university, you are addressing issues related to the development of ethical leaders; the achievement of a values-based curriculum; the relevance of attaining an advanced degree to the responsibility of helping to transform society; and a special sensitivity to the poor and the marginalized. For all of this, as well as for your role in promoting inter-faith dialogue and mutual respect, and for your unique international perspective, you certainly deserve high praise.

We at Lewis University have been privileged to receive over the last several decades more than a dozen of your outstanding graduates into our Master's degree programs (and quite likely in the future, into our doctoral program), with the large majority having returned to teach or serve in other capacities for at least a few years. As you know, some of them continue even now and are making a wonderful contribution. All have done very

well in their graduate studies at Lewis University and most have excelled. They have been very impressive representatives of the Palestinian culture, articulate and insightful spokespersons for the overall situation in the Middle East, and very caring, friendly and warm human beings. We are prepared to continue this scholarship program for as long as you wish, to extend it to the doctoral level, and to formalize the agreement so that it can continue beyond my years of leadership at Lewis.

Lewis University has been in existence slightly more than twice the history of Bethlehem University, but in the world of higher education both institutions are relatively new. We have approximately 5,000 students but are growing rapidly. Our anticipation is that we will reach 8,000 undergraduate and graduate students in 5-6 years, at which point we will want to cease growing, so as not to lose the character and spirit of a small- to mid-sized university community. Many of our students reside on our 400 acres campus, but the majority commute to the main campus or to one of our regional centers. I note that most of your students study in the arts and sciences, business administration, nursing, education, social work and hotel management/tourism. In fact, we are also concentrated in many of those same academic areas. Business administration, nursing, education, biology, psychology, criminal justice, and organizational leadership studies are among our largest programs, and we have approximately a dozen graduate fields. While we do not yet offer academic programs in hospitality and tourism, we do have a vibrant aviation and transportation department. And while the majority of our students are Catholic Christians, we also enroll Orthodox, Protestant, Muslim, Jewish, Hindu, Buddhist and students of other faiths. Moreover, we have perhaps 125 international students.

Bethlehem University and Lewis University are just two of more than 1,000 Lasallian educational institutions in perhaps 84 countries around the globe. Most of them are primary, elementary, middle or secondary schools. However, there exist approximately 65-70 Lasallian institutions of higher education, centered primarily in Latin America, Europe, portions of Africa and Asia, the United States of America and, very importantly, here in the Occupied West Bank. There are about 6,000 De La Salle Brothers and nearly 80,000 dedicated lay women and men and other religious personnel involved in Lasallian education worldwide. They serve in those 1,000 schools and universities, but also in spiritual life retreat centers, technical institutes and childcare centers for at-risk children. As you may know, representatives of the Lasallian universities meet every three years for a week-long conference, and there is much interaction and sharing that occur during the intervals between those Encuentro international conferences. The most recent one occurred in Spain a year ago, and the next will be in Brazil in 2007. Interdependence, solidarity, collaboration and the collective analysis of common issues and challenges, increasingly characterize our global network of Lasallian universities. Moreover, we are just at the beginning phase of exploring creative and practical ways in which we can capitalize on the uniqueness of our international association of higher learning institutions.

As I have read your publications and as I have come to know the wonderful young adults whom you have sent to us for periods of two or more years of graduate studies, I have recognized increasingly what “an oasis of hope” you have been for the Palestinian people and in the Arab world. Even in the most difficult of times, especially during the last fifteen or so years, you have demonstrated extraordinary commitment and made innumerable sacrifices so as to ensure that the invaluable work of Bethlehem University would endure even in the face of obstructions of every sort. I recognize that you have had to cope with countless instances of interference, assaults, violence, humiliation, harassment, closures, turmoil and divisiveness. In the best of Lasallian traditions, that is, “together and in association,” you have creatively adjusted to those circumstances, demonstrated exceptional determination, been renewed in your essential purposes, struggled onward, encouraged each other in the rightness of your cause and the significance of your common enterprise, and remained faithful to your mission. In this way, you have been truly heroic and a model to all.

I also note in your publications and Website that there are “friends of Bethlehem University” all over the world. I saw write-ups on sources of generous support in Ireland and Jordan; Dubai and Germany; France, Malta and the United Kingdom; Italy and the Holy See; the Gulf States and Holland; Norway, Spain and the USA; and the United Nations (UNESCO). I assume that the assistance and support received from people all over the world, who obviously understand and greatly respect the meaningfulness and impact of your educational programs and the dedication of your personnel, is of considerable benefit in enabling you to remain hopeful, when others might tend to give up or become cynical and pessimistic. Indeed, perhaps the most heartening reality for all of you is to hear accounts from your graduates of the highly positive impact you have had in their lives, their motivation, their self-confidence, their professional readiness, and their desire to make a positive difference as responsible and competent citizens within their various communities. I recognize that you have always had to deal with the reality of limited resources, that you are required to seek contributions to cover the large majority of your institutional budget each year, and that you have a special sensitivity to the plight of those who are among the most poor and oppressed. Again, for all of that, you are a model for the rest of us in the Lasallian world of higher education. Hopefully, we can determine innovative ways of being more effectively in solidarity with you in the future, while benefiting from insights gained into all that you have become as a very well-regarded University.

