

THE CLEANING OF THE BASILICA OF THE NATIVITY IN BETHLEHEM, 2009.

The Armenians infringed upon the rights of the Orthodox on the Holy Shrines

According to the long-standing Status Quo in the Holy Land, the Basilica of the Nativity in Bethlehem is cleaned each year by the three Major Christian Communities namely the Greek Orthodox, the Franciscan and the Armenian, as set by the Status Quo and on a date designated by the Orthodox, prior to the Orthodox Christmas Feast.

The procedure of this cleaning is determined by the long-standing Status Quo on the Holy Shrines which was established by bilateral and international treaties.

It should be noted that at the main Basilica rights of ownership and prayer have exclusively the Orthodox. The Franciscans and the Armenians have rights of prayer at the Grotto of the Nativity after the Orthodox. The Armenians have right of prayer at the chapel situated at the north-eastern aisle of the Grotto's Basilica.

The absolute observance of the stipulations of the Status Quo contributes to the harmonic coexistence of the Christian Communities relating to the Holy Shrines without tension, discord or dispute.

With the hope of compliance to the prevailing Status Quo, members of the Brotherhood of the Holy Sepulcher from almost all areas of the ecclesiastical jurisdiction of the

Patriarchate of Jerusalem went to Bethlehem on Tuesday, 16th/29th of December 2009 and initiated the yearly cleaning, with the Franciscans and the Armenians participating up to the extent and at the specified spaces as stipulated by the prevailing Status Quo.

At the chapel which is in use by the Armenians in the northeast aisle of the Basilica, it is determined with accuracy and scholasticism the limits of the jurisdictions, the rights of cleaning of the Orthodox and the Armenian. The roof and the inner apses of this chapel, above the rings of the hanging oil-lamps (candles) are cleaned by the Orthodox, whereas the floor by the Armenians. Apart from other difficulties, which are created almost every year at this chapel by the Armenians towards the Orthodox, last year there was an intense attempt to prevent the Orthodox to move the ladder -in order to clean the apses and the roof- to the east, west, and north according to the Status Quo.

Last December, after repeated talks and remonstrations by the Greek Orthodox and after the intervention of the Palestinian Authority via a personal decision and order from President Mr. Mahmoud Abbas Abu Mazen, an agreement was suggested via the Minister of the Palestinian Authority Mr. Zeyad El Bandak, a Greek Orthodox from Bethlehem. This agreement was signed by the representatives of the three Communities in Bethlehem, Greek Orthodox, Franciscan, and Armenian, and this agreement determines the procedure of cleaning the apses and roof of the aforementioned chapel.

This year, when the Orthodox put up the ladder in order to begin cleaning, the Armenian clergymen refused to leave the chapel as the agreement defines that only three Armenian clergy are to remain. This number was stipulated to avoid disputes by the many. This agreement also dictates the stay

of three Greek Orthodox clergy when the Armenians clean.

His Beatitude Patriarch of Jerusalem Theophilos III was present the entire time of the cleaning. The Greek Orthodox requested the absolute implementation of the agreement, not more nor less, from the Minister of the Palestinian Authority present and author of the agreement Mr. Zeyad El Bandak, and also from the Palestinian Police.

For hours the Armenians refused to leave. The Minister Mr. Zeyad El Bandak and the chief of the Palestinian Police in Bethlehem showed inaction for the implementation of the agreement. The Orthodox persisted until even the afternoon hours of Tuesday in demanding the adherence to their rights, knowing the tactics of the Armenians in creating illegal incidents at Holy Shrines in order to seize further rights.

As a consequence of this situation, the Basilica remained closed to the pilgrims. Due to this continuing situation and the unfinished cleaning, these pilgrims were compelled to stay outside in the courtyard, being unable to enter.

During this time, His Beatitude Patriarch of Jerusalem Theophilos III, in the presence of the Consul of Greece in Jerusalem Mr. Panayiotis Pouleas, had a personal telephone conversation with Mr. Spyridon Kouvelis the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of Greece for issues relating to the Greek Diaspora, who arraigned this episode and requested the intervention of the Greek government to the President of the Palestinian Authority Mr. Mahmoud Abbas Abu Mazen.

After many efforts by us the Orthodox and by the representatives of the Palestinian Authority, it was agreed that we the Orthodox would put up the ladder for the cleaning, as it so happened, under the condition that eight clergies

from each party would stay at the chapel for the duration of the cleaning.

Even so, the Armenian priests refused to exit and stayed while their numbers even increased at the corner of the chapel. We, the Orthodox, anticipating the intentions of the Armenians warned the police not to let them remain therein.

While our priest Rev. Archimandrite Fr. Filotheos had already climbed the ladder and started cleaning, the Armenians broke the police cordon, assaulted police officers, assaulted our priests, broke two fingers of Hieromonk Mattheos, injured the shoulder of Hierodeacon Athanasios, injured the neck with the possibility of concussion of Rev. Archimandrite Fr. Aristovoulos, injured Rev. Archmandrite Demetrios and the Patriarchal Representative in Qatar Rev. Archimandrite Fr. Makarios and hit other priests with chairs, broom handles, and threw down the aluminum ladder used for the cleaning.

Whilst these incidents were occurring, stronger Special Forces of the Palestinian Police arrived and partitioned us the Orthodox and the Armenians into separate cordons to avoid the escalation of clashes.

This unsettled atmosphere was prevalent for much time, until the Special Forces of the Police imposed upon the Armenians, drove them back and we the Orthodox put up the ladder again exercising our right and cleaned the apses of the chapel from above the rings as well as the partitions of the ceiling above the beams, of which the right of cleaning belongs to us the Orthodox as determined by the Status Quo.

The Patriarchate of Jerusalem remonstrates for the repeated unacceptable conduct of the Armenians at the Holy Shrines and accuses them locally and internationally as provocateurs in

creating problems, confusion and disorder at the Holy Shrines, especially in view of the celebrations of Christmas and despite the demonstration of goodwill, conciliatoriness and understanding of the Orthodox.

Chief Secretary's Office