

Opening Prayer for Awarding of Honorary Doctorate to Cardinal Martini
Bethlehem University of the Holy Land
Father Peter De Bruhl
26 June 2005

A Teacher's Prayer

On the occasion of awarding an honorary doctorate to
Carlo Cardinal Martini at Bethlehem University of the Holy Land.

I know, O Lord, I cannot be a Mary
And bear a Christ Child for a world of sin,
But make me, Lord, today a better poet
That I for you my listeners may win.

I know, O Lord, that I'm not Che Guevera
To lead the peasants free into their lands,
But make me, Lord, today, a better teacher
For the students that I have within my hands.

Some say that teaching is another business,
That teachers work for salaries with words.
But teachers are like poets in this matter---
They want to teach their students to be birds.

We teach them to do math and science, language,
Business and nursing, by and by,
We teach them education and hostelry,
But above all we try to teach them how to fly.

And make their way across the many checkpoints
Amidst the bloody pressures of their age,
To teach them how to work out of unemployment,
And find increasing freedom from their cage.

Each evening little birds come to our garden
To tell their stories high among the trees,
They chatter to each other until sunset
For even birds have universities.

In Italian they are known as “uccellini”.
In Arabic they’re known as “balladi”.
Not one of them can fall without your knowing,
For everything you know. O Lord, and see.

So look upon our garden now this evening:
A larger bird has come inside our hall.
Tonight we have a bird, a “cardellino”,
In English we call a “cardinal”.

Yes tonight we have a big bird in our garden.
He has not come by chance or just by fate.
A red bird comes among us here this evening,
Whom we have asked to come within our gate.

He came here through the checkpoint like the others.
He came up to the Wall. They let him in.
He came to receive an honor, “doctoris causa”,
He honors us by letting us honor him.

A “cardinal” may sound like a kind of number.
The word also means a hinge upon a door.
Tonight it means a certain man among us:
A teacher, priest, a bishop, even more!

A student! Just like us. He comes among us.
A “taleb,” coming over the Green Line,
In search of friends who asked him to come over,
Into what is left of Palestine.

So we pray, O Lord, for all the uccellini,
For red birds and the uccellachi few,
Especially for this visiting Cardinal
Who honors us as he is honored too.

It seems that we are honoring one another,
As actors and the politicians do,
But let there be no mistake, we’re not here for our sake.
We’re here because we want to honor you.
So Lord we thank you for your help and guidance
When we make mistakes or sometimes get things right.

We thank you for our benefactors,
And ask you to bless the one who is here tonight.

He comes for his diploma and his honors
Because he merits them among his friends,
But we also honor him, we also honor him,
For teaching us how freedom never ends.

May he come back some other time to mingle
With students and to listen to their words.
He may not hear Haendel and Albinoni
But he will get an earful from our local birds.

They might even dance a dabkeh, sing some poems,
Under sunlight or under midnight lamps,
Songs from students of their present generation
Who have learned them in their villages and camps.

And we hope that all our students will take notice
How teachers keep on learning all their lives,
How even Popes and Cardinals and Bishops
Keep coming back to the town that's Children's Size,

Where Mary, Joseph, Jesus found some lodging,
In a cave one night so many years before,
Where folks keep coming back, along the checkpoint track,
To stoop low like a child through the door.

And when our years of care are over
And they of student life have had their share,
May they to you still bring petition
Praying to you in faith their teacher's prayer.

But all we ask tonight of this assembly
That's gathered on this hill in Bethlehem,
Is to ask of them one word, not too muck for a bird,
And the word, you guessed it, is that word: Amen.

And if you think my prayer is too long,
Remember not the singer but the song.