

Let me share a little history with you distinguished guests and friends, ladies and gentlemen. **Thirty-five years ago** the then Apostolic Delegate to Jerusalem and Palestine, Archbishop Pio Laghi, saw the **urgency** of setting up an institution of higher learning in the Occupied Territories open to **all** Palestinian **women and men** because they had no possibility of local University education.

He also realized the **need** to address the problem of emigration.

His Holiness the late Pope John Paul VI, who believed much could be done to improve life in the Holy Land, entrusted this task to Monsignor Laghi.

In 1972 he formed a committee of local Palestinians to explore the best way to implement those ideas and eventually convinced the Holy Father to agree to establish Bethlehem University.

The first University founded in the Palestinian Occupied Territories opened its doors in October 1973 to students offering specific courses which would allow the graduates to find jobs, to work and live in their homeland.

The community of de La Salle Christian Brothers accepted the **challenging and difficult mission** to administer and develop the newly-created University.

The brothers a few locals came mainly from different overseas countries. They left their peaceful and safe surroundings, their families and friends, and came to an unsettled part of the world and brought with them the Lasallian educational process.

This process, as Brother Álvaro Echeverría, the current Superior General, explained in his speech in Panama in 2007 (at the Fourth Congress of the World Union of Lasallian Former Students) is one which could respond to the **characteristics, needs, aspirations and cultural values** of each population it serves.

Today, as we bring to a close **the 35th anniversary year** with over 11,000 graduates, our society is undergoing **a rapid and deep change** bringing forward new challenges.

The brothers will have **to explore** various possibilities to adapt the University to those changes and **plan carefully** for the future by **encouraging** the **highly academically-qualified and dedicated faculty and staff** to work together to formulate strategies to respond to **the needs of our people in shaping Palestine**.

Please join me on this **33rd commencement ceremony** in a **standing ovation** to show our **gratitude and appreciation** to **all the brothers** and **in memory of those who have passed away**, including earlier this year **H.E. Pio Cardinal Laghi**, a primary force in establishing BU, and **Mrs. Julia Michel Dabdoub**, member of the first Board of Trustees, for their vision, service and loyalty to the University.