



**Address of Father Hady Mahfouz**  
**President of the Holy Spirit University of Kaslik**  
**USEK Patronal Day**  
**May 23, 2015**

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1. "The University of the Spirit and Life". When this expression reaches the ears and the minds of human beings, it penetrates their souls and shatters their stillness; it triggers them to ask "What is life? What does it mean?", and "What role does the 'University' have in it? Especially the University of the Spirit.

This expression is not the only one that raises questions in us about life in all its areas and about humankind; many things drive each one of us to ask questions, and such questions transform us into students who always seek knowledge in the school of life. This brings to mind the words of His Holiness Pope Francis in his homily on the occasion of the Solemnity of the Pentecost on June 8, 2014: "More than a master of doctrine, the Holy Spirit is a master of life. And He surely takes part in life as well as in knowledge."

Thus, knowledge is a part of life. Since knowledge finds its special place in a university, and since the Spirit is its master, we ought to drive our thoughts towards life, meditate on it, in order to add life to our life.

2. Without doubt, life is the opposite of nothingness, the opposite of petrification and the opposite of death; however, our approach to it takes a dual sense. The first is the time of our existence on Earth, during which we move forward, one step after the other. We cannot stay still and we cannot refuse to advance; time is moving on, whether we walk forward with it or not. The second sense is the quality and strength of this existence; it is the principle linked to success and joy.

Like every detail and every existential event in the lives of human beings, our work, in the University of the Spirit, belongs to these two senses. It is a part of existence; and it is able to grant strength, success and joy.

3. Our work at the University is part of our existence; it belongs to our days and our lives. Therefore, it is scrutinized by our existential questions. Our global outlook on life gives rise to episodes of questions that change with the variation and quality of events that we encounter. There is always more than one answer to every question. Indeed, questioning life happens with all of us, but each case has its uniqueness. Who, among us, does not question life over its absurd appearance, over conspiracies and plans concocted by those who have the power, on many levels, over wars engulfing the young and the old, over death knocking on the doors of children, young men and women, or old people, in the oddest of manners? Who, among us, does not question life over events, diseases, disabilities, earthquakes, natural disasters, deliberate plane crashes, and so on?

Who, among us, does not ask, in the midst of times of trial, about the reason why a certain person acts in a manner that denotes injustice or stubbornness? Who, among us, does not wonder about accounts of unfair success achieved in a not-so-noble manner? How many partners or friends have deceived a partner or a friend? Who, among us, does not express annoyance with structures created by those of power so that no one is able to progress without them? Who, among us, does not wonder why life put him/her in this particular situation rather than elsewhere? Who, among us, does not ask oneself about the meaning of his/her job, daily actions or commitments? Or more globally, the meaning of his/her own life?

Human beings realize that life, the time of existence on earth, is too short regardless of how long it lasts. Here too, they wonder about the usefulness of doing anything and the usefulness of doing it right; hence, there will be a great danger of their experiencing a sense of loss, absurdity and indifference. The work at the University is not excluded from the circle of life.

This flurry of questions prompt a search for what is right, for the Truth. This puts before us, in our university, the University of the Spirit, its slogan: "But when He, the Spirit of truth, comes, He will guide you into all the truth" (John 16: 13). This guides us to the Holy Bible, which speaks of how life is short and full of misery; saying at a time that reaching 80 years of age was a rare occurrence: "Our days may come to seventy years, or eighty, if our strength endures; yet the best of them are but trouble and sorrow, for they quickly pass, and we fly away" (Ps 90: 10). Yet this verse is fully understood in the light of the first two verses of the same psalm, which constitute the foundation of all that follows: "Lord, you have been our dwelling place throughout all generations. Before the mountains were born or you brought forth the whole world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God" (Ps 90: 1-2).

When our gaze falls upon existence and wanders in its absurd appearance, it may become troubled by strangeness and injustice, but will not get itself lost or trapped within the confines of existence; rather, it goes beyond, opening up to the broadest and most beautiful prospects that give existence its meaning, namely the horizon of God, the Creator. Far from overlooking existence and indulging in intellectual luxury, this gaze takes what it has spotted in the arena of earthly existence into even broader prospects in order to derive some meaning or understanding of what life is about.

This gaze is precisely what sheds light on the second sense we normally bestow onto life, its quality, strength, success and joy.

4. We are moving one step after another into life-existence, with success and joy as our primary concerns. In this context, the Syriac language noticeably uses a plural word to designate life, as if the concept of life in that language is synonymous with great abundance of life.

