

REMARKS AT THE CONFERENCE OF THE SEARCH FOR COMMON GROUND ON THE STATUS AND NATURE OF HOLY SITES.

Jerusalem, 30 October 2013.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Good morning.

First, please allow us to thank our dear friend, Mrs. Sharon Rosen, for her kind invitation to address this conference. The subject of Holy Sites is, needless to say, of supreme importance to all the religious communities of the Holy Land, and it is crucial for us to gather together to discuss both the nature of Holy Sites and their meaning for us all today. We would also like to acknowledge and thank Rabbi David Rosen for moderating this part of our conference, as well as his instrumental work in the Universal Code on Holy Sites.

The Nature of Holy Sites

According to the Psalms, “The earth is the Lord’s, and all its fullness. The world and those who dwell therein (Psalms 23:1).”

In the Christian tradition, holiness is the supreme attribute of God. Human beings share in God’s holiness insofar as we share in the divine life. “For it is written, be holy for I am holy.” We call those people “holy” who reflect the divine life, and we call places “holy” where that divine life breaks through into our temporal reality. The goal of true Christian living is precisely this: that by sharing in God’s life in the church we shall attain full union with God for eternity.

Therefore holiness cannot be created by us; but we can nurture holiness where it is found, both in places and in people, and we can participate in this dynamic life.

For the Christian, too, a proper understanding of Holy Places flows naturally from our biblical theology of creation and the mystery of the divine economy of the Incarnation. We believe that God created all things from nothingness, and that all creation will be redeemed and restored by God to its original purpose. Therefore even geography has the potential to mediate the divine life. The Christian monastic tradition is especially sensitive to this, and monasteries have often been built in situations of particular beauty or starkness, as being the most propitious to the ascetic endeavor.

Our theology of the Divine Logos tells the Christian that because we believe that God became a human being in a particular time and place, and because we know from our experience that we may know the presence of God in this life, we have a keen appreciation for the holiness of places. In his own earthly life, our Lord Jesus Christ inhabited specific places, spilling his sacrificial blood, and so made not only human history but geography sanctified. These are precisely the places where, over centuries, the faithful have come to venerate and become an eye-witness to a person in our sacred history – that is, the Christian history of salvation. Holy Sites, therefore, are “the intersection of the timeless moment” where earth and heaven meet, and we are enabled to see a glimpse of eternity.

Holy Sites do not depend on our presence for their true nature to be evident. In other words, particular sites are holy whether there is a solitary pilgrim lost in silent prayer, or whether there are thousands gathered for a great religious feast. We in the Holy Land who are accustomed to great crowds of worshippers and pilgrims also know what it is like to be alone in the quietude of a Holy Place and experience the “gentle breeze” (aura) that is the voice of God.

These remarks naturally bring us to a difficult subject, which is the tendency of Holy Sites to be turned from pilgrimage destinations to mere tourist attractions and archeological sites. We who have been entrusted with the guardianship and service of the Holy Sites are indeed sensitive to this delicate issue. Of course we acknowledge that even some who call themselves faithful Christians visit Holy Sites more as observers than as worshippers, still, we are aware of the fact that Holy Sites are to be conducive to their primary purpose to be “intersections of the timeless moment.” To allow Holy Sites to become simply tourist attractions is to gravely undermine their true nature. In this regard, one of the great benefits of the “Universal Code on Holy Sites” is to support religious communities in safeguarding and sustaining Holy Sites around the world from this exact sort of misdirection.

“Holy Gifts for the Holy” and Others

Holy Sites are gifts both for the faithful who claim the site as well as for the entire human family beyond the bounds of a specific religious community or group for whom the site is sacred. We know this in the Holy Land, for pilgrims come to us from all over the world. For example, we welcome many pilgrims to sites that are distinctly Christian, but however, are equally sacred to other religious traditions of the Holy Land and beyond. All of us, we must admit, whether Jew, Christian, or Muslim, have observed that pilgrims from other traditions often treat our Holy Sites with more reverence than our own faithful do!

No doubt, Holy Sites testify to the power of the faith and hope of those who kneel there to worship, “as the deer pants for the water brooks” (Psalms 42). In fact, Holy Places possess layers of sanctity for those whose religious tradition and attachment is fully identified; sanctity that may escape even the most pious person from another tradition. “For what person knows a man’s thoughts except the spirit of the man which is in him?” (1 Cor. 2:11). For instance, the Church of

the Anastasis (known as the Holy Sepulcher), which encompasses the crucifixion place and tomb of our Lord Jesus Christ, will have spiritual implications that are as much emotional and inexpressible for Christians as they may be explainable to others who are not necessarily Christian. Just as the Western Wall (known as the Kotel) will have spiritual implications for Jews, and the Haram as-Sherif (known as Al-Aqsa) will have spiritual implications for Muslims. There are levels of religious experience that we can only know in the heart, and for which words are inadequate.

And yet, it seems to us that here is a point of convergence for the faithful of various religious traditions. That is to say, as Christians, we may not be able to perceive what the Kotel means for the Jewish soul, as we also cannot perceive what Haram as-Sherif means for the Muslim heart. But we as Christians know what it is to feel divine intimacy at a Holy Site, just as Jews and Muslims also feel at Holy Sites. This experience can be for us one of deep unity, since we share a common humanity and a common destiny. Needless to say, it is in this respect that through the sanctity of the Holy Sites we find grounds for peaceful coexistence and mutual understanding.

One should not underestimate the undeniable power of holy places to be points of cohesion for religious identities and unique facilitators of unity, not just of the religious kind, but the kind that transcends national and human barriers. It is so often faith that unites people under their national identity and fosters solidarity between nations. One should bear in mind that this is a mighty stronghold against which globalization has not yet managed to influence.

Furthermore, it should be underscored that the unwillingness or failure to take into serious consideration the inherent sensitivities and concerns of various religious communities, both individual and collective, especially in our region and in particular the Holy Land, can turn the Holy Places into a

metaphorical volcano that is imminently ready to explode with unpredictable consequences for both the religious and political realms.

We cannot conclude these brief remarks without the observation that we have not only Holy Sites in our region that are specific to our respective religions; we have Holy Sites that we share in common. It is one thing to have claims of exclusivity over one's own tradition's Holy Sites. It is quite another thing to have discreet access to the sanctity of those places.

It is here where we are presented with both a challenge and wisdom. Our human predicament is the desire to possess and to exclude, while the divine impulse is to give and include with discretion. The Sites that we hold in common are a challenge to the boundaries that have been fixed around our religious and cultural traditions. It should be said that we are not the possessors of sanctity which emanates from holy places; it is sanctity that possesses us. It is our commitment to the sanctity of the Holy Places that holds us in a divine encounter.

Thank you.

His Beatitude

THEOPHILOS III

Patriarch of Jerusalem