

Bethlehem University:

An Oasis of Education

Since 1973, Bethlehem University has been a lifeline to education, a beacon of hope, and a point of light for the Catholic Church.

Writer: J. A. Gray

Contributors: Brother Kenneth Cardwell, FSC, Brother Ronald Gallagher, FSC

Photography: Brother Neil Kieffe, FSC, and Bethlehem University Web site

THE NATURAL DESIRE OF YOUNG PEOPLE FOR EDUCATION AND THE LASALLIAN DETERMINATION TO PROVIDE A “HUMAN AND CHRISTIAN” EDUCATION WHEREVER IT IS NEEDED, HAVE ALWAYS COMPLEMENTED EACH OTHER. TODAY, IN ONE OF THE MOST TROUBLED AREAS OF THE WORLD, THE STUDENTS AND STAFF OF BETHLEHEM UNIVERSITY CONTINUE TO CREATE AN OASIS OF LEARNING AND HOPE IN A DESERT OF UNCERTAINTY AND VIOLENCE.

Click onto the well-maintained and informative Web site, and you can read news that sounds like news from any busy and thriving college: The alumni association reports on its ongoing projects to aid graduates; the entering class of students this fall is larger than expected; the new high-tech classroom building dedicated several months ago is making a great contribution to learning; the basketball team has made it to the Final Four; and a new graduate in sociology talks about his plans for the future. Fairly standard stuff.

But there is a difference: That high-tech classroom building has been damaged by bullets

and missiles; that entering class is lacking many would-be students who cannot travel to the school though they live just a few miles away; that sociology grad's future is bleak, as there is no job market to speak of in the refugee camp where he lives; the alumni association's prime project is building affordable housing for grads so that they do not need to leave their native land in order to make a life and career; and that Final Four—it's the first-ever Arab Universities championship, held in Jordan.

This is Bethlehem University, which for nearly 30 years, amid perennial unrest and periodic wars, amid economic difficulty and political uncertainty, has offered badly needed higher education

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—Akef Al-Azzah, 29, Class of 2002

and professional training to one of the most talented but politically unfortunate people in the world, the Arabs of Palestine.

Campus has been closed many times by military order during the periods of protest and violence called the *intifada*, the longest closure being three years from 1987 to 1990, the most recent being for five days in early April 2002. As gun battles and house-to-house searches went on in Bethlehem and Israeli troops occupied and searched the campus, Brother Kenneth Cardwell and Brother Myron Collins of the San Francisco District were there. They and the other De La Salle Christian Brothers and staff who were stuck in the middle were offered safe passage out, but all chose to stay with their college, to protect it and to be ready to reopen it. It was the same response that the Christian Brothers had given repeatedly in their schools in Lebanon during the 17 years of civil war and foreign invasion there in the 1970s and 1980s. The past half-century has been a violent one in the Middle East: Political upheaval is among the adverse conditions in which the Brothers and their Partners carry on their work.

Bethlehem University was founded in 1973, in response to the direct appeal of Pope Paul VI, both to provide higher education to Palestinians and to help stem the tide of Christian emigration from Palestine. Brother Ron Gallagher, FSC, a professor at Saint Mary's College of California, was



Staff Recognition Day, September 2002. The faculty and staff number about 260, 13 of them Christian Brothers. About half of the faculty and staff are alumni of Bethlehem University.

vice-chancellor of the university and president of the board of trustees from 1993 to 1997. Brother Ron explains, “The loss of Christian population from the Holy Land during the conflicts of the past few decades, and the lack of opportunities for higher education, so concerned



Arriving in Jerusalem in 1876, the Christian Brothers founded secondary schools in Jerusalem, Jaffa, Haifa, Nazareth, and Bethlehem. Pictured is the first building in Bethlehem, opened in 1893, now part of the University but originally a novitiate and a secondary school. The Ecole des Frères secondary school still operates in Bethlehem, as do the schools in Jerusalem, Jaffa, and Nazareth. The Near East Region of the Brothers also maintains schools in Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey, and Egypt.

the Pope that he asked the Brothers to found a Christian university in Bethlehem. The entire U.S. Region responded, and has been committed to maintaining it. The university fills a crucial need. Its programs have a direct

