

Building an Oasis of Peace and Tolerance

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Professor Peter Bray, from Australia. Since Feb. 1st 2009 he is officially the new Vice Chancellor of Bethlehem University.

Bethlehem University, which has developed a reputation as a model of tolerance by embracing students of all faith traditions, is celebrating its 35th anniversary this year. The only Catholic university in the West Bank also has a new Vice Chancellor: De La Salle Brother Peter Bray. Professor Bray, 63, spoke with Terrasanta.net about the university's challenging mission, his plans for the future, and why some students are apprehensive about Pope Benedict XVI's planned visit to Israel in May.

How did you come to be Vice Chancellor at Bethlehem University?

I've been teaching "Leadership" from 1999 in Wellington, New Zealand. My Ph.D. is from San Diego, California. I've been running workshops both in US and New Zealand. And then, last summer, I was asked if I would consider taking up the position in Bethlehem after the previous Vice Chancellor passed away last August. I had been there once before and I accepted.

I arrived at the beginning of November and I have spent the past 11 weeks meeting people, listening, finding out different aspects of the life in the University. I suppose the complexity of Palestine and of the University had a great impact on me. I realized that what I knew was virtually nil before I came, and the impact of the occupation on the Palestinians is the thing that has hit me more: the restrictions on their movements, on their freedom...

I am surprised by the resilience of the Palestinians in being able to survive in that sort of environment. The students, some of them, are from East Jerusalem and they have to go through the separation Wall every day, through the checkpoints and every day they face this uncertainty. Sometimes they just go through, sometimes they wait for hours, other times some people would be asked to get off the bus. The unsettling aspect of not knowing what is going to happen. Many people would have given up, but their determination in facing these difficulties is amazing. We also have restrictions on movements: everyone has to get permission to go to Jerusalem for certain events.

What we are doing with the Bethlehem University is trying to provide an oasis of peace in the midst of that hassle and also trying, through education, to provide them with a future, even through all the restrictions that the Israeli occupation is posing at them. Education is the weapon to build up their country.

How do you see the mission of the Bethlehem University 35 years after its foundation?

Its mission is to provide quality higher education to the people of Palestine, and to serve them in its role as a center for the advancement, sharing and use of knowledge. Our main task is to continue to match the education that we are providing to the students to the actual needs of the Palestinian society - providing opportunities to our students to get educated and matching the necessity of their country. For example, one of our leading programs is the Master in International Cooperation and Development of the Cardinal Martini Institute of Leadership. What we are looking at, as a result of

being Bethlehem University, is trying to have our students build up their future in Palestine, not to flee the country and go looking for a job abroad. We want them to stay there.

You see, we are celebrating our 35th year of teaching since we started. We have now 11,000 students, and we have graduates who are teaching in Palestine. We have many nurses, and others who are working in the NGO's. What we are seeing is that, for our graduates, as a result of having been with us, Palestine is a better place for them to live in.

How is the conflict perceived on campus? What is the social environment among students like?

Well, I had the unfortunate experience of coming in just before Gaza happened. And the impact that it had on the students was very negative. Before the Second Intifada started, we had 438 students from Gaza; now, since the Second Intifada started, the Israeli army did not allow them to come through. Many of the students have relatives or friends there, and because of the difficulties in communication we don't know what has happened to them. It would be unrealistic to think that not one of them has been injured. So, my experience was that because of the situation, in the past month all the conversations that I had with the students was obviously about Gaza and what is happening there. The impact on the morale of the students was really negative. Up to the Second Intifada, we had students from the north of Jerusalem, from Ramallah, but because of the Wall and the number of checkpoints, it has made it impractical. Bethlehem has virtually become a prison.

What were the main issues of discussion in this two-day meeting?

We meet twice a year at the International Board of Regents (from United States, Switzerland, Germany, Ireland, England, Japan etc.) and this is one of our meetings. Our first challenge is finances because 69% of our budget comes from fundraising and I have never been in an institution where so much of the budget is so vague. The annual cost per student is approximately \$3,600 but most of the students can pay from \$300 to \$500, about 12% of the tuition. The Palestinian Authority contributes about 7%, and the Vatican covers about 12%. So we have to find, every year, nearly 70% of our budget. We have 2,800 students enrolled right now, but at least twice as many apply and hopefully, in the future, we will be able to accept more students. But the aid of our donors is really crucial. For example, we also receive funds from the Gulf, in the form of sponsored scholarships. They're helping students to cover the cost of the tuition, instead of investing money for example in building new departments.

What are the main problems facing the Bethlehem University?

Finance is the big one and the second one, I would say, is getting students to the University. Nobody from north Jerusalem can really get to the University right now, and people from East Jerusalem have to face checkpoints to arrive. So, on the one hand we have objective restrictions on their movements and on the other hand another the issue is the impact that the Occupation has on their ability to study. I would say that one of the significant issues is having programs that are able to help them to find a job when they finish, to help them to move from university to employment. Because, especially as far as the Christian students are concerned, if they cannot find a job they would leave the Holy Land, and that's what we are trying to avoid. The drift of Christians from the Holy Places is a real concern in the university. We would like them to stay.

What are your goals during your mandate?

What I would like to focus on is teaching and learning. We need to find a way so that our professors, lecturers and students grow as a result of their study, that they are able not only to learn but also to think differently. As a university, we need to get beyond memorization. We need to get people into thinking critically, not only being able to memorize what they have been exposed to. So, I really hope to be able to teach and learn.

What can ordinary Catholics do for the University?

Praying for us and, of course, contributing financially are the most important aid. And then we have several arrangements with universities mainly in the United States, Europe and Ireland. So I think that fostering these connections is another way that the Catholic faithful can help us.

The Pope is planning to visit Bethlehem next May. What are the expectations for the papal visit?

Our university was created just after Pope Paul VI's visit to the Holy Land, as a result of a meeting with Christian Palestinians that made the point with the Pope that there was no catholic university in the West Bank. So that's how the university was opened in 1973. And that's why it is still supported by the Vatican. And that's why we invited the Pope to come during his coming visit. After all, he's an academic and we are the only Catholic university in the West Bank. I know that it would be difficult, but we have asked. As for his visit, there are ambiguous feelings among the Palestinians: what message might he give to Israel after what happened in Gaza? Some of the students are not happy with the perspective of him coming and supporting the policy of the State of Israel.

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