

SPEECH BY PATRIARCH THEOPHILOS III, ON BEHALF OF ALL THE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES OF THE HOLY LAND, BEFORE THE PRESIDENT OF ISRAEL

Mr President,

Honourable Ministers,

Members of Parliament,

Distinguished Guests,

At the turn of the year, we greet you warmly in this season of renewal and hope, and we thank you for this opportunity to address you.

Events and gatherings such as this are of great importance both for celebrating the common bonds of our humanity, and for reminding ourselves of those fundamental values that are essential to our common life. Humanity today is confronted on every side with harsh forces of disrespect and even humiliation. And sadly much of this is taking place in the guise of religious allegiance and in the name of Almighty God.

The special position of the Churches ensures the uniqueness of Jerusalem as a city of sacred significance and the religious character of the Holy Land as a whole. This region is home to the three monotheistic religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. And it is a living witness to multi-culturalism and, most importantly, to ethnic and religious diversity. We who

make up the community of the Holy Land in general, and we who are Christians in particular, must always strive to speak with one voice, stressing a united vision for peace and harmonious co-existence.

We are always glad to affirm that the Churches, in good times and in bad, never cease to serve our people and accomplish our mission and pastoral ministry, locally, regionally, and, ecumenically.

In our capacity as the Mother Church of the Holy Land and because of our unique historical presence, the Patriarchate of Jerusalem takes seriously our vocation of service. We are an anchor of Christian existence here and we are committed to advancing interfaith dialogue and maintaining the fabric of our society.

As we said recently to a gathering of the Diplomatic Corps here in Jerusalem, hard times must not blind us to the ties that bind us. When relationships are strained, we do not always like to admit that we are as closely related as we are. But we shall walk blindly on the road to peace if we do not appreciate the heritage of inter-religious co-existence that is ours in this region. We see a real chance for peace and recognise many courageous people of conviction and action. We must build on every opportunity for peace and reconciliation not just for ourselves, but for the generations to come.

The world looks to us for leadership. In countries that have emerged from decades of Communist government, for example, there is a desire to learn from us about the ordering of society in which there is genuine freedom of religion and inter-faith co-operation and mutual respect. We in the Holy Land can give a gift to the rest of the world that no other people can give, for we have a heritage of living together in

this region that is generations old. It is not too strong to assert that the future of our world is deeply connected to the future that we build in the Holy Land for all our people.

Over the years, Our Patriarchate has laboured to promote understanding between the religious communities and advance dialogue. We have the utmost confidence in the responsibility that the State of Israel has taken for the Christian Churches and communities.

We are highly appreciative of all those who support the spiritual integrity of Our Patriarchate and of our sister Christian Churches and communities. This support contributes to enabling the Churches to exercise our legitimate rights, privileges, and ancient customs.

Here again we mention something about which we have spoken recently. For in respect to the rights, privileges and the ancient customs of the Churches, we must never detract from the fundamental nature and purpose of the Holy Places. Here we are speaking primarily of the Christian Holy Places, but the same principle applies to all. We are particularly concerned at present with the attitude that considers the Holy Places to be either primarily tourist attractions or places of national heritage. While we appreciate the sentiment that can underlie these attitudes, it is our responsibility to remind those who have the power to make such decisions, of the fact that the Holy Places are primarily neither tourist attractions nor national monuments.

The Holy Places are, needless to say, primarily *sacrosanct* sites, and this is the character that they must always display. Here, in these places, the faithful believe that God entered human history in a unique way. We remind ourselves always that Holy Places have so far secured and sustained the

Christian presence in the region.

Allow us and in this context to underline the concerns common to our Christian community as a whole. We acknowledge the many positive steps that the State of Israel has taken to evaluate our concerns, such as:

- Free movement of the faithful;
- Examination of entry visas for clerics;
- Exemption from taxation;
- The historic standing of the ownership of Church property.

The historic rights, privileges and ancient customs accorded to the Patriarchate and to Christian communities have been articulated over generations in what we now call the "Status Quo."

A fundamental provision of the consecutive international agreements that has sustained the resilience of the "Status Quo" is the moral obligation of the ruling civil authority to exercise the power of arbitration when serious disputes arise. The sole purpose of the arbitration of the ruling civil authority is to restore harmonious co-operation and order, without altering the instrumental mechanisms implied by the "Status Quo."

We believe firmly that our Churches can contribute significantly to stability, reconciliation, and a lasting peace in our beloved Holy Land and our wider region, which is such an imperative in our day.

History has shown us that the solution to attaining peace is

not violence, but dialogue. It is dialogue that builds trust and mutual acceptance, and that shows us the way forward. We cannot but strongly condemn violence wherever it occurs, and the Patriarchate as well as the Churches support all efforts to build a lasting peace and security to which everyone, regardless of religious affiliation or cultural identity, is entitled.

Your Excellency, we express our sincere thanks to you for this cordial invitation and for your gracious hospitality. We pray God's special blessing on the approaching New Year: may our hearts be warmed, our minds enlightened, and the lives of all the citizens of the State of Israel be fulfilled.

Happy New Year and Hanoucha Samech.