

Bishop Madden, priests from Baltimore visit Bethlehem University in West Bank

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BETHLEHEM, West Bank - The newest building at [Bethlehem University](#), completed in the year 2000 and appropriately called the Millennium Building, was struck by shells fired by the Israelis. Other parts of the campus were hit as well.

The damage has since been repaired, and other than the hole in the library building/heritage center that has now become a porthole window, and machine-gun scars that pock-mark the walls of some buildings, most of the campus seems secure.

“I don’t know what the message was supposed to be,” de La Salle Christian Brother Joe Loewenstein said of the guided-missile attack on the school, the first university in the Palestinian Territories, but he knows it was not a mistake.

“They said they saw somebody with a gun or something,” he said wryly. As the president emeritus of Bethlehem U, he sounds as though he has trouble believing the claim.

The university aims to be unabashedly Catholic-Christian, and yet be a place where the region’s Muslim majority are comfortable attending. In fact, with Christians comprising less than 1 percent of the population in the Palestinian territories, it might come as a surprise that 30 percent of the 3,000 students are Christian and 70 percent are Muslim.

To encourage understanding of each other's cultures, all students are required to take a religious studies course that teaches students about both Christian and Muslim cultures.

While on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land Oct. 12-21, Bishop Denis J. Madden, auxiliary of Baltimore, and 23 priests from the archdiocese and nearby dioceses visited Bethlehem for a day. After celebrating an early Mass Oct. 14 at the site of Christ's birth and visiting the Grotto of the Nativity, the group visited Bethlehem University for a briefing and a visit with students.

The university was established in 1973 as one of three initiatives - along with the Tantur ecumenical institute and the Ephphatha school for the deaf - at the urging of Pope Paul VI after his visit to the Holy Land in 1967.

Ala Sharif, a fourth-year student who is a Muslim, said she has no problems relating to her classmates; if possible, she hopes to start her own business after completing a master's degree.

The priests talked with students about prospects for peace, not only among Christians and Muslims within Palestine, but with Israelis on the other side of the 700-mile-long wall that separates the West Bank and Palestinian territories from Israeli-occupied settlements.

Bishara Nassar, a recent graduate and one of the school's ambassadors, said peace must begin from the ground up. "Peace will never come from the governments; it will not come through the peace process," he told the group.

Another fourth-year student, Tareq Shahwam, agreed, though he believes it will not be even his generation, but the next, that can achieve peace.

"We need to break down the physical barriers and then break down the

psychological barriers,” he said, adding that most of those in his Palestinian generation “would recognize Israel if they would recognize us.”

However, with the requirement for service in the Israeli military for people his age, Shahwam fears that they are already indoctrinated.

“The next generation,” he said, “if you can put other ideas in their head that Palestinians are people too,” then there may be a chance for peace.

De LaSalle Christian Brother Jack Curran, vice president for development for Bethlehem University, told the priests that 2,000 years ago, “people came to Bethlehem because a star led them.” Gesturing toward the eight students who had shared their experiences with the group, he said, “Brother Joe (Loewenstein) and I and people like us stay in Bethlehem because stars lead us.”

- *Bethlehem, Oct 19, 2010*