

ARTICLE OF HIS BEATITUDE PATRIARCH THEOPHILOS III OF JERUSALEM FOR WASHINGTON POST

“Merry Orthodox Christmas”

While Christians in the West celebrate Christmas on December 25, Orthodox Christians keep the Feast of Christ’s Nativity on January 7. Here the Patriarch of Jerusalem, the spiritual leader of Orthodox Christians in the Holy Land, the 141st bishop of Jerusalem in a succession that stretches back unbroken, by tradition, to James, the Brother of Jesus, reflects on the meaning of Christmas in the land where Jesus was born.

Every year Christians from the Holy Land as well as pilgrims from the world over gather in Bethlehem for the Feast of the Nativity of Jesus Christ. Here, in one of the oldest church buildings in the world in continuous use, the faithful come to celebrate their belief that God entered human history in the person of Jesus. For Christians, hope has a face: the face of the infant Jesus. Because, Christians say, in the face of this person we see the very face of God.

For Orthodox Christians, the life of faith is not built simply on principles for living a good life, though such principles are certainly important. For us, the life of faith is grounded first and foremost in this historical event, in which God took on our human life in all its fullness so that we, in our turn, might be drawn into the fullness of God’s own divine life.

The first church to be built on the traditional site of the birth of Christ in Bethlehem was begun by the Empress Helena, the mother of the Emperor Constantine the Great, in the year 327. Beneath the church is the grotto of the Nativity. Here for 1700 years the faithful have venerated the place of Jesus’

birth. In the year 565, the Emperor Justinian I, who also built the great church of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople, rebuilt the Church of the Nativity, and over the centuries there have been many alterations and repairs to the building. When the Persians invaded the Holy Land in the early 7th century, the Church of the Nativity was one of the few Christian holy sites not to be destroyed. It remains a unique architectural masterpiece of the early Christian era.

Here, in this ancient and holy place, Orthodox Christians will gather to welcome the birth of their Savior today. One of the most famous features of the church is the low door at its entrance, through which everyone, from princes and presidents to shopkeepers and students, must enter bent over in adoration and humility.

The Orthodox Patriarchate of Jerusalem has been a constant witness to this truth of faith and of history for 2000 years. We endeavor to ensure that the holy sites of this Holy Land remain places of pilgrimage and religious observance for all people of good will, for we understand the power of place and of history to make God real for us. We understand that God transcends all material things and all human constructs; but we also understand that the presence and knowledge of God are mediated to us by holy places. We all know of those "thin" places where heaven and earth seem to touch, and time and eternity meet. The grotto of the Nativity is just such a place.

There has been a Christian presence in the Holy Land since the time of Jesus and the apostles, and in this region we have come to know something of the power of place and history both for good and for ill. But for us Orthodox in the Holy Land, whatever the political or economic circumstances in which we find ourselves, Christmas is a yearly reminder that hope has a face, the face of a newborn child who is greeted by shepherds and worshipped by Wise Men.

At Christmas we Orthodox sing, "Today the Virgin gives birth to the Transcendent One...for our sake the eternal God was born as a little Child!" These words describe a wonderful paradox. For not only does a Virgin give birth – itself a sign to us of an inexpressible example of divine-human co-operation – but "the eternal God is born as a little Child." While a Western mind may stop to ask how such a thing might be possible, the Orthodox mind allows itself to be embraced by mystery. For what better hope could there be than God himself breaking into human history.

Our sacred history lies at the heart of our identity as Christians in the Holy Land. We live in the places where that sacred history unfolded, and here Jews and Muslims, as well as Christians, are living witnesses to it in all its complexity. But at the heart of that complexity remains the person of Jesus, who is the face of hope.

Hope is not optimism. Hope does not turn its eyes away from the truth of life in all its beauty and in all its danger. In the face of the life of the world as it is, hope insists that there is a different way for the human family to live altogether, a way that was originally intended for us, and a way in which we could walk again if we were but willing to do so. The birth of this Child has made that hope a genuine possibility for the human family, and it is the responsibility of faithful people to be co-creators with God of a new future for creation that ensures the well-being of all the unique creatures of God.

For Christians in the Holy Land, the life of faith is not a decoration to an existence of other accomplishments. The life of faith is a journey into union with the One who is our Life and our Hope, our Light and our true Wisdom. January 7 in Bethlehem we shall gather once again to proclaim this Hope to all the world: "Make ready, O Bethlehem, for paradise is opened!".

**By His Beatitude Patriarch Theophilos III, 141st Patriarch of
Jerusalem, January 6, 2010**