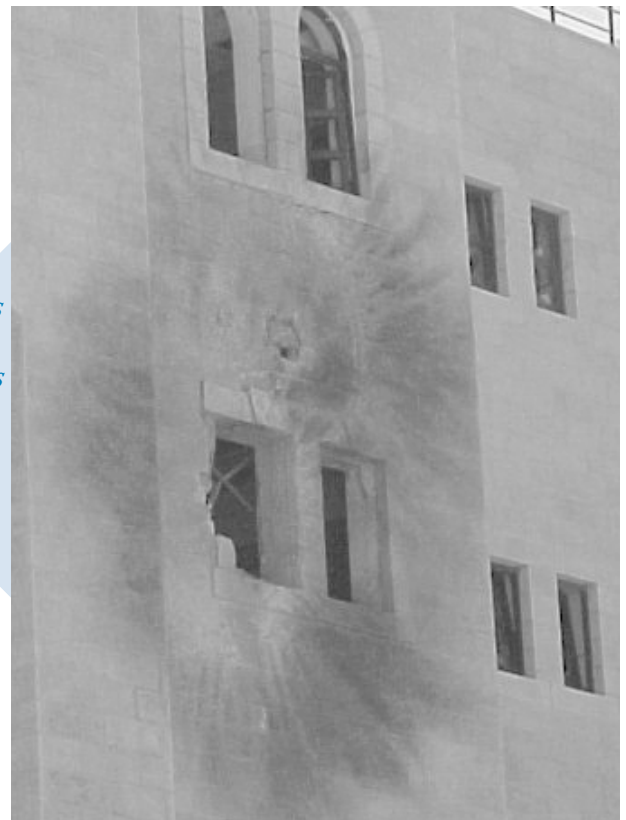
and immediate impact on the society, since trained Palestinians in health services, in teaching, in business, in agriculture, in science, are badly needed. The university is a lifeline to education and a beacon of hope, as well as a point of light for the Church in that area. In a very unstable area, it's important for the Brothers to maintain this as a stable institution."

As faculty member Sister Elaine Kelley wrote in marking the University's 25th anniversary, "Bethlehem University is much more than a place of higher learning. It is a vibrant international community..., an international meeting place for inter-religious and cultural understanding, and where Christians and Muslims live and study together pursuing degrees in education, the arts, science, business administration, and nursing. It's also a training center for the largest industry in the country, tourism..., a community outreach clearinghouse..., [and] a popular site for international conferences..."

(Washington Report on Middle East Affairs, December 1998).

Pope John Paul II in March 2000 on his visit to Bethlehem conveyed this message to the students: "Dear young people, continue to strive through education to take your rightful place in our society, despite the difficulties and handicaps that you have to face.... The Catholic Church is particularly happy to serve the noble cause of education through the extremely valuable work of Bethlehem University." The Superior

War has too often been the accompaniment to Bethlehem University's educational efforts. It opened its doors to its first 100 students in October 1973, a few days before the Yom Kippur war began. Street battles in Bethlehem in 2002 caused the campus to be closed three times by order of Israeli authorities. Right: The impact of a missile on Millennium Hall, the high-tech building. Below: Interior of Millennium Hall at its opening in 2001.



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—Sister Elaine Kelley, faculty member

General of the Christian Brothers, Brother Alvaro Rodríguez Echeverría, FSC, wrote in his pastoral letter of December 2000: "Bethlehem University is, without a doubt, one of the most important works of our Institute."

In the first paragraph above, we mentioned a new sociology grad whose future is bleak. Yet in his context—that of a refugee camp dweller on the West Bank—perhaps his future is less bleak than that of many others. Because of his determination to get an education and the University's determination to provide it, he has at least laid an educational foundation for his life.





From about 100 students in 1973, the University had grown to 1,000 by the early 1980s and now serves over 2,000 students, most of them full-time. Sixty-five percent of the students are women. About 70 percent of the students are Muslims and 30 percent are Christians, both Orthodox and Roman Catholic.

His name is Akef Al-Azzah. He is 29 years old, and during his student years he worked as a waiter in Bethlehem hotels while he did his studies and sustained himself and his family. Then the *intifada* started, tourism stopped, and he lost his job and his ability to pay tuition. The university found the means to help him pull through to finish his



Bethlehem University was the only Palestinian school to participate in the Arab Universities Basketball Championship held in Jordan in February 2002, involving competitors from Jordan and Iraq. B.U. lost to Yarmouk University of Jordan by six points.

undergraduate studies, and he graduated in 2002 with a major in sociology and a minor in psychology.

Interviewed on the university's Web site, Akef says that he has two siblings in college who rely on him financially and who are also determined to get their education. He says, "As I look to the past, it was very difficult and cruel, but it came to a happy ending because I accomplished something very good. So I hope I can pursue my ambitions and go on with my education. I owe so much to Bethlehem University. This university helped me a lot, and they kept me here." ■

For more information about Bethlehem University, click on <http://www.bethlehem.edu/>

BETHLEHEM UNIVERSITY IS A MEMBER OF THE ASSOCIATION OF ARAB UNIVERSITIES. IT IS SPONSORED BY THE VATICAN, SUPPORTED BOTH BY TUITION AND BY INTERNATIONAL DONATIONS, AND ADMINISTERED BY A BOARD OF TRUSTEES OF WHICH THE PRESIDENT (ALSO THE UNIVERSITY'S VICE-CHANCELLOR) IS A CHRISTIAN BROTHER. IT OFFERS BACHELOR'S DEGREES IN ARTS, EDUCATION, BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION, SCIENCE, AND NURSING, AND DIPLOMAS IN HOTEL MANAGEMENT AND TOURIST OFFICE ADMINISTRATION, AS WELL AS MIDWIFERY, EDUCATION, AND RELIGIOUS STUDIES.