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**Convocation Address, Fall 2015**

On October 6<sup>th</sup>, McMaster University and the McMaster Students Union announced the launch of a partnership to support student refugees, with a focus over the coming year on refugees from Syria. This Fall, as the scale of the crisis in the Middle East—and by extension Europe—has become more widely grasped around the world, educational institutions everywhere have begun looking for ways to alleviate the difficulties of student refugees.

At a conference of the International Association of Universities which I recently attended in Italy, discussion never wandered far from this topic. We had gathered to consider the internationalization of higher education—what it means to think of the academy as a global network existing for the education and enrichment of all humanity. So when in my session the President of the European Students' Union admonished delegates to make the plight of student refugees their top priority, he was warmly applauded.

Here in Canada, almost every university has developed a strategy to accommodate refugees, in many cases—as at McMaster—working in partnership with World University Service Canada (WUSC), which has brought more than 1500 students to Canada since 1978, nearly 100 just this year. Admirable though it is, that number is quite small, especially when you consider the magnitude of the problem. But as Chris Eaton, the Executive Director of WUSC, pointed out in the *Globe and Mail* this past September, “The key thing that a student refugee program does beyond the modest numbers it can bring over is that it sends a spark of hope about education and the opportunities it can provide.”

In the same article, Paul Davidson, the President of Universities Canada, commented that “Universities feel a sense of solidarity with those who are under siege.” That is certainly an accurate description of the current state of mind in our institutions, but it is also a declaration of fact corroborated by history: during the Spanish Civil War, Mexican universities provided a haven for students and professors needing to escape the conflict; during the 1930s Jewish academics from Europe found safety and opportunity on American campuses, and after the Hungarian revolution of 1956 Canadian universities took in significant numbers of refugees.

I want to consider why universities feel solidarity with people under siege, and why today, as we celebrate *your* induction into the worldwide McMaster family, it is imperative that we regard that family not as a private club made strong by its determination to exclude others, but instead as a fellowship of diverse people, united by shared experience and certain common values, and committed to continuous expansion as we welcome new members from different cultural, ethnic, religious and geographical origins.

It has lately become fashionable to talk about institutions like McMaster as *multiversities*—this as a way, I think, of signaling their complexity. But to do so misses a critical point about the word *university*, namely that it implies *unity in diversity*; that, like the physical universe, it is assumed to be not just a proliferation of things, but instead a proliferation held together by purposes, rules or values that are to some extent inferable. There the analogy breaks down, of course, because it is considerably more difficult to infer the structure of the universe than the order of a university—though some might disagree. But the point is that the Latin *universitas* means “the whole,” a totality.

In the Twelfth Century, in Europe, the word came to be applied to communities of teachers and scholars, partly *because* members came from all parts of the known world. At that point the possible fields of study were few—civil law was the focus at Bologna, for example—so it was inclusiveness of people, rather than of subjects, that made the *universitas* an avatar of the universe in those days.

What is often forgotten is that the teachers and scholars who came together to form the first universities in Europe were, if not exactly refugees, then almost always aliens within the cities that hosted them. Some might indeed have been refugees: these were the years when the Holy Roman Emperor was vying with the Pope for control of central and southern Europe, and cities as well as the nascent universities within them inevitably became aligned with one side or the other. Students, though, were a deracinated group who came to be known as *clerici vagantes*, or “wandering clergy.” Sometimes they were also known as *vagabundi*, and the closeness of that word to our modern *vagabond* tells you that students then, as now, did not on the whole live priestly lives! As one historian has written, they moved “from town to town in search of learning and still more of adventure.”<sup>1</sup>

Then, as today, town-gown relations were sometimes problematic, and not only because of the exuberance of students. Landlords and the city authorities frequently took advantage of the students, who as non-citizens were without most of the legal protections afforded to the general population. In the city of Bologna, in the early 1150s, the situation became so serious that the university was forced to act, adopting in 1155 an academic charter called the *Constitutio Habita*. This document guaranteed the right of the *clerici vagantes*—the wandering scholars—to travel freely in pursuit of their education. It was, in a way, the document which turned a mere association of teachers and learners into something more formal, an institution with a distinct membership, to whom were accorded such special rights as would be conducive to their studies.

