

THE VISITS AT THE PATRIARCHATE ON THE OCCASION OF CHRISTMAS

On Wednesday morning, December 27, 2018/ January 9, 2019, the leaders of the Christian Churches of Jerusalem visited the Patriarchate on the occasion of Christmas.

At 9.15 a.m. the Franciscan Custody visited the Patriarchate under its Abbot, Fr. Francesco Patton.

H.H.B. our Father and Patriarch of Jerusalem Teophilos addressed the Custody as follows;

“Your Paternity, dear Father Francesco,

Your Eminences,

Your Graces,

Beloved Members of our Respective Brotherhoods,

Dear Fathers,

We rejoice with you, dear Father Francesco, and we thank you warmly for your greetings for the feast of the Nativity of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Incarnate Logos. As we sing in our Liturgy

Today the Virgin gives birth to Him who is above all being, and earth offers a cave to him whom no one can approach. Angels with shepherds give glory, and Magi journey with a star. For unto us is born a young child, the pre-eternal God.

(Kontakion of the Feast)

It is right that we pause for a moment together to recognise the extraordinary mystery of the Incarnation, when the Creator

of all became a part of his own creation. And God did not become man for his own sake or benefit, but out of love for us, to restore humanity to our original vocation.

This great mystery of the meeting of heaven and earth is not simply a theological ideal; it is an event in our sacred history that happened here in this land, the land of the divine-human encounter. As Saint Athanasius the Great has said, "God became man, so that man might become divine".

And so we hold in special reverence the Church of the Nativity, where over the last few days both our communities have celebrated this great feast. Like all the Holy Places, the Church of the Nativity has been entrusted to us by Divine Providence to guard and sustain, and we give thanks for our fraternal partnership that enables us to pay attention to the restoration of the Grotto.

It is of course, fundamental that the Church of the Nativity remains a place of worship, prayer, and pilgrimage that is open to all freely and without distinction. The Holy Places are not museums or national monuments, but "springs of [spiritual] water gushing up to eternal life (cf. John 4:14).

Our brotherly co-operation has enabled us also during this last year to provide a united front against proposed legislation that would impinge severely on our rights and freedom with respect to our properties. We cannot rest in our vigilance against those radical elements in the society that seek to change the fundamental multi-cultural, multi-ethnic, multi-religious identity of the Holy Land, and who are undermining the Christian character of this Holy City as well. Our continuing steadfastness together is our proper defence, and it is a sign of hope and encouragement to all those who look to the Holy Land in hope during this holy season.

We take this opportunity to thank you, dear Father Francesco, and your community, for your ongoing solidarity, along with

the other Heads of Churches, and we re-commit ourselves to doing all that may be necessary to ensure that the Integrity of the Holy Places and our beloved Holy Land is maintained and respected by all.

MAY Christ our God, who by His Incarnation has gathered into unity all things in heaven and on earth, through the intercession of the Mother of God, the Theotokos, bless you, your brotherhood, and all the members of your communities, and MAY we wish you a happy and peaceful New Year.

Thank you”.

At 10.00 a.m. there was the visit of all the other Communities, of the Latin Patriarch in Jerusalem His Beatitude Pierre Battista Pizzaballa, the Church of the Copts, the Syrians, the Anglicans, the Lutherans and others.

His Beatitude addressed them as follows;

“Beloved Fellow Heads of the Churches,

Your Excellences,

Your Eminences,

Your Graces,

Dear Fathers,

We welcome you all to our Patriarchate as we celebrate the Feast of the Nativity of our Lord Jesus Christ, and we thank you warmly for the greetings that you have expressed to us. This is a joyous time, in which our welcoming of each other is a sign of our welcoming of the Good News of the Incarnate Logos. As we sing during the Royal Hours in preparation for the Christmas Feast, let us listen to Saint Sophronios, Patriarch of Jerusalem;

Make ready, O Bethlehem,

let the manger be prepared,

let the cave show its welcome.

The truth has come,

the shadow has passed away.

(The Royal Hours, Tone 8, by Patriarch Sophronios)

The divine-human encounter in the flesh lies at the heart of our sacred history in this land. Here we Christians have lived and built communities from the very beginning, cherishing and guarding with our very lives the Holy Places, that is a living *martyria* by God's salvific acts.

The integrity of the Christian character of Jerusalem and the Holy Land, along with the stability and vitality of the Christian presence here, are at the heart of our physical presence and spiritual mission. We believe firmly that we have the capacity to enable Christians to remain in this region, and our Churches have long experience in building initiatives that serve this purpose and goal.

During this past year, we have emphasized all this on many occasions, and we wish to express our gratitude to all of you for your solidarity in the face of unjust incursions and threats against our legitimate rights and freedoms as Christian communities here. For the moment we have fended off proposed legislation that would intrude unjustly on our legitimate rights and freedom with respect to our properties, and we continue to ensure that the Old City, and more specifically the Christian Quarter, maintains its historical Christian character. Our united efforts have up to the present enabled us to protect ourselves against those radical elements in our society that seek to weaken and break down the true multi-cultural, multi-ethnic, and multi-religious nature of this Holy City and our region. We realise that this is a constant threat against which there must be constant

vigilance.

Please allow us to take this opportunity to express our gratitude once again to His Grace Archbishop Suheil for all that he has done to enable us to work with His Grace the Archbishop of Canterbury, who has given our cause invaluable help and support. We cannot but mention the support the we have received from His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales in his recent gathering in London of Church Leaders from stricken areas of our beloved Middle East. We also thank His Excellency Archbishop Pizzaballa for facilitating and supporting our ongoing and fruitful relationship with the Holy See. It is just such international support as this, from Church leaders as well as governmental authorities, that has contributed so much to our success so far. We must not allow our alliances to be undermined in any way.

In support of this united front, please allow us to announce to you that we have encouraged the establishment of the International Community of the Holy Sepulchre, with a base in London. This Trust exists to benefit the Christian presence in the Middle East in general and in the Holy Land in particular, and it is an intentionally ecumenical and international organization. The concept of ICoHS, as it is popularly called, has flowed directly out of the work that we have been doing around the world to keep the situation of the Christian community here before the world community. We invite your participation and support in this venture. We have come to see that we have many supporters around the world who care deeply about the Holy Land, and who are prepared to act on our behalf. ICoHS is one way to be effective in this work.

Finally, let us acknowledge with gratitude His Majesty, King Abdullah II, who hosted the gathering of the Heads of Churches and Christian Communities in Amman last month in celebration of Christmas, and which took place in the presence of His Excellency President Mahmoud Abbas.

At this season, when we welcome so many pilgrims who come longing for the spiritual refreshment of the Holy Places, and who long for the coming of our Lord into the cave of their hearts, MAY we who live and minister here also make ready our minds and souls, so that the incarnate Logos by the intercession of the Mother of God, the Theotokos, MAY shine in us and strengthen us to carry on the mission that the Divine Providence has entrusted to us.

MAY God bless you and your communities during this blessed Christmas season, and MAY God bless all the peoples of our beloved Holy Land. We wish you all a happy and peaceful New Year.

Thank you”.

Near noon the Apostolic Delegate visited the Patriarchate, as the representative of the Vatican in Jerusalem.

Likewise, the Most Reverend Archbishop Philoumenos of Pella with an entourage returned the visit to the Copts, the Syrians and the Ethiopians.

From Secretariat-General