

HIS BEATITUDE' S ADDRESS TO THE WORLD COUNCIL OF CHURCHES GENERAL MEETING OF THE PALESTINE ISRAEL ECUMENICAL FORUM IN BETHLEHEM

"Your Excellencies, Your Eminencies,

Distinguished participants,

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

We greet you warmly on the occasion of this important Forum, with the Christmas message, the message of the reconciliation between heaven and earth which took place on the very locality over which this blessed meeting is taking place. Two years have passed since the launch of this initiative in Amman and much have been achieved through promoting this incarnate message of reconciliation, not only between God and man, but also between humans sharing common humanity. We re-applaud the choice of subject for our work and in the difficult endeavor of the resolution of conflict and of building and sustaining peace, for the art of dialogue and listening is of supreme consequence.

While the hearts and minds of hundreds of millions of people around the world turn to Bethlehem around this time of the year, the people in Bethlehem and in the Holy Land turn their hearts and minds to the world in search for assistance, hoping for peace to reach this part of the world. For many years Christmas in the Holy Land registers an irony of reality. Jesus Christ, the incarnate Logos of God the Father,

intervened our human history and liberated our humanity from the evil of darkness by shedding upon us the light of wisdom, the light of righteousness. Where the world joyfully celebrates Christmas, the people who share this very earth over which Jesus Christ delivered this message, live deprived of practical manifestation of this message of peace. From within this scene of unrest and instability emerges this community of the Almighty as an "endangered" component of the Holy Land to add to the issues we have to address, practically on the ground, in order to fulfill the commitments we made before the Lord and amongst ourselves.

As we convene around this dedicated manifestation to inter-religious action for peace and justice in this part of the world, represented in the Palestine Israel Ecumenical Forum, we have to admit that political polarization and ideological zeal and eagerness have increasingly posed a serious challenge to our humble efforts and great intentions. Since we have accepted the Lord's calling to become servants of his message, it is our duty to relentlessly increase our efforts for improving the living and socio-economic conditions in which people of the Holy Land experience, thus further promoting a peaceful and just solution to alleviate the suffering.

To many people around the world the relationship between religion and political unrest has been complicated and vulnerable; it is our obligation, as religious leaders, to lay foundations enabling all political efforts to defuse such complexity and present religion as the most effective tool in peace building.

We believe that the Palestine Israel Ecumenical Forum constitutes a legitimate platform from which, to launch comprehensive and collective efforts towards achieving peace that could be felt by individuals in our communities within the Holy Land. Prophet Jeremiah laments by saying: "Pease,

peace. But where is peace? They were ashamed because they failed". (Jer. 6:14-15). We are confronted with political inability to carry on, but we need to submit to the fact that there is no shame in perseverance. We encourage and stand by politicians and decision makers to be more courageous and determined as ever, in order to fulfill the Lord's message of peace, justice and reconciliation.

The Patriarchate of Jerusalem once again loudly reaffirms its commitment and support for all peace initiatives in our beloved region and calls upon all concerned parties to join efforts and to rise up to the challenge imposed upon our common humanity in a manner that will lead to the formation of a "de facto" united front for peace in the middle east/ capable of invariably defeating all forms of extremism through dialogue and awareness.

We thank you for your invitation to give these remarks, and we pray for God's blessing upon all of you and upon the work of this seminar and upon all people working for peace. For "blessed are the peace-makers" (Matth. 5,9).

So that the voice crying in the wilderness (Matth. 3:3) would be transformed; praising God and saying: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men!" (Luke 2:14).

Thank you.

Bethlehem, 11 December 2009

Theophilos III,

Patriarch of Jerusalem