The greatest success we aim to attain is to keep on existing, much like we perform any action to achieve an excellent quality of existence. This is why human beings seek to ward off diseases and set success as a target from childhood. They seek to increase wealth and properties, and to hold high positions in society. In all actions and in everyday life, each one seeks luxury. This is something positive and good; everything in the hands of human beings is good since 'God saw everything that he had created, and behold, was very good'.

These elements, which we have enumerated, refer to the dynamism of human life. By and large, if human beings achieve these things, we describe their lives as successful. Human beings thus inject life into their life-existence, and go about life with greater joy. Yet the danger of having this joy diminish or vanish is real,

for the reasons underlying success may become scarce or disappear due to human failure or to circumstances one cannot control. The search for success may come along with the loss of joy. Such is the case, especially when one overly seeks to be brilliant, or when one has recourse to not-so-noble means to achieve one's purpose. Human beings may have absurd thoughts or be overwhelmed by how void things are, how short life is and how absurd its appearance is, how difficult it is to deal with others, and how unjust people seem to be successful. As a result, they become indifferent and uninterested in the progress of their own lives and of their society, and passively accept the structures offered by society and life. This gives rise to the following question: How does one secure everlasting success? In other words, how does one find real success, since real success is everlasting? To sum up even further, how does one fill life with everlasting life?

5. The answer to this question is found by casting a positive and dynamic look at He who is eternal, He who remains when all life on Earth passes by, at God, the Lord of past, present, and future, the Lord of History, He who is always victorious over the vicissitudes of life. Only then do we understand that success in achieving a quality life and joy lie in encountering the eternity of God. We know that He is the Lord of goodness, love and kindness. Every time we act upon our good intentions, every time we show the love we have inside us, and every time we pour out the kindness by which we live, we encounter God's purpose. In doing so, we place ourselves at the very heart of life, success and joy, for He is the Lord of life, the Lord of success and the Lord of joy.

This is how we encounter everlasting success in every action we undertake; we always remember that, whatever life vicissitudes give us, life remains transient and, accordingly, it is unable to offer us everlasting success. This brings to mind, in a joyful glimpse, the words of His Holiness Pope Francis on the general

audience during Easter Week on Wednesday April 23, 2014: “How often do we search for life among inert things, among things that cannot give life, among things that are here today and gone tomorrow, among the things that pass away ... ‘Why do you seek the living among the dead?’.”

Our faith in this given is further strengthened, thanks to the wonderful and successful key role played by many people, anytime and everywhere, without being known or famous, without being described as “successful” in society or in history books. Let each one of us take some time to draw up, clearly and with a positive spirit, a list of successful people in his/her life, be they his/her mother, father, husband, wife, teacher, any kind person in his/her hometown or business field, or any person we may encounter in the course of our respective lives. Some of them are barely known and are famous only within the boundaries of their hometown. Are these kind people less successful than those whose names are registered in history books for having discovered, led, or created? Are they of a lesser status than those who have attained top spots in society due to their wealth, position, power or genuine capabilities? Do these kind people enjoy a lesser quality of life compared to the others? Is the countrywoman who spent twenty years of her life inside her house, taking care of her quadriplegic husband in-an-almost-complete coma, successful or not?

What also strengthens us in this belief is the way many people live accordingly, abnegating life, not seeking the so called “personal success”, like the consecrated people honoring their commitment, in general, and the hermits, in particular.

We will all pass away from Earth without personally enjoying, then, what is usually referred to as “success in life.” Even during our stay on Earth, if joy does not come along with success, success does not give anyone a life or a quality of life. We have actually come across many successful people who have very little

joy in life. Success, as we conceive it, thereupon falls off the throne of life-quality.

6. All of the above does not cancel the meaning we usually relate to success in terms of appearance, wealth or advancement in life. Rather, it injects these elements with permanent quality, exactly like everlasting life, success and joy inject the simplest forms of life.

Both successful and unsuccessful people are to be found among those who are famous. At the same time, both successful and unsuccessful people are to be found among those who are not famous.

In the light of these conclusions, the solution is not to quit, be indifferent or permissive; it is not to cast a negative, gloomy and absurd look at life; instead the solution is to be dynamic on Earth joining with the creative dynamism of the Lord of History. The solution is to understand what we have already understood about the absurd appearance of life while working, each in accordance with his/her vocation in life, to fructify the talents entrusted to us. It is the spirit of tactfully trading with the talents, which makes us aware of the Master's words: "Come and join in [your lord's] happiness" (Matt. 25: 21-23). The Lord rejects the mentality of the person who buries the talent; if this happens it reflects a negative look at the master and at others.

