

## University leader overseeing “oasis of peace” for young Palestinians accepts honorary doctorate

The Vice-Chancellor of the only Catholic university in the Holy Land has accepted an honorary doctorate from Australian Catholic University (ACU).

Br Peter Bray, a De La Salle Brother originally from Taranaki, New Zealand, has received the Doctor of the University (*Honouris Causa*) on February 17, 2023 for embracing the values and principals of education in the Catholic tradition and for significant contributions to education and educational administration in Australia and overseas.

Br Bray became the eighth Vice-Chancellor of Bethlehem University in late 2008. During his 15-year tenure as Vice-Chancellor, he has committed to making Bethlehem University an “oasis of peace” for young Palestinians.

Established in 1973 as a joint venture between the Vatican and the De La Salle Brothers, Bethlehem University is the first registered university founded in the West Bank, and the only Catholic university in the Holy Land.

Whilst less than 1% of Palestine’s population is Christian, the university, under Br Bray’s leadership, is committed to providing quality higher education for the people of Palestine, including the 20% of students who are Christian.

When asked about the personal experiences and challenges his students face, Br Bray speaks of a male student who came to him after his home, located in the West Bank, was demolished for a second time.

“And he said: they can take my house, they can take my land, they can take my freedom, but they can't take my education,” Br Bray said.

“I’m particularly aware of the suffering that our students are experiencing in just existing, so I really admire the fact that their resistance is expressed in a nonviolent way by just getting on and doing the ordinary things.”

Br Bray accepted the honorary doctorate from ACU on behalf of his inspirational students.

“By ACU recognizing Bethlehem University through me is showing the young people of Bethlehem University that they are not forgotten, and that is a really important part of helping to keep hope alive,” Br Bray said.

“I’m deeply, deeply grateful to ACU for enabling us to keep hope alive among our students.”

ACU Vice-Chancellor and President Zlatko Skrbis said Br Bray’s approach to leadership was inspirational.

“Despite the challenges he faces at Bethlehem University each day, Br Bray is always mindful of putting the present and future needs of his students first,” Professor Skrbis said.

“His commitment to education in the Catholic tradition is bound by the duty he feels to help people to realise their full potential. His ultimate vision to instil hope in his students is inspiring and should be at the heart of the mission of all educational institutions.

“ACU is proud to bestow the Doctor of the University on such a humble leader.”

Br Bray’s honorary doctorate also recognises his instrumental role in leading the creation of ACU’s Master of Education Leadership, which was established while he was Director and CEO of the Wellington Catholic Education Centre in New Zealand.

Despite having over 40 years’ experience in Catholic education as a teacher, consultant, administrator and expert educational leader, his personal experience of high school was the complete opposite.

A life in academia was far from his mind but Br Bray eventually went on to not only complete secondary school but eventually attend Macquarie University in Sydney, obtain a Masters degree from Massey University in New Zealand and then a Doctorate at the University of San Diego.

He was assigned as principal of several Catholic secondary schools, before becoming the Vice-Chancellor of a Catholic university.

Of all his education postings, he said being Vice-Chancellor of Bethlehem University was the most difficult but also the most rewarding.

Australian Catholic University has specialists who can comment on news matters relating to their area of expertise. Please direct requests to ACU’s [Media Team](mailto:media@acu.edu.au) at [acu.edu.au/media-enquiries](http://acu.edu.au/media-enquiries).

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“It's been by far the most difficult job I've ever had in terms of the complexity and unpredictability of the situation, among other things, but I've never been in a place where it is so obvious that what we are doing is worthwhile,” he said.

Br Bray's honorary doctorate conferral coincides with the Golden Jubilee of Bethlehem University in October 2023. The honour also followed a speaking tour in his home country of New Zealand at the invitation of the New Zealand Catholic Bishops Conference to elaborate on their statement on Palestine issued in July 2022.

Br Bray was invited to give a talk in Sydney this week and will be in Melbourne for talks until February 24.

**Br Peter Bray FSC is available for interviews.**

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