The author of the *constitutio* is believed to have been the Holy Roman Emperor himself, Frederick I Barbarossa. The rights granted by the Emperor to scholars included, first, immunities and freedoms normally reserved for clergy. Somewhat

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Homer Haskins, *Rise of Universities*, p.111.

amusingly, a condition for this was that scholars should wear clerical dress—something they agreed to do, setting a fashion trend that continues even today on this stage. Second was the guarantee of freedom to travel for the purpose of study. Third was immunity from the right of reprisal—a serious issue because until adoption of the *Constitutio* students' goods could be seized at any time in retaliation and compensation for damages arising out of the actions of other students. And finally, the *Constitutio* accorded students the right to be tried by their masters, rather than the local civil courts.

From the *Constitutio*, then, came that defining attribute of the European university: academic freedom, being the right to conduct research and discuss issues unconstrained by external prohibition—the right, that is, to go where you want to go in pursuit of knowledge and understanding—and to do so without fear of reprisal, being accountable on academic matters only to your peers. Today this remains the essence of any acceptable definition of a university, and while institutions take many forms, those lacking the academic protections first outlined by Emperor Barbarossa in his *Privilegium Scholasticum* will find themselves on the margins of the academic community. Two years ago McMaster was represented in a ceremony at the University of Bologna in which we signed on to a modern declaration of those protections in the *Magna Charta Universitatum*. [You can find this at [www.magna-charta.org](http://www.magna-charta.org)]

All of this, nearly one thousand years of scholarship and learning and in my view the crowning achievement of European civilization, began with wandering scholars—*clerici vagantes, vagabundi, ribaldi*, or whatever they were called. It began with their high spirits and the sometimes disruptive effect of their hunger for knowledge, with the fact of their being foreign and by virtue of that a challenge and a temptation to the established order. Here I am reminded of the American poet, Audre Lorde, who writes that “the learning process is something you can incite, literally incite, like a riot.”

The earliest universities were, in a sense, a strange kind of refugee community, a volatile association of persons displaced from their homes by political and economic forces, as well as by a personal longing to find answers to questions and a life richer in intellectual, spiritual and material terms than the one left behind.

That may be why today universities feel solidarity with refugees and are committing themselves to help address the current crisis. I do not wish to draw a preposterous equation between a modern research-intensive university like McMaster and a refugee camp in Jordan, but I do want to remind you that the education it has been your privilege to enjoy—an education that would not be the same without our society's endorsement of academic freedom and the *Constitutio Habita*, enshrined in our country, as throughout the Western world, in custom and legislation—is founded upon a sympathetic understanding of the condition and value of persons alien, stateless, in flight, and searching.

The garments you see worn on the stage today—vestiges of that early requirement that wandering scholars dress as clerics—are evidence that universities in those early years were, like churches, places of refuge. By definition, then, scholars like yourselves were understood to be in some metaphorical if not actual sense, refugees. But the expectation was that to be a refugee was a temporary condition, and that eventually you would emerge from it empowered and ready to make a difference in the world.

I have no doubt that today as you graduate from McMaster University you are indeed so empowered. Remember that; and also remember your kinship with others for whom the condition of refugee will not be so easily escaped.

I want to leave you with a few stanzas from a poem by the British-Jamaican dub poet, Benjamin Zephaniah, who writes this:

We can all be refugees  
Sometimes it only takes a day,  
Sometimes it only takes a handshake  
Or a paper that is signed.  
We all came from refugees  
Nobody simply just appeared,  
Nobody's here without a struggle,  
And why should we live in fear  
Of the weather or the troubles?  
We all came here from somewhere.

Graduating students, wandering scholars, *vagabundi* and *ribaldi*—my very best wishes go with you all.