

# **ADDRESS OF WELCOME TO THE PRIME MINISTER OF THE REPUBLIC OF ALBANIA H. E. EDI RAMA TO THE PATRIARCHATE.**

21 December 2015

**Your Excellency, Mr. Prime Minister,**

**Your Eminences,**

**Distinguished Members of the Diplomatic Entourage,**

**Your Graces,**

**Reverend Fathers,**

**Ladies and Gentlemen,**

As we prepare in this season to celebrate in the Holy Land the Nativity of our Lord Jesus Christ, we welcome you warmly to the Patriarchate of Jerusalem. You have come to the Mother of all the Churches, and in witness to the Incarnate Light of God, the Church of Jerusalem is always engaged in spreading the Gospel of peace, love, and reconciliation to the whole world.

We are glad that in Albania, after a long period of totalitarian rule in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the freedom of religious expression and worship has been restored. We pray that this crucial liberty may always be supported and strengthened, as it is crucial for the well-being of any nation. Indeed we have

been a witness to its progress in your country, when we were present in 2012 with Archbishop Anastasios for the consecration of the Resurrection of Christ Cathedral in Tirana. This event was a landmark in the modern history of Albania, and a recognition of the deep Christian roots of the region.

We take special pride in our close relationship with the Orthodox Church of Albania and our brother, Archbishop Anastasios. The Orthodox Church is playing a vital role in promoting the multi-cultural and multi-religious society of your country, and Archbishop Anastasios is deeply committed to the well-being of Albania and all her peoples.

We recognize the special relationship that Albania enjoys with the State of Israel, not least because of the role that Albania played in protecting its Jewish population during the Second World War. As you foster this important relationship, we take this opportunity to remind you that the integrity of Jerusalem depends in large measure on the place and the role of the Patriarchate, which remains the oldest, continuously functioning religious institution in the Holy Land. So your visit to the Patriarchate, as well as your mission to the State of Israel and the Holy Land, opens a new door in our deepening relationship.

It is always important that we remember that the Holy Land embraces a diversity of peoples, cultures, religions, and ethnicities, and in particular the followers of the Abrahamic faiths, that is Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

We welcome many thousands of pilgrims to the Holy Land every year, and we look forward to welcoming even more pilgrims from Albania. Pilgrimage is one of the most effective ways of strengthening the bonds between peoples and nations with our region, we welcome you, Mr. Prime Minister, not only as a political leader, but as a pilgrim yourself.

We wish you success in your mission here, and we pray for God's blessing on you, your family, and all the people of your beloved Albania.

In recognition of the special relationship that exists between the Patriarchate and the Church and people of Albania, we wish to bestow on you the decoration of the Order of the High Cross of the Knights of the Holy Sepulcher.

Thank you.

His Beatitude

**THEOPHILOS III**

Patriarch of Jerusalem