In short, success is about pouring goodness, dynamism, kindness and love in every action, whatever it is. Our criterion is to encounter everlasting success that comes from the everlasting God. In doing so, human beings give color to their life-existence and in that case, no one and nothing would be able to deprive them of life, success and joy.

When human beings pour themselves into a creative dynamic, when they trade with the talents they were given, God exchanges these talents in return for overflowing abundance. As He said in the same parable: “For to everyone who has will be given more, and he will have more than enough; but from the man who has not, even what he has will be taken away” (Matt. 25: 29)

7. When joining in the master’s happiness, the first servant joins the second and many others who have adequately traded with the talents. This leads to the growth of the group, which is united by the dynamism of life and the positive approach to it. Trading with the talents has become the mark of a group wherein each person looks positively to the other, thus leading to the growth of every human being and of the community.
8. This is the spirit of life, dynamism, kindness, goodness, love, strength, success and joy. It is the spirit of “the Joy of the Gospel” which tells us about Christ who is the Word in whom is life and who gives life to the full (John 1: 4; 5: 40; 10:10). It is the spirit of knowledge, the spirit of our university, the University of the Spirit. Based on this spirit, we rejoice in everything that is regarded as success and we seek it in our university. Nevertheless, we do not lose sight of the essence of everlasting success. We strive for growth, the growth of every human being, without any discrimination, and of all the human beings, in all their dimensions, along with the growth of the community, the university and the society. Accordingly, at every crossroads, the choice of growth, arduous though it is, replaces the mentality of false satisfaction, which automatically leads to regression. This is the principle of “arduous growth” as opposed to “lax regression.” Through all of this, we want life within life. We want a life in all



those who are affected by our lives, all stakeholders, namely students, administrative staff, Faculty members, deans, officials and partners in society.

So our university becomes a source of life and its students and alumni become messengers of life wherever they go.

9. Our University is fulfilling this mission while remaining faithful to its vocation and identity as the child of the Lebanese Maronite Order (OLM), which has sowed in every corner in Lebanon, a monastery or an institution, and has accompanied the Lebanese diaspora, to ensure them life in abundance. Time and again, we repeat that the name of Lebanon is included in the name of the Order which cherishes Lebanon. Many are afraid of the ongoing events in the neighboring countries of Lebanon and within Lebanon. They are afraid of world reports on the issue of transparency and the level of happiness among peoples, which place Lebanon among the lowest of rankings. Yet according to the spirit of life, we answer that Lebanon is just fine. This answer does not deny the essence of these reports, nor does it evade a correct reality. Rather, it steers away from the language of sniveling and complaining to the benefit of a positive language that leads to acknowledging that Lebanon is a home to many natural and human riches that enable us to start from where we are today to reach what is better. Such is the spirit of our university.

10. Accordingly, all academic and administrative units have been working on organizing conferences and activities that deepen knowledge and develop human beings. Important issues with tremendous influence on our society have been addressed. The University has also maintained its characteristic tradition of taking care of heritage and identity. As always, the Phoenix Center for Lebanese Studies, which is affiliated to the USEK Library, has taken major steps forward.

Indeed, the Library has signed conventions with the heirs of many illustrious Lebanese figures in order to have their archives deposited, documented and studied within the Library. In this context, USEK rejoices for the imminent start of a unique Master's program in Lebanon, in renovating old buildings, artifacts, pictures, books and manuscripts. Also, a Master program in Library Sciences, Archives and Museum Management will be soon launched, another first for Lebanon.

11. On the academic level and in keeping with world-class criteria, all Faculties are in the process of innovating their programs; each new program framework has been based on identified competences and learning outcomes. The University Council has recently adopted a decision, whereby the number of general requirements credits has been brought up to 30 credits. The aim is to meet American accreditation requirements and to develop students' level of grasping knowledge and guarantee the integrality of the knowledge system. Therefore, university students receive better education on civic engagement and open up to other specializations. The University team, which encompasses the people in charge of the quality assurance, accreditation and academic affairs issues, has sought, along with the various Faculties, to enter all USEK information and programs onto the TK20 database, thus granting us greater efficiency in managing, monitoring and evaluating academic programs.

12. Moreover, the University Board has recently ratified a new strategy for research that enables our university to step forward in this very vital field.

13. USEK has also been a pioneer in creating the Learning and Teaching Excellence Center (LTEC), which specializes in developing the fields of learning, teaching

and electronic education, and is especially addressed to teachers. During this year, USEK has continued to organize sessions to train teachers on new education methods. Seventy teachers, including deans and officials, have thus obtained certificates from U.K. and American universities.

During the coming academic year of 2015-2016, we will be launching a learning and education program with strategic partners, such as Norwich University.

