

Bethlehem Reminiscences

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*Bethlehem University in the Holy Land
35th Anniversary Mass of Thanksgiving
Chapel of the Divine Child
Saturday, 18 October 2008*

*Extracts from a talk as given on Saturday night,
October 18, 2008 during the Mass of Thanks-
giving to celebrate 35 years of existence..*

I have divided my reminiscing into three time areas: first, the mid-70s and early 80s which perhaps is the most significant to me, when I was the president and later Vice-Chancellor; second, the Intifada and Gulf war in the late 80s and early 90s, when I was Dean, and the third from 1999 to present.

1: The late 70s and early 80s

On October 3, 1973, the university opened its doors during the Yom Kippur war, under Israeli occupation and requiring permission to open from the military powers. I believe that permission was given because they were convinced the university would never succeed under these conditions. How wrong they were.

When I arrived in 1975, there was one building, shared with the Frère's College, making conditions difficult and unpleasant with little boys running all over the place, and a dearth of university oriented facilities. The first physics lab is now Elias Michel's bookstore, but only about one quarter of its current size, so that it was difficult to get a lab table in there. The chemistry lab was part of the current financial office behind a walled off area, entered by a short corridor now disappeared in the renovations. The library is now the computer lab on the first floor of De La Salle Hall, divided into two parts with the current entrance opening into the English section, and an opening through a window in the areaway in front of the chapel to the Arabic section.



But when I think of the staff offices and the few classrooms available in those early years, I so admire the devoted teachers and administrators who were so imaginative, creative, and energetic to keep academics moving in spite of the difficulties. People like Br. Brendan Fitzgerald, who directed all academic affairs with a smile for everyone, no matter what his feelings, his clever use of the facilities and his knowledge of each student not only by name but also by class, year, program, and he was loved by all, or Sister

Regina Hanson, who developed the English department to be the root of its success today and without our modern library, or Sr. Margaret Ahl, who initiated and organized the nursing department without labs and equipment leading to its renown of today, or Sr. Miriam Dolmovich, who organized the financial office professionally setting the basis for its smooth operation today and making it easier for Sami El Yousef and others who followed her lead in this difficult

position.

I must mention Sister Pia, now living in the Sisters' retirement convent section of the French hospital in Jerusalem, and her solicitous care of the students, especially the women. I can still see her in the main courtyard during every conflict with the soldiers when the students were in danger or leaving the campus or dodging tear gas, a standard of strength and protection. She never left campus before all the women had gone, and swallowed so much tear gas, that her lungs are severely damaged today.

There is one name that I separated from the others, a good friend, a professional educator with outstanding loyalty and devotion to Bethlehem University who played a very significant role in the early days of the university: Dr. Anton Sansour, of course. Not only was he my mentor in cultural matters, but was also my alter ego in

dealing with the Arab community especially in educational affairs. He also assisted me greatly in dealing with political and military affairs with the Israeli occupiers. I needed his guidance. And what you see today is evidence of his importance. He died quite suddenly on May 16, 1996 to the shock and dismay of all. God bless him.

And this leads me to say a few words about the major problems of the time. I arrived knowing nothing about guns and occupation or the wonderful culture of the Palestinians. I came only with three recently earned letters after my name. The occupation was the major problem and continues to be, and again I must repeat that only help from above kept me going, especially when I was called before the military governor who usually berated me for my lack of control of the students, often questioned me about students, or events on campus and the like. Someone guided my responses and remarks.

One incident that sticks in my mind, which was quite threatening but recalling my own reactions now, I find a bit of humor in their spontaneity. One day when the university was surrounded and an Israeli jeep parked next to the Sisters' school but facing the university gate, I was called out by the military governor. I could feel the students watching as I walked to him. He immediately berated me for the conduct of my students and gave me ten minutes to get them to leave the campus. But as he was talking, I could see that he was getting angrier and angrier, and suddenly he gave the order for the jeep to move. Without thinking, I ran in front of the jeep, held up my hand for it to stop and yelled 'What about my ten minutes?' It stopped. I'm still here, maybe to the chagrin of some.

The first time, the Israel soldiers used guns on our students, in addition to the tear gas, I received a telephone call from the military governor saying he heard there was trouble. I said 'Yes, your soldiers are shooting'. When he said that can't be true, I held out the phone toward the window so he could hear the shots, then I said 'Please send an ambulance here, one of the students was just shot,' and I automatically added 'and he is bleeding on my rug'. I don't know where that came from. Incidentally no

ambulance came, but several hours later, Dr. Batarseh arrived in his car to take the student, who was being cared for by our nurses in training, to the hospital. The lad survived.

