

RESPONSE TO THE GREETINGS OF THE HEADS OF THE CHURCHES AT THE FEAST OF THE NATIVITY.

Holy City of Jerusalem, 9 January 2013.

Your Beatitude,

Your Excellency,

Your Grace,

Your Eminences,

Reverend Fathers,

Dear Pastors,

Beloved Brothers and Sisters,

Christ is born! Glorify Him!

We welcome you with the joy of this Holy Season and we thank you for your greetings for the Feast of the Nativity. In the birth of the incarnate Logos, our Lord Jesus Christ, from the All-Pure Mother of God, the Blessed Virgin Mary, we celebrate once again the triumph of light over darkness, truth over falsehood, and goodness over evil.

We celebrate the Nativity of Christ once again at a time of ongoing, and deepening, uncertainty and difficulty for our region, especially in Syria. The political and social situation in which we are living in the Middle East makes our proclamation of the Gospel all the more urgent, and it makes our co-operation as Christians the more crucial.

Our peoples and our region are desperate for spiritual leadership and for the hope that the incarnate Lord brings. For the Nativity of Christ is not an event of the past; it is an event that is taking place today. As we sing in our Liturgy:

*Today the Virgin gives birth to the Transcendent One,
And the earth offers a cave to the Unapproachable One!*

(Kontakion for the Nativity)

We must not forget, too, that the world watches us at this season with a careful and expectant eye.

In one of his letters, which he wrote in the year 368, Saint Basil the Great praised the recently deceased Bishop Musonius of Neocaesarea. Saint Basil said of Bishop Musonius that during his life he had been *“a pillar of his homeland, an ornament of the churches, a pillar and support of the truth, a bastion of faith in Christ, the protector of his friends... [and] a guardian of ancestral laws.”* (Saint Basil Letters, 28:1).

May the same be said of us as Christian bishops and leaders. More than ever before we are called to live in the Light of the Eternal Son of God. For our struggle in maintaining our Christian presence in our region *“is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the cosmic powers of this present darkness of evil in the heavenly places.”* (Eph. 6:12). As St Paul says, we must *“keep alert, stand firm in [our] faith, be courageous, be strong”, “doing everything in love”* for the sake of the Holy Places of which we are guardians and servants (cf. 1 Cor. 13). This is the vocation of us all, members of our respective fraternities, as well as those of us who are bishops and pastors.

As Saint Basil said of Bishop Musonius, we must be *“bastions of faith In Christ”* those who so overflow with *“the grace of*

our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God the Father, and the communion of the Holy Spirit," that all may see beyond us and our inadequate ministrations a glimpse of heaven. For at Christmas heaven comes down to earth.

We should never forget that we are first and foremost a liturgical community, and our celebration of the Feast of the Nativity in Bethlehem, inspires and makes real for all our people, as well as for so many pilgrims, the eternal and spiritual truths of the Incarnation. It is our privilege here in the Holy Land to express the true ecumenical spirit: the power of our unity rests in our spiritual and cultural diversity. This diversity is the true strength of our togetherness.

At this great Feast, may we join our voices, from the land of the justice and philanthropia of God that is Bethlehem, and the land of the hope and resurrection of God that is Jerusalem, in an appeal to all in authority to give their tireless efforts to work to stop the bloodshed of innocent people, to alleviate poverty, to clothe the naked, and give succor to widows and the orphaned around the world.

We pray to our newly-born Saviour Jesus Christ, that he may be born in the cave of our hearts today. May the true Light that is born into the world on this Feast be the same light that is reflected in us, so that the World may see our good works and give glory to our Father in heaven (cf. Mt. 5;16).

Christ is born! Glorify Him!

We wish you all a blessed and peaceful New Year-

Thank you" .

His Beatitude

Theophilos III,

Patriarch of Jerusalem