We will go on organizing such sessions because we believe that the level of a University is, primarily, the level of its Faculty members. To every instructor at the University we extend our most noble thankful thoughts.

14. On another level, our University has adopted a serious approach by introducing the e-portfolio, and the number of teachers and students who have benefited from what the University has to offer in this respect has greatly risen. It is worth noting here that the e-portfolio puts users on the world academic and professional map and allows them to identify themselves by showcasing the minutest of details about their professional and academic careers.

As for e-learning, which we launched last year, the number of our e-students has risen, nearing 500 students in total. A committee has been formed and a person appointed to run the e-learning project.

15. The University attaches great importance to the principle of internationalization, and has thus adopted the principle of comprehensive internationalization. In this respect, last year, we joined the Internationalization Laboratory of the American Council on Education (ACE), and we were the first university from outside the Americas to do so. USEK has created an internationalization taskforce composed of Faculties and administrative units in order to examine the status of “internationalization” within the University, assess internationalization strategies

and take practical measures to promote this principle on all levels, in curricula, programs and subject matters. In this context, it is worth mentioning that a team composed of fourteen USEK Faculty members and staff has travelled to Washington where they underwent internationalization training funded by the U.S. government which we thank.

16. Furthermore, we have started, during the current year, to work on ranking issues.

Once again, we realized the benefits of having the University open up to worldwide challenges, as this enables the advancement of internal university matters. As was the case many times before, we are confident that our team will also succeed in its mission.

17. We also rejoiced because we made considerable steps this year in making the Alumni Association more efficient and in communicating better with many Alumni committees. We are determined to make further and important steps in this regard.

18. At the start of the current academic year, the University Council has adopted a three-year strategic plan based on nine axes. The fruits of this plan have certainly started to become apparent and will play an ever increasing role in promoting the University among other similar universities in order to serve all its stakeholders in general, and students in particular.

19. Our Faculties are pursuing the accreditation of their programs. Indeed, the three Faculties concerned with engineering and computer sciences have made noticeable progress towards the Accreditation Board for Engineering and

Technology (ABET) accreditation. The Business Faculty goes on as well with its accreditation journey. The Department of Human Nutrition and Dietetics at the Faculty of Agricultural and Food Sciences, and the Department of Architecture at the Faculty of Fine and Applied Arts have also embarked on the accreditation process. EVALAG will start in the coming October evaluating curricula in some faculties. About a month from now, the MATRIX British accreditation program will start assessing the student-related administrative services. In 2012, the first edition of the World Bank's program on Higher Education classified us within the first category of MENA universities. In the second edition of the program this year, we are once again involved in a project that seeks to develop all the activities of the University.

20. I have hereby reached the conclusion of activities mentioned in my address this year, which acquires tremendous importance in the history of our University. In fact, the University has submitted to the General Superior and the General Council of the Order a new bylaws project which they ratified. This is a stage we will all remember, because the new bylaws consolidate the University's belonging to the OLM and its identity, and they also meet the basic criteria of U.S. accreditation, a journey we embarked on last December. We implore the master of talents to support our University so that it is able to bring this accreditation journey to completion as it should be done. These new bylaws create a board of trustees, which has a say in the management and monitoring of the University. We hereby address our warmest thanks to our Most Reverend General Superior and our General Council for the attention they bestow upon the University.

21. Our inside look on these major achievements tells us a great deal about the efforts that made their realization possible. I hereby express my heartfelt thanks to all and everyone in the USEK team for their continuous and tremendous efforts.
22. All these academic activities deepen knowledge, constitute interpretations of the meaning of life and are also proof to the principle of life and of the Spirit that moves it. All this brings us back to the introductory expression, “The University of the Spirit and Life”, the expression that reaches the ears and the minds of human beings, penetrates their souls, shatters their stillness, and urges them to seek answers to their questions. We now see it mixed with the contemplation of joyful facts, becoming itself a source of peace, serenity and dynamism within us. Hence, each time the noise of concerns shatters our serenity, we smile back at them and go about joyfully, as we are aware that such concerns are normal in the course of our fragile existence and that we have to deal with them with the shrewdness of those who traded with their talents. We thus become aware that we cannot only cancel out the harmful effects of these concerns, but we also include them with greatness in our developmental journey forward, since the vicissitudes of History are of no consequence in the face of its mighty Lord. We go about trading with our talents and multiplying what is good, thus contributing to the growth of each one of us and to the growth of our institution and our society. We can achieve this, for we are proudly attached to the principles of our University, proud of our belonging to our University, proud of the fact that our University is “The University of the Spirit and of Life”.