

May 10, 2007

Founders' Day 2007

This year, Notre Dame University is celebrating its 20th anniversary and the Maronite Order of the Holy Virgin Mary its thirty years of activity in higher education, which began when Louaize Center for Higher Education (LCHE) was founded in collaboration with Beirut University College (BUC). Blessed is this occasion which I seize to hail all those who have contributed to the foundation and the development of this University, with its programs, buildings and equipment. Blessed are the human minds who aspire to a better future with courage and hope.

This University, my friends, is not the fruit of one individual's effort; it was not established by chance or coincidence; nor was it a response to any precarious security situation prevailing at that time. It is the fruit of dreams, ambitions and a historical heritage which was embodied in the Maronite Order of the Holy Virgin Mary, which ever since its establishment has considered education and learning as its main objectives. These inner thoughts emerging from the heads and the hearts of the Order's founding fathers have converged with the dreams and ambitions of certain laymen to give birth to a nucleus of great ideas, which has developed into a distinguished institution of higher learning.

Notre Dame University is proud today to have five thousand students and three outstanding campuses, in Zouk Mosbeh, Barsa – North, and Deir El Qamar – Shouf, all equipped with the latest technology. It is also proud to employ hundreds of staff and teachers who every year, prepare almost one thousand students to graduate with a Bachelor's or Master's degree in various majors. It is proud to accommodate research centers, to be active in many cultural fields and to be preparing rising generations who believe in God and in a better, freer, and brighter tomorrow.

And what else?

What good is it if hundreds of students are graduated, buildings are erected, thousands of new students are accepted and new campuses arise in and outside Lebanon? When were mere numbers an objective or an indication of development? What good is it if we conquer the whole world by spreading our graduate students all around the globe, and we lose Lebanon? Is the role of the university limited to educating students and granting those degrees?

With this, then, crucial questions come to the surface: What has been our role on the national level? Have we succeeded or failed? And how can we explain the tension prevailing among some students in our universities? And can we explain the constant fear that infiltrates the hearts and the souls of all Lebanese?

After the Taef Agreement in 1989 and the restoration of stability in Lebanon, Notre Dame University decided to take more interest in public affairs by collaborating with the official authorities to put forward visions and suggestions in order to come up with solutions to the problems the country was suffering from in the political, economic, cultural, and social fields.

Nobody, my friends, can keep the university away from national preoccupations, and nobody can pretend that the function of the university is limited to an education cut off from political, national and social concerns. University and society interact and deeply influence each other; hence raising walls between university and society is a real crime.

At the beginning, we were certain that in addition to offering traditional university courses, it would be necessary to create a healthy political culture allowing dialogue and the use of the pen rather than of the gun, when the latter had proved a failure.

Therefore, from this belief, our University has become, with the passing of years, a platform for conferences, symposiums, and talks having political and national dimensions.

Then, Lebanon was confronted with the incidents of the last two years, which have resulted in trouble in all universities in Lebanon, and more divisions among the students. These divisions have often taken abhorrent political and confessional forms, transforming the Student Cabinet elections into occasions of conflict and resentment. As a result, voices would say high and loud: No more politics in universities! So, instead of contributing to change and renewal, the new generations have tended to undermine political stability and only compound the problems of Lebanese society.

So, what is the solution?

How can the university provide the framework for national political awareness and be a center for research and dialogue without leading to the exploitation of freedom for narrow personal and party interests? Do we transform the university into a jail? Do we seek to suppress the freedoms of the students? Do we abide by the popular saying that tells us to stay away from trouble, and avoid harm? Do we mean that a university is just a venue for classes, students and teachers? How can we find a balance between the theory that expresses belief in students' freedom, power of change

and national aspirations, and the current complicated political situation which is leading the country to divisions, conflicts and breakdown?

ø Can we find a good middle road between spoiled politics and narrow nationalism?

Dear friends,

In the Ninetieth Text of the last Maronite Patriarchal Synod, we can read under the title The Maronite Church and Politics, “Politics is a continuous struggle and a daily practice of individuals and groups, passing from generation to generation in order to find solutions to the problems of society and to ensure the right for Man to live in freedom, justice, peace and integrity away from illusions and simplification of affairs. For in politics, nothing is constant and everything is subject to continuous development. Politics is caring about others, looking at them, listening to their problems and helping them, and respecting and loving them...It is urgent that the Maronites reconsider the importance of political activity.”

