

PREPARING THE WAY FOR THE BAPTISM OF PILGRIMS AT THE JORDAN RIVER

His Beatitude Patriarch of Jerusalem Theophilos III visited the Holy Monastery of St. John the Baptist by the Jordan River and the traditional Biblical place where the Lord was baptised. The visit took place on Wednesday July 8th 2009 in cooperation with the Patriarchate of Jerusalem and the Ministry of Tourism of Israel. During the visit, the Ministry was represented by its Senior Deputy Director-General Mr. Raphael Ben-Hur and his colleagues, while His Beatitude was escorted by the Elder Chief Secretary His Eminence Aristarchos Archbishop of Constantina, the Superior of St. Gerasimos Rev. Archimandrite Chrysostomos and deacon Rev. Fr. Athanasios.

This area has been a military zone since 1967 and the Israeli Defence Forces permit pilgrims to visit the site twice a year, on the 5th /18th of January, the eve of Epiphany, for the ceremony of the Blessing of the waters performed by the Greek Orthodox Patriarch of Jerusalem and, on Holy Tuesday, for the traditional pilgrimage baptism of believers. This allowance resulted from a suggestion made by the late Patriarch of Jerusalem Diodoros I to the I.D.F authorities.

The I.D.F, in cooperation with the Israeli Ministry of Tourism, provided access to the site on the occasion of the Patriarch's visit to view the premises of the Holy Monastery of St. John the Baptist, partially demolished since 1967 and to assess the possibility for its renovation. Approval for renovation work already exists and in order for the project to be initiated, it requires the submission of an architectural site analysis and the goodwill of a benefactor to finance the expenses.

After the visit to the Holy Monastery, His Beatitude together with Mr. Raphael Ben-Hur, the General military Commanding officer of Jericho Mr. Itzik Deri, the General military Commanding officer of Bethlehem Mr. Iyad Sirhan, the civil engineer Mr. Ofer Meital and the architect Mr. Ron Margolin, visited the place of the Baptism at the Jordan River and inspected the works carried out by the I.D.F, namely the support of the river bed for the safe access of pilgrims to the river waters and the construction of a stone platform and stone roofing for the performing of the Blessing of the waters ceremony by the Patriarch. This platform and its surroundings is the Patriarchates' property.

The Patriarch of Jerusalem Theophilos III conveyed appreciation for the cooperation between the Ministry of Tourism and the Israeli Defence Forces which led to this facilitation, an event that preludes the gradual and permanent prevalence of peace, enabling the more frequent and easy visitation of pilgrims for their customary baptism and sanctification at the traditional Biblical place of the Lord's Baptism.

Chief Secretary's Office

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