

HIS BEATITUDE ADDRESS AT THE 10th GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE MIDDLE EAST COUNCIL OF CHURCHES IN PAPHOS, CYPRUS 29-30 NOVEMBER 2011

Your Beatitude Archbishop Chrysostomos,

Your Beatitudes,

Secretary General Mr. Girghis,

Your Eminence Metropolitan Georgios of Paphos,

Your Eminences,

Your Graces,

Reverend Fathers,

Dear Pastors,

Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

“Blessed is who comes in the name of the Lord.”

We are delighted and honored to be at this 10th General Assembly of the Middle East Council of Churches.

We wish to express our gratitude to our host, Your Beatitude Archbishop Chrysostomos II, for your welcome and your efforts in support of the work of the Council. We assure Your Beatitude of our fervent prayers for your primatial ministry and for the people of our beloved neighbouring country of Cyprus. We wish also to acknowledge Your Eminence Metropolitan Georgios of Paphos, in whose Holy Metropolis we are meeting.

As we gather here in the name of the Lord, we are focused on our theme of looking forward to the renewed life of the Middle East Council of Churches. Please permit us in this address to make a few specific remarks in this regard.

First, let us notice the work that has been accomplished by the Task Force over the past two years, especially with respect to restructuring the Council. This General Assembly will be examining this work and approving a way forward at this meeting. We also want to thank the member Churches for their financial help in enabling the Council to sustain its mission in this challenging period. We cannot continue without such financial support from all our members.

Having engaged in the crucial work of restructuring the Council, we must strengthen the capacity of the Council to foresee and anticipate problems and misunderstandings before they occur. This sort of internal foresight is fundamental to any healthy organization and we accomplish this best by effective meetings and communication. If they are caught early, most problems can be dealt with relatively easily and this is one of the primary goals of the restructuring work that has been done. Vigilance in this area of our work must remain high, because the unity of our mission must be clear to all.

As we move forward, we must also re-commit ourselves to the principle that the Council is not a vehicle for the agendas of individual member Churches or their leaders. As a Council, we respect the right of individual Churches and their leaders to speak and act as their circumstances dictate and we all have our own means for the discussion and publication of those matters that affect our own Churches and communities. Yet, at all times, with regard to the ongoing work of this Council, we are to keep our collective mission at the forefront of our work.

With respect to this mission, let us outline the way ahead as

we see it.

As the Churches of the Middle East, we have three broad responsibilities, which this Council exists to support:

1) As Churches, we have the prime moral obligation to oversee and pastor our congregations and communities. As leaders of the Churches, the needs of our people and their joys and hopes of the future must be our first concern and we must give our best efforts to this sacred ministry without delay. There is no time of distractions from this task and we must overcome our human weakness and give ourselves for the life of our people. This commitment lay at the heart of Our Lord's earthly ministry and as his followers we are bound by the same sacrificial and life-giving endeavor.

2) As Churches, we also have a moral obligation to all the peoples, cultures and countries of our region, regardless of their religious affiliation. The Christian Church in the Middle East, which has existed here without interruption from the earliest days, is native to this part of the world. We are not foreigners here, we are an essential part of the unique life of our region and our presence is an irreplaceable factor in the future stability of the Middle East.

Here we would like to remind this General Assembly of the pioneering work of many leaders and particularly of His Majesty King Abdullah II and His Royal Highness Prince Ghazi of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, in the area of interfaith understanding and dialogue and we commend the work of The Amman Message, The Common Word Initiative and the new World Interfaith Harmony Week, which we shall observe on January 2012. We encourage the Council to be proactive in finding ways to participate in these activities.

3) And then as Churches we have a further moral obligation in the world. Peace and reconciliation in the Middle East are the responsibility of all, but as Churches and leaders we must

show the world not only that we are capable of leading our congregations, but also that we are capable of making our essential contribution to lasting peace and genuine reconciliation between Christian communities as well as between Christians, Jews, Muslims and all those who call this region their home. With respect to the work of this General Assembly, we shall be a living witness to the world in our ability to organize the effective mission of this Council. And so we see that the unity of our purpose and mission is essential not just to the work of the Middle East Council of Churches; It is essential also to building the confidence of the world in the ability of the Churches here to make our contribution to the reconciliation of our many religious and ethnic communities. The last several months of developments in our region, that is, in our respective countries, should be a clear message to us that, as a Council and as Churches, we no longer have the luxury of petty squabbles.

There are many ways in which we can accomplish the mission of this Council, but let us not forget the increasing importance of the use of the modern means of communication, like the internet and social media. Our website is one of our primary tools in this respect and through it we can reach around the world. We encourage this Assembly to ensure that the Council's website is user-friendly in a number of languages and up-to-date in the information it communicates.

In looking to the future of the Christian presence and its dynamics in our region, we understand the fear to the stability of the Churches that emigration poses. It is true that emigration diminishes the Christian population of the Middle East, but it is also true that the movement of individuals and groups has always been a part of our life and will doubtless continue to be so.

No less important is the future status of the Holy City of Jerusalem. As a city, as a spiritual and ecumenical reality and as a witness to the crucified and risen Lord, not only in

the Holy Land, but throughout the Middle East and beyond, Jerusalem is the focus of hope – the hope of all the people of the world. The future status of Jerusalem as a visible, tangible place of true symbiosis must be plain for all to see and this Council has a leading role to play in ensuring this.

As to peace and stability in our region, we must not forget Cyprus, where the need of reconciliation is as urgent as ever. We must do our best for a united and independent island, so that Greece Cypriot and Turkish Cypriot may live in the same peace, reconciliation and true symbiosis for which we hope for all peoples of our region.

My dear sisters and brothers in Christ, the challenges before us are clear; the mission of this Council is paramount. It is our fervent prayer that this Assembly will propose and carry out to a successful completion a specific plan to accomplish all these goals. As we have emphasized, our work together and the strength of the Middle East Council of Churches are of life-saving significance, especially at a time of inevitable change and serious threat to the Christian presence here.

The world looks forward to a renewed and strong Middle East Council of Churches. Let us not disappoint those, both near and far, who look to our Council for leadership in trust and hope. The stakes are high and it is inconceivable that we shall not rise to the challenges before us.

At this time, as the Churches are preparing in the Nativity Fast and the season of Advent for the celebration of the Nativity of our Lord Jesus Christ, may the One True Light, the Son of Justice that comes into the world enlighten our minds and warm hearts also, that we may be true and faithful witnesses to God the Father who loved the world so much, that he sent his only-begotten Son Emmanuel into the world.

Thank you.

Additional remark for an appropriate moment:

Please allow us also to mention the work of Father Ibrahim Dabour, who has seen the representative of the Patriarchate of Jerusalem to the Council for the last decade and who has given invaluable service to this work.