At the same time, the Apostolic Exhortation has confirmed the duties of the Lebanese towards their country, with the principal aim of rebuilding Lebanon materially and spiritually; this goal is vital and cannot be reached without the active participation of all. Participation starts with dialogue, love, forgiveness and respect for others. The objective of dialogue is “living together, and building the society by respecting the sensibilities of the persons and their social disparities and by overcoming mutual suspicion.”

To return to the role of the university in this ever-changing world, I shall focus on the following three points.

- 1- A deep shock is needed to pull the twenty-first century away from the tensions of the twentieth century. Isn't this the role of the university to bring this shock about?
- 2- The university should face violence and terrorism with dialogue, freedom and democracy.
- 3- The role of the university is to equip society, so that its development, capacity and potential are in harmony with international developments.

How can we equip society with the human factors if we don't train men and women to live together and respect each other? The time of mass movements that lead people to commit wholesale suicide is over. It is now the time for leaders to think, analyze and foresee the future. But where are those leaders to come from? It is the role of universities and centers of thought to form leaderships.

Although we recognize that “evil people are the ones making history in this region today,” (Friedman) it is no longer acceptable to allow the “dark reality” to continue.

This is the great dilemma we are all facing in the universities. On the one hand, the role of the university is to train students to vote, to be leaders, to dialogue and to achieve the common good. On the other hand, the universities, their classrooms and courtyards have been exploited; political manipulations have been instigated to provoke troubles and quarrels, as if freedom were chaos and political practice were blackmailing and elimination of the other.

The concepts confuse the theoretical idea of real politics with the practical reality of daily political practices. The differences are so many, and the blood and tears as well.

What can be done then? Do we sacrifice the freedom of university thought on the altar of the narrow interests of some political leadership? Will the fear of students’ opposition lead us to abandon all forms of elections and social university life? Do we prohibit all political practices within the university campus, for fear of them being subjugated to personal interests? Won’t we be renouncing our educational and national objectives by making such decisions?

The Patriarchal Synod confirms that politics is, for many, equivalent to manipulation, conflict, and the misuse of power. For such it means trampling on principles to manipulate authority; it is also the easiest way to gain private wealth at the expense of the public interest. Yet, politics, in science and law, is a noble and fine art. It is also in the service of public welfare.

How can we make peace with politics? How can we overcome an ailing reality that produces nothing but fanaticism and conservatism, in order to penetrate the new society with the human values of democracy and freedom?

At present, this is the challenge faced by our universities. This is the challenge that compels us to make necessary decisions, even if sometimes painful ones, in order to cleanse political practice and lift it to the level of a noble and dignified national vocation.

If the mission and vision of our Maronite Mariamite university are based on Catholic principles, then the Apostolic Exhortation confirms the following points:

- The Church as an entity cannot be confused with any political group;
- the Church cannot be reduced to any one political system; and
- the Church does not suggest any specific regulations, or political and economic programs.

Our role is, therefore, to keep our students away from the narrow negative practices of politics, to raise awareness of the reality of political labor, and to try to educate them to dialogue with each other, live together, and accept each other.

If politics is the art of serving others, then we support any political activity. But, if politics is the art of lying, maneuvering, stabbing the other in the back and causing provocations, the university will not accept being the scene of such politics. And we believe that the great majority of our students are of the same mind and opinion.

Dear students,

Embrace the creed you want, but never at the expense of your values and studies, because you are students of this University not delegates of political parties. We regard you as students, not as ones who brandish political slogans.

Dear students, I am addressing myself to you, on behalf of your teachers and parents, telling you to practice decent national politics in this University, the way you want, and to acquire a political, social and economic culture, as much as you want. We are at your disposal and service. However, reject the division, and know well that the state is not simply the authority; it is neither the opposition nor the supporter. The state is the constitutional and the legal framework that gathers us all and shields us under one flag. We cannot be Christians by hating our brothers and colleagues. We cannot be Muslims by abusing and harming others. We cannot be Maronites by letting the principles of dishonesty and separation prevail over those of honesty and brotherhood.

