

# HIS BEATITUDE ADDRESS AT THE HOLIDAY RECEPTION HOSTED BY THE PRESIDENT OF ISRAEL

Jerusalem, 30 December 2013.

Mr President,

Our Fellow Heads of the Churches and Religious Leaders,

Esteemed Members of the Government,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

At this festive and holy season, we greet you with words from the Psalmist:

*May God be gracious to us and bless us*

*and make his face to shine upon us,*

*that your way may be known upon earth,*

*your saving power among all nations.*

*Let the peoples praise you, O God;*

*let all the peoples praise you. (Ps 67:1-3)*

Here in the Holy Land, where humankind and God have conversed for millennia, we understand our life and mission to be a witness to “the way of God upon earth,” and “God’s saving power among all nations.” Jerusalem and the Holy Land are a beacon of hope to the world, and no more so than at this time of the year. We thank you, Mr President, for gathering us

all together on this special occasion, so that we may be reminded of our common purpose as the many communities that call this land our home.

We take this opportunity to express our appreciation in particular to you, Mr President, for the determined and strong voice that you have been raising in condemning the waive of "Price Tag crimes" in our country, and especially in Jerusalem. All such acts are abhorrent, whatever their target, and undermine the efforts of all those in our country who are working for reconciliation and peace. And those despicable acts that are directed against Holy Sites and cemeteries are not only intolerable deeds of desecration; they are unworthy of our contemporary, technologically advanced society that seeks to be built on the principles of mutual respect, freedom of worship, and peaceful co-existence.

Today more than ever Jerusalem and the Holy Land are the destination of so many. We welcome pilgrims of every faith and religious tradition, and the Holy Land continues to exercise a tremendous influence on the human soul. This factor alone makes our attentiveness to the integrity of Jerusalem, the Holy Land, and the Holy Places of supreme importance. For in this regard we who live here are privileged to be part and parcel of this unique multi-cultural and multi-ethnic heritage.

It is precisely for this reason that we are all required to take renewed steps to ensure the safety and well-being both of pilgrims and of the members of our communities, and to guarantee their rights and privileges that are sanctioned by our common sacred history. We are especially to be attentive to this at the times of religious festivals, so that all those who wish to do so may have access to the Holy Places and participate in worship.

In our capacity as the Heads of the Church communities understand all too well the complexity of managing large

numbers of people in small spaces, and we commend the police authorities and the security forces for their hard and responsible work. However, in order to avoid repeating the mistakes of bitter experience, there is more that can be done both to facilitate access to the Holy Places for pilgrims from a distance as well as from our local communities and to deepen our commitment to the democratic value of freedom of worship. For such great religious events by their nature are the best means for building peace and eradicating prejudice.

In this way, more than any other, shall we serve and guarantee the fundamental nature and mission of the Holy Places. For the Holy Places are neither tourist attractions nor archaeological wonders. They are first and foremost the physical expressions of the divine-human encounter and the marks of our sacred history, and so they are always primarily places of worship that gather people together in the same purpose. Our common task, as religious and civic leaders, is to maintain this true character of our Holy Sites, so that all may drink deeply of their spiritual waters.

As we celebrate this festive season and look forward to the New Year, let us re-dedicate ourselves to the fundamental principles of mutual respect, peaceful co-existence, and the equal care of all our people, that the light of this Holy Land may shine brightly in a dark world to give hope and life to all.

May God bless you, Mr President, in all the work that you are doing for all our communities, and may God bless our beloved Holy Land. We wish you a happy New Year.

Thank you.

His Beatitude

**THEOPHILOS III**

Patriarch of Jerusalem