

Inauguration Address - Br Peter Bray

Nau Mai, Haire Mai tena kota, tena kota, tena kota katau

Your Excellency, Archbishop Franco, Your Beatitude Patriarch Fouad Twal, Distinguished Guests, Faculty, Staff, Students and friends,

I stand before you today as someone probably coming from as far away from Bethlehem as one can possibly get. I come aware that this is a very different land. I come from a very small island nation in the South Pacific surrounded by the sea with some four million people, about the same as Palestine. Yet I come with greetings from the people of the land of Aotearoa New Zealand. The indigenous people, the Maori people, are very attached and bonded with that land. I grew up in the small town on the west coast of the North Island. The Maori people had a big influence on me. As a result, like the Maori people, I identify myself by my mountain and by my river. So I come from a place where Mt Taranaki is my mountain and Waitara is my river. There is nowhere in the world where I feel more grounded, more at home, more attached, more myself than sitting on the banks of my river looking at my mountain or being on the slopes of my mountain. It is from the people in Aotearoa New Zealand who identify themselves in this way as people of the land, that I bring greetings to you the people of Palestine, the people of this land which you treasure. I bring greetings to you here in Bethlehem, this city that is so sacred on such holy land and whose mayor we are honoured to have with us today.

I bring greetings from the Wellington Catholic Education Centre where I worked for eleven years before coming here. The people of the Archdiocese of Wellington from whom I come send their greetings. The De La Salle Brothers in New Zealand in sending me to the community of Brothers here at Bethlehem University send their greetings. My family, who miss having me near them, also send their greetings.

So the question arises, why have I come here? Why have I travelled half way around the world to be here in Bethlehem? I have come to stand with you, to walk with you, to share something of your life, to serve you, to learn from you what it means for you to be people of the land here in Palestine where you suffer so much in being able to simply live in justice and peace. I particularly come to be involved in education. In being involved in education, I see myself called to work in whatever way I can against anything that is stopping you from living a full life. Thus I commit myself to work side by side with you against ignorance by providing the best possible opportunity and encouragement for people to learn. I commit myself to work side by side with you against fear, to work against prejudice, to work against injustice, to work against anything that is closing people off from becoming who they are capable of being – whatever is preventing us from living a full life.

Will I be successful? When I leave here will I be able to look back on having successfully achieved that? Absolutely! I have no doubt that while I am here together with you - **we** will be successful if we continue to be united in emphasizing academic excellence and the development of students as committed people working for the common good. What leads me to be so sure, so confident? It is because I follow in the footsteps of Jesus Christ, for whom success was about being faithful – faithful to God's call and faithful to his companions and faithful to the people he served. I walk in the footsteps of John Baptist De La Salle, who was also faithful to God's call, faithful to his companions, the first brothers and faithful to the young people entrusted to him. With God's help we will help each other to be faithful. So I commit myself to faithfully work against fear, against prejudice, against

injustice, against anything that is closing people off from becoming who they are capable of being - and I will use all my abilities and resources to move in that direction. I know there will be obstacles. I know I will make mistakes. I know that at times I will be frustrated and disappointed. I know there will be people who won't agree with me. Nevertheless, at this time, here and now, I stand here and publicly commit myself to Bethlehem University and pledge that I will work together and by association with you to build the future of Bethlehem University and I will hold myself accountable for that.

As we move forward from today, in the midst of all the challenges we face, we need imagination to call us forth into the mystery of what we have not yet become. So I invite you to join with me to explore that mystery, to become aware of the wonder of the God who created us, God who calls us, God who walks with us, God who loves us beyond our wildest dreams.

In seeking to bring life, to walk with people, to learn, to bring hope, I am conscious of the people from whom I have come. I know I am a stranger in this land and no matter how long I stay here I will always be that. However, as I said earlier, I bring from the people of my land to you, the people of this land, this land of Palestine, represented here today by two of the honorable ministers of the Palestinian government. I bring to Bethlehem University, therefore, a gift from the people of the land, the Maori people of New Zealand. It is a patu, formerly a Maori war club.

This patu, which is no longer a weapon, has been specially carved with spirals, known in New Zealand as the koru – a sign of new life - and inlaid with paua shell from the sea that surrounds New Zealand. I have added a feather of a dove from Palestine. The war club and the feather bring together the carved wood from the Pacific Ocean with the peace feather from the Palestinian desert to help bring new energy and peace to this holy land. So I would ask our Chancellor, our President and Chair of our Board of Trustees to accept this gift on behalf of the University community.

And in conclusion, as I begin my time here at Bethlehem University, I ask you to pray that God will give us the wisdom and courage we will all need to hold onto a hope that will sustain us, to seek after ever better ways to serve the Palestinian people, to support one another in our efforts, and to build here in Bethlehem University a place where people learn, a place where people take responsibility for what they choose to do, a place where people are respected, cared for, challenged and enabled to grow. I ask you to join me as we continue the journey begun 35 years ago here in the first university in the West Bank, with Br Joe as a central figure, to create a University which truly meets the needs of the Palestinian people and prepares people to make a better Palestine. Let us together and by association build the future of Bethlehem University.

Thank you, Sukran
Tena kota, tena kota, tena kota katau