

HIS BEATITUDE ADDRESS OF WELCOME TO THE INTER- PARLIAMENTARY ASSEMBLY ON ORTHODOXY IN AMMAN, JORDAN

Christian Communities in the Holy Land: Presence, Rights,
Fears and Hopes

H.B. Theophilos III Patriarch of Jerusalem

15 November 2011

Mr. Abdul Karim Dughmi,

Speaker of the Chamber of Deputies,

Mr. Sergei Popov,

President of the Inter-Parliamentary Assembly,

Your Eminences,

Dear Fathers,

Distinguished Members,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in
unity! (Ps 132).

It is great honor for us to address this assembly.

First, please allow us to express our gratitude to His Majesty
King Abdullah II for the courageous steps that he has taken to
ensure democratic principles and religious freedom in the
Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan and to provide leadership in a

time of great change on our region.

We should draw on this great example of religious diversity and tolerance existing here in this beloved Kingdom and build further on the well-established initiatives that have culminated into the "Amman Message" and the "Common Word" which truly engaged both the opinion and efforts of communities around the world to strive to understand each other and see the religious diversity of the fundamental fabric of our society.

We also congratulate Mr. Dughmi on his recent election as Speaker of Chamber of Deputies of the Jordanian National Assembly, and we wish him strength and success in his new and important role.

My dear friends, since the founding of the Inter-Parliamentary Assembly on Orthodoxy, your Assembly has sought to keep the life and witness of Orthodoxy in the civic realm. The Articles of your Founding Act quite properly refer to the "ecumenical and unifying spirit of Orthodoxy" and the "unifying role" of Orthodox culture, as well as to your "support of human rights and religious freedoms" of all people both in Europe and around the world. (Founding Act, Article 3, Sections c, e and f). It is to these noble aims that we wish to speak today.

For millennia, the Middle East has been a special place. Here great cultures have arisen and here great religious traditions have met and shaped civilization. Judaism, Christianity and Islam have, quite literally, grown up together here over centuries. It is important for us to remember that Christianity is not alien to this region, but native to it..We are part and parcel of the unique cultural and religious make-up of the Middle East..

In spite of the fact that communities here are designated by religious affiliation and so appear to the outsider as distinctly separate from each other, let us not forget that

they share a common history, as well as common linguistic and cultural roots and social customs. In this commonality, we begin to see the force of what in Greek is called symbiosis – a genuine living together in which many conventional categories are crossed as the people of this region live their daily lives, create families, do their work, seek to be faithful to their religious tradition and we are loyal to their national allegiance.

In just this environment of symbiosis do we see the “ecumenical and unifying spirit of Orthodox Christianity” in action. The mission of the Church in this region is, in part, to sustain and support this unique symbiosis so that all our peoples may live in peace, security and justice.

The Rum Orthodox Patriarchate of Jerusalem is the oldest continuous religious institution in the Middle East and we have been faithful to this mission, conscious of the power of the “unifying force” of Orthodox faith and culture.

This unifying force of Orthodox faith and culture is founded on an understanding of the nature of the Orthodox Church. The nature of the Orthodox Church is based on a relationship of autocephalous and autonomous Local Churches that fully acknowledge the integrity of each Church and therefore have succeeded over the centuries to live with a vibrant “unity in diversity”. This diversity by no means lessens the strength of the fabric of our unity.

This means that the gift of cultural, linguistic and national diversity which so characterizes the Local Orthodox Church is not a threat to the unity of the Church, but a testimony to the true nature of the “One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church and our witness throughout the oikoumene – the entire world. Wherever the Orthodox Church is, we are truly local and truly integrated in the culture and life of the people.

The Rum Orthodox Patriarchate of Jerusalem has always been

faithful to our mission down the ages as the Local Orthodox Church of this region, the region of the Holy Land, which of course embraces the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. We have a unique and precious integrity. Here we embrace in our own unity a great diversity and so we live the ecumenical and unifying spirit of Orthodoxy completely. Into this Local Church we welcome both immigrants from various countries who come to live here, as well as pilgrims from all over the world who visit the Holy Places and find spiritual refreshment.

The integrity of our unity in diversity has been threatened more recently by external powers. While we appreciate the concern that others have for the peace and stability of our region, we sometimes discern that, under the pretext of concern for the Christian communities of the Holy Land, these external powers are attempting to make inroads in order to promote their own political purposes. The best help is always founded on true and sincere respect and sensitivity to the nature of the communities one is trying to support. Unfortunately this respect and sensitivity are sometimes lacking.

We honor your good intentions to be aware of our life and to be of encouragement to the Christian communities of the Middle East. If you wish to be of real support to the mission of the Christian communities of our region, it is incumbent upon you to ensure that the nations you represent and especially those that have an Orthodox heritage, are careful of your intention. We feel that we have to assay this, because the threat to our integrity comes sometimes not from the stranger, but from brothers and sisters.

The Rum Orthodox Patriarchate of Jerusalem, which has the jurisdiction over all Palestine as well as the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan is able and willing to be of assistance to all people of goodwill who seek to foster the mission of the Church. The Patriarchate is recognized by the political authorities of the Middle East as the senior Christian

institution with a special role of leadership in representing the Christian voice of this land. Let us not forget that, from the very beginning, the Patriarchate of Jerusalem has been the guardian and servant of the Holy Places. As such it has played and continues to play, the primary role in guaranteeing the Christian presence in the Middle East with integrity. For, through our pastoral and educational efforts, the mission of the Church here is purely spiritual and religious.

However, in our humble opinion, the greatest threat to the ongoing life of the Christian communities here and in the broader area of the Middle East is the concern both for the fundamental issue of unity of religious communities as well as the future status of the Holy City of Jerusalem. We mention Jerusalem because it is at the heart of Christianity, as much as it is at the heart of Judaism and, of course, of Islam. We refer to Jerusalem because it is a unifying point of reference for all the Christian denominations and religious communities that make up the landscape of our region. Right up to our own day, Jerusalem remains the well from which we all seek to drink the deep waters of our Abrahamic traditions.

In any future for Jerusalem, the living presence of the Church is essential and we must do nothing that compromises the integrity of the Local Church and therefore of the local Christians. The focus of our Christian brothers and sisters around the world should be the strengthening of our Christian communities, in and through the Patriarchate of Jerusalem which continues to live the "unifying role" of Orthodoxy here and around the world.

We are a people of hope. Here in this Holy Land, the Land of our sacred history, we encounter the living Christ in the life of the living community of the Church as well as in the sites that we associate with the life, ministry, passion and death of Our Lord Jesus Christ. We encourage you in your work as the Inter-Parliamentary Assembly on Orthodoxy to uphold the well-being, the unity and the unique mission of the Orthodox Church

of this region. The Holy Places, common to all religious communities, are like a mother hen that gathers her children under her wings. For as long as the current status of the Holy Places is guaranteed and as long as the mission of the Rum Orthodox Patriarchate of Jerusalem is supported by our Orthodox brothers and sisters around the world, we see no reason to be afraid or hopeless. For this is the way that our privileges and rights are assured, while no discrimination befalls any other.

Once again, we welcome you. And may we learn even more completely to live the words of Our Lord Jesus Christ, who said:

Let your light so shine before others,

so that they may see your good works,

and give glory to your Father in Heaven. (Mat.5:16)

May God bless you and the nations you represent and may God bless our beloved Kingdom of Jordan and all our peoples.

Thank you.