

HIS BEATITUDE' S ADDRESS ON BEHALF OF ALL THE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES OF THE HOLY LAND, BEFORE THE PRESIDENT OF ISRAEL MR SHIMON PERES

"Mr President,

Honourable Ministers,

Members of Parliament,

Distinguished Guests,

"For unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given and the government will be upon his shoulder. His name will be called the Angel of Great Counsel; for I shall bring peace upon the rulers, peace and health by Him. Great shall be His government, and of His peace there is no end..." (Isaiah 9:5&6).

Events and gatherings such as this one are of great importance for promoting values that are greatly needed in our present day.

The special character and position of the Churches is alluring to the uniqueness of this Holy Land. Sacred and spiritual, this region is host to the three monotheistic religions; Judaism, Christianity and Islam, as well as being host to multi-culturalism and most importantly ethnico-religious diversity. We, the community of the Holy Land in general and Christians in particular must always strive to speak united, invigorating one vision for peace and harmonious co-existence.

As we have recently said to a conference for interfaith dialogue at Georgetown University in Washington DC, in the

cause of denouncing violence and promoting peace-building, the role of religious leaders, especially the clergy, is both crucial and fundamental. We do not believe that clergy should take the role of politicians; clergy have different, but equally serious ethical, social and pastoral responsibilities. But we do consider that, just as political leaders must be shaped by the moral principles of their religious traditions, in the same way religious leaders have a role in forming congregations and communities of faithful people to exercise responsible citizenship. This role manifests itself at the grass-roots level through educating our congregations and the general public on the importance of peaceful symbiosis; in providing social services that focus on the equality of all people regardless of religious or ethnic affiliations; In taking strong positions in denouncing all forms of violent acts; in leading and participating in public and private dialogue between different religious communities and ethnicities; And in supporting initiatives, institutions and leaders who are committed to the same social and civic good.

As we have gathered here today in a clear expression and manifestation of inter-religious history, understanding and existence, 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 calling of the Almighty to become servants of His divine message, it is our duty to relentlessly enhance 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 of all affected.

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 reconciliation and peace building.

The historic rights, privileges and ancient customs, accorded to the Patriarchate of Jerusalem and to the Christian churches in the Holy Land, have been substantiated during the many years in what we now call the "Status Quo". This doctrine, especially in our beloved Holy Land must be safeguarded by the understanding, respect and protection of the "**laissez faire**" practiced by the governing authority to ensure our very existence and help further our work of calming effect and inducement of peace.

We are appreciative of the Authorities' efforts in facilitating the access for pilgrims and worshipers and we commend them to continue and push further this holy and important provision; and allow Us to say: "more can always be done". In this context and 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, and We stress the need for the continuation of progress for:

- Free movement of the faithful;
- Provisions of entry visas for clerics;
- Honouring the privileges of Tax exemption sanctioned by the sacred history; and
- The historic standing of the ownership of Church property.

The inauspicious endeavours to attaining peace should not be ignored this festive season. This should be a reminder amidst our joyful celebrations that God's will is loud and clear for both the political and religious leadership to persevere in our commitment to reaching peace.

Our work as religious leaders in the Birthplace of the Prophetic and Incarnate message is to raise awareness amongst people that peace not war, dialogue not indifference, respect not bigotry and bridges not barriers are the way to forge lasting peaceful ties between believers of the various faiths who share this Holy Land namely Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

Rest assured that both the Christian institutions and leadership, in the Holy Land are willing to employ their blessings and resources in furthering peace in the region because we believe that this constitutes one of the fundamental commandments of our faith which solidifies our existence and determines our mission.

Our fraternal noble wishes for this happy occasion on the New Year to all Jews, Christians and Muslims, who persistently pursued peace during times of great turmoil, as they set a role model for all those who believe in the true prophetic message of the incarnation of the divine logos. And to those, we extend our hand for assistance and offer our humble blessings.

As the custodians and servants of the Holy Places that bare testimony to the sacred history of redemption and salvation of human kind, we time and again commit ourselves to promoting peace and invite every human being to "soul searching"; in order to recognize the other's entitlement to peace, respect and dignity; and we should always remember to behave in the same way as we would like people to behave towards us. For it is written "...whatever you want man to do to you do also to them for this is the Law and the Prophets" (Matthew 7:12)

Your Excellency, we express our sincere thanks to you for this cordial invitation and courteous hosting. We call upon the Lord Almighty to bless this coming New Year with fruitful achievements to warm our hearts, enlighten our minds and guide all the citizens of the State of Israel to fulfillment and

prosperity.

Happy New Year.