Our religious values prohibit killing, violence, and suppressions and contempt of the other. Fragmented knowledge is very dangerous and fundamentalists, in all religions, are those whose fixed belief is unilaterally distorting genuine culture. We are with dialogue, the dialogue of reason and the dialogue of life. You are responsible before the nation for your behavior; therefore, you are responsible, just like us, for your university, your colleagues, and your country. Do not be drifted away with the mad storms threatening our Lebanon.

If you truly love your country, let reason prevail rather than instincts and hasty reactions; this is stated in the Patriarchal Synod; Stay away from violence and stop telling lies. Always remember your friends, the martyrs; don't you ever ask yourselves why they suffered martyrdom? Also remember your friends who have emigrated or were displaced: why have they fled Lebanon? Why did they leave their parents, home and country to search for their livelihood in foreign countries?

We, at Notre Dame University, whatever the situation, shall always raise students' awareness about good citizenship, because we believe that our students are the solid foundations on which the country is built. We support and sustain all practices leading to a sound national education and a pacific political awareness. However, we will neither allow nor tolerate any acts such as those which have led the country to real disasters and upheavals.

Dear friends, you are the seeds of true revolution and renewal, so be sure that the revolution is not a political creation, rather a human creation that touches the person in the depth of his soul and culture. We support you in this revolution, and maybe we could in this way save our country from the scourges and unhealed wounds that have caused and are still causing bitterness and tears.

It is true that Lebanon is a difficult country; it's a message, a laboratory of experiments, and it is a small country of 18 confessions. However, it's not an impossible country; as Ghassan Toueini has said: "Lebanon is the country of perpetual danger, but it is this beautiful country in which we can, together, build a state to give shelter to us all, or we destroy it".

Dear friends,

In conclusion, I would like to review the five principles in which Notre Dame University believes. These constants are the result of studies and researches the University has conducted in politics and citizenship:

1- "Everything starts with education, construction and destruction, and we have experienced all that." This expression of René Maho, ex-Director of UNESCO, points out our future direction.

2- "Christians cannot have two parallel lives: one spiritual and one secular, each with its different values." This expression taken from the Apostolic Exhortation confirms that the duality which most of our politicians are living, and which is reflected in our students, is to be totally rejected and should be pointed out clearly and boldly.

3- "Cultures, not fanaticism, are the basis of our work at university." This expression of His Beatitude, Patriarch Mar Nasrallah Boutros Sfeir articulates our role and decisions regarding all political activities in our University. "We support all that serves cultures, while we reject all that causes bigotry and natural impulses. We do not want any politics or politicians that make us ashamed." (Patriarch Sfeir)

4- “The young, who are facing difficulties, and holding to their hopes, dreams and aspirations, are all invited to give the social and political life a new start, because they have the right to control, request accountability and express themselves.” This quotation from the Maronite Patriarchal Synod (11th Text) compels us to provide a sound, not ailing or fearful, democratic atmosphere in order to let our youth play its national role.

5- “...The clear distinction, even approaching separation, between religion and state is what the Maronite Patriarchal Synod calls for. The Synod states that religion and politics ought not to be confused, and that politics should not be established on a religious basis. This incites us more and more to make our decision declaring that the University is for all categories and confessions, and aspires to make its campus a laboratory for conviviality, not for regional, confessional, or party discrimination.

Dear friends,

While we celebrate our 20th anniversary, we confirm our commitment to these principal concepts, which we hold not as symbols but as principles of our daily university life. We, therefore, invite our large university family, embracing teachers, staff, students and alumni, to commit themselves to these principles. Our emblem for this year is “From joining to belonging”, but our belonging will not be true if we do not make of this University an expression of our national confidence far removed from any fanaticism, sectarianism and violence.

Dear friends,

In addition to celebrating NDU’s 20th anniversary, it is a real coincidence to be commemorating today the 10th anniversary of the visit of Pope John Paul II to Lebanon, when he launched the “Apostolic Exhortation”.

It is our duty to review this Exhortation in order to straighten our national course, since the future will not forgive us if we close our eyes to this historical document.

Together, we shall continue along this road, and together we shall repeat every year: Long live Notre Dame University, long live Lebanon!