

**2009 International Association of Universities Conference on  
“The Role of Higher Education in Fostering the Culture of Dialogue and Understanding”**

**Address of Father Walid Moussa, President Notre Dame University, NDU  
Opening Ceremony, NDU, Lebanon, November 2009**

Dear Friends,

First and foremost, allow me to welcome colleagues and friends arriving from around the world, and perhaps stepping on Lebanese soil for the first time.

Welcome to Lebanon, or as the French say, “*Soyez les bienvenus.*” We pay tribute to the International Association of Universities (IAU), which has chosen Notre Dame University and Lebanon to convene its annual conference. I would also like to pay tribute to the IAU President, my friend, Juan Ramon de la Fuente, to the IAU Secretary-General, Eva Egron Polak, and to everyone who participated in organizing this conference and contributed to its success. We have high hopes that this international gathering will provide our colleagues and friends with the opportunity to become better acquainted with Lebanon and with its natural beauty, educational system, and social characteristics. This gathering also testifies to Lebanon as a civilized country that is open to both the Arab world and the world in general.

Dear Friends, I would like to thank you for traveling to Lebanon, because by doing so you have overcome obstacles, ignored negative media reports, and disregarded rumors claiming that Lebanon is in the middle of a crisis because it has been unable to form a government for the past five months.

Ladies and Gentlemen, it is true that Lebanon’s political situation has witnessed tension and disorder. Yet, both the social fabric and internal security were not adversely affected. And just as our conference tackles the issue of fostering the culture of dialogue, various political parties in Lebanon live in an atmosphere of active dialogue, which, we hope, will soon resolve our national issues in a spirit of unity, harmony, and equality.

Dear Friends,

This is Lebanon: a small country (10,452Km<sup>2</sup>) with a population of less than four million but with eighteen co-existing sects. Lebanon is in itself a model for the theories and views we shall be examining during our conference. However, the main question is this: can these groups of diverse religious backgrounds peacefully co-exist within these constricted borders and socially complex contexts without resorting to conflict, hostility, and animosity?

To this question, I would reply that our previous experience proves co-existence is feasible, but based on two main conditions:

1- Freedom within the country, giving each group the right to express its thoughts and beliefs, and practice them without fear, repression, or prejudice. Article 10 of the Lebanese Constitution asserts this freedom.

2- Preventing foreign influences from interfering in our national affairs, because some external forces attempt to exploit Lebanon's diversity to not only secure their interests but also to demonstrate that building a country based on religious diversity is an impossible venture.

How can these two conditions be assured?

There are several ways, given the approach set out in the Conference's title: **The Role of Higher Education in Fostering the Culture of Dialogue and Understanding.**

In fact, we have to be brave in the face of adversity in this University, in all Lebanese universities, and in all institutions of higher education around the world, even though they do not all face the same challenges. Yes, the culture of dialogue requires firm adherence to the following principles:

- The "other" is not our enemy. We should acknowledge and recognize him. I lay stress on both words: "acknowledge" and "recognize". I also confirm that the "I" (ego) cannot realize itself without the presence of the "other."
- Dialogue cannot be held with any "other", but only with one who mirrors us. A philosopher once said: We do not hate strongly, we only hate those who resemble us.
- Dialogue with the "other" and dialogue with the one who mirrors us is essential in reaching dialogue with oneself, which we truly need.
- Dialogue with God does not emanate only through poetry. As Saïd Akl, the famous Lebanese poet, said, "I am proud to hail from a mountain that is a link for dialogue between God and the world."

And I would say: Lebanon is the dialogue between God and the world.

The University's mission is directed towards studies, curricula, and educational practices within the umbrella of this multifaceted dialogue.

Dear Friends, we are living in an age of globalization, whether we accept or reject it, like or dislike it. Globalization necessitates dialogue that transcends the boundaries of geography, religion, ethnicity, and ideology. The world has become, as we say, a small village. So, if dialogue is not the way for this interaction, how can we co-exist?

On top of this, the culture of dialogue takes on different dimensions that transcend Lebanon to touch the world and beyond Notre Dame University to touch all universities around the world.

In fact, studies have demonstrated the existence of more than ninety global challenges, resulting from diversity and variety.

Which university can pretend it has ensured a firm and effective presence for itself without having adopted the language of dialogue between its human and social constituents?

Which university is able to erase the aspects of diversity and plurality to the point of abandoning methods of dialogue and understanding?

The word, “University”, is in itself an acknowledgment of the diversity of human society. A university cannot be a university if it loses its power to unite. It would then develop into a radical and isolated institution, which would erode from within and perpetuate repression, and oppression. Then, there would be neither freedom nor culture, nor belief in human rights.

Thanks to God, we, in Lebanon, have been able to cure the disease of unilateralism in our universities despite difficult conditions. None of our universities have shut their door in the face of any “other” who is different. NDU is a good example. In fact, this University, which bears the name of the Virgin Mary and belongs to a Christian Maronite institution, has students, professors, and staff from all sections of Lebanese society: be it Christian or Muslim, Lebanese or non-Lebanese, believer or atheist... We are proud of this fact and we do not need to boast about it.

Dear Friends,

As I said at the beginning of my address, “This is Lebanon.” I would like to add that the topics I raised today are the same topics that prompted the President of the Republic of Lebanon, H.E. General Michel Sleiman, to state loudly and clearly that Lebanon should be adopted as a center of dialogue of civilizations, because no other country in the world can assume the role of a laboratory of dialogue as Lebanon can. The President has repeated this here, at the United Nations, and in all international instances.

It is true that the twenty-first century brought with it signs indicating a clash of civilizations, not only in theory, but also in the reality of catastrophes witnessed around the world: wars, crises, atrocious massacres perpetrated against humanity, and blind terrorism.

However, these horrific events should increasingly incite us to raise our voices in support of the President of the Republic of Lebanon to call for serious and bold decisions, which could save the world from the black fate these monstrously extreme conflicts would cause.

I would like to thank H.E. President Sleiman, who is represented here today by H.E. Dr. Tarek Mitri. To Dr. Mitri, I would like to say, “Whatever your rank or position, you will always remain a university professor and a friend to all universities. And as we have always known you, your role will remain that of an advocate of culture of dialogue and understanding. That is why, together, we walk on the same straight line and always converge on the same principles.”

Dear Friends,

Once again, I would like to welcome you to Lebanon, hoping that in our country you will find the spirit of love and peace so that you can convey a bright picture of Lebanon to your countries and universities; the picture of a six-thousand-year-old country, which is constantly regenerating given the diverse civilizations that have lived in it. However, Lebanon remains the ‘mission country’, the land of freedom, diversity, culture, and peace.

Long live your universities  
Long live IAU  
Long live NDU  
Long live Lebanon