I have several times in these remarks referred to the international family of Lasallian institutions of higher education, among which Bethlehem and Lewis are but two of many. It is true that each institution functions within its own unique context and attempts to respond to the needs, strengths and inadequacies of its local culture and overall situation. However, there is that other important dimension which we all share, no matter where we exist and whomever we might serve throughout the world community of nations. That added dimension is our Lasallian legacy, which includes the living Lasallian tradition and the vision and charisma of John Baptist De la Salle, which legacy is our common treasure and mark of distinctiveness. Indeed, we would all be well-served to the extent that we probe its riches and adapt its core values to our own unique set of circumstances. Perhaps

there is no more important priority in the coming years than to devote special attention in a systematic manner to fostering the Lasallian spirit among all Lasallian educators of similar attitudes and values. Most certainly, given the fact that the Brothers are only 6% of the Lasallian educational community worldwide, it is imperative that we place a very high priority on the formation and development of a new generation of spirited and well-informed Lasallian lay leaders in all of our universities and schools, here and everywhere.

And what are some of the principal characteristics of Lasallian higher education which, taken as a whole, give a certain distinctiveness to our approach to university education in all parts of the world? Among the most important are the following:

- respect for and appreciation of the uniqueness and innate human dignity of each student, as well as her or his individual potential
- a special sensitivity for the poor, the marginalized and at-risk students, as well as for education in support of greater justice, peace, ethical leadership and regard for the dignity of all human life
- a priority for unity among all local Lasallian educators in pursuit of the vital goals that flow from the mission and vision of each Lasallian institution
- high quality, well-conducted schools and universities, typified by an appropriate degree of academic rigor coupled with a commitment to the human and educational development of each individual
- a regard for the inner life, the spiritual dimension and the pastoral needs of students and faculty alike
- an emphasis on volunteer service and on unselfishly reaching out to the needy, the poor and the underprivileged
- formation for mission for all university personnel, especially the faculty
- a blending of the humanities with professional education
- understanding the crucial place for relationships (faculty to students, faculty to faculty, students to students) in the achievement of the lofty goals of a Lasallian and Catholic university
- the centrality of religious education and an appreciation for various religious traditions and the enriching contributions that they each make to human development
- an integration of effective teaching, practical research and community service
- the call to recognize that education is not only for personal and familial benefit, but also that it carries with it an obligation to be involved in the social transformation of one's own community and also the world community to the extent possible
- belief in the worthwhileness of the shared search for truth, as well as the unity of all knowledge rooted in the one ultimate source of Truth
- an appreciation of the extraordinary legacy of John Baptist de la Salle, as well as his witness to creative adaptation and his resolute determination, in order to achieve the enobling purposes of Lasallian education because the need for our institutions is so very great
- a welcoming, fraternal and caring environment
- a concern for the widening gap between the have's and the have-not's

- attention to each individual, but also a balancing regard for the common good and the expectation that each person be willing to sacrifice for the good of all, with special concern for the most needy
- the interaction of faith and reason, religion and culture
- stewardship of human and financial resources and of the environment, with a concern for equal access to quality education, health care, dignified work and a just wage
- creative adaptation to the needs of each era and each context, fostering partnerships and outreach programs that fit the capabilities of the university
- openness to multi-cultural, multi-ethnic and multi-religious participation
- and solidarity in a common commitment to resist all forms of hatred, prejudice, violence, discrimination and selfish greed

Fellow Lasallian educators, I again want to applaud and encourage you in all that you are achieving here at Bethlehem University, for the benefit of your students, their families and communities, and for all of Palestine. Your work is highly impactful and worthy of great support. Indeed, it is of historic significance.

Congratulations for your fidelity to your mission and the immense sacrifices that you have made and continue to make, always “together and in association,” to quote St. De La Salle and his *RULE*. We at Lewis University, situated thousands of miles away, are well aware of the meaningfulness of what you are doing and the quality of your fine university. We remain committed to be in partnership with you in a variety of ways and to our mutual advantage. You have our enduring respect, as well as our pledge to journey further together and with other Lasallian universities, in pursuit of a far better, more just and well-educated human community, here and in many other nations of the world. Thank you again for the honor you have afforded me and the university which I represent. It is very good to be here with you and a privilege to be associated with you in such a worthwhile common mission.

Brother James Gaffney, FSC
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