To end this section, I must say something about the students. They were real pioneers by gladly putting up with the inconveniences but enjoying university life as much as possible, and so very friendly and polite to us foreigners.

In those early days, I quickly learned what mob pressure really means. I will never forget this incident. As was the custom then and still is, no one was allowed on campus without permission. One Friday, the students arranged for a number of secondary school students to come for a political rally without my permission. I was furious, so I went outside, spoke, probably yelled, at the students, who just stood there and looked at me and then I moved to the front of the car gates which were still closed. Some of the students whom I had just berated, walked over and positioned themselves on either side of me and gently moved me in the direction of the gate house until the doors were cleared and they could be opened. When I realized what was happening to me, even in my anger, I had difficulty not laughing. So much for authority.

2: The Mid 80's and early 90's

In November 1985, the Brothers occupied their newly constructed House, which had unanticipated positive effects as you will soon see. Academia was successfully in progress until October 1987, when our student, Isaac abu Srou, from Azza Camp, was killed by an Israeli sniper and the university was closed as punishment for three months which extended to three years because in December 1987 the Intifada began in Gaza and soon spread to the West Bank. Because the Brothers lived on campus, we were able to insure the safety of the buildings and university equipment. The Intifada had a profound effect on the university, on all of Palestine and on me so that when I began reminiscing about those years, the Intifada was all I pictured. And once again, it was the people I remember.

The heroics and courage of staff and students in keeping academics alive through off-campus activities were unforgettable. I remember when

the idea was first proposed by Dr. Adnan Musalam at an academic council meeting which was immediately supported. The main problem was to devise a system that would not be rejected immediately by the military. The class size was set at 9 persons; 8 students and one teacher, in order to avoid transgressing the Israel military law that decreed a group of 10 people was a political meeting. Next, in some ways was fun, visiting hotels, hospitals, social and other institutions, churches, and even individual homes asking for permission to conduct classes there. At first, some were hesitant and both the teachers and students were a bit nervous. But there was enough support to start and with its early success off-campus teaching expanded to such an extent that 517 students received degrees and diplomas at the first graduation after the reopening. Only God could have given us the inspiration and strength for this activity.

I briefly want to mention two important activities that filled my time during the closure: One was visiting students and their families with the gracious help of Nuah Salameh, a student at that time. He was my faithful companion, guide and translator on all of these visits whether to a student or to a family to offer condolences on the death of a loved one. Without him, these visits could not have taken place.

The other activity was working as a physical therapist assistant for the wounded young people in the Arab Rehabilitation Center in Bethlehem near Cinema Square at that time. I mention this activity because it was the seed for the special attention Bethlehem University provides today for students with special needs. Isn't it amazing how God makes good from evil?

But what about the Gulf War. Suffice it to say that our safety and survival during and after that time is certainly another example of God's protection, for which we are all grateful

3: From mid-1999

After 7 years of service to the Brothers in the States I returned in 1999.

Let me begin by mentioning the names of three recently deceased great leaders; Brothers Fergus, Vincent and Daniel whose individual and gifted talents added to the growth of the university. Thank you, God, for the time you gave us these three great men to serve the university.

I just can't get away from names. I will end with mentioning one special person that has filled my time, energies and now memories. Shortly after returning, I noticed a young wheelchair student sitting near the walk-in gate uncontrollably kicking his left leg and wildly moving his left arm, watching the students entering the campus and who, on seeing him, would immediately turn their heads so they would not have to greet him. I began to take an interest and often stood by him and greeted the students as they entered, who naturally greeted me and the young man in his wheelchair. And a result, Mazen Qoqas has an earned Bachelor of Arts in English from Bethlehem University, is working in his home in Safa as translator for an Arab agency in Abu Dhabi, is married and is about to have his first daughter next month. Why? Because his teachers and his fellow students gradually adopted him, which caused him to open up as it were and expose his real self and develop his talents. I believe God gave Mazen to us so that we could thank Him for all His gifts to us by sharing them with this severely handicapped young man.

As I said at the beginning God's greatest gifts to the university are its people. Thank you, God.

God bless you all.