

ADDRESS ON THE OCCASION OF THE NEW YEAR RECEPTION OF THE ISRAELI MINISTER OF TOURISM.

21 December 2015

Your Excellency, Mr. Levin, Your Eminences,

Distinguished Members of the Ministry of Tourism,

Fellow Religious Leaders,

Your Graces,

Reverend Fathers,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Once again we gather in this festive Season of Light to celebrate our respective religious traditions and to welcome the New Year. On behalf of the Churches of the Holy Land and of the religious leadership of all our diverse communities, we are grateful to you, Mr. Levin, for this reception, and for the focus that it gives us at this time of the year.

We welcome many thousands of pilgrims every year to Jerusalem and the Holy Land from many different religious traditions. The essential identity of Jerusalem depends on its rich religious heritage, a heritage that embraces Jew, Christian, and Muslim alike, and in this respect, the Church of Jerusalem, which is the Church of the blood both of the prophets and of our Lord Jesus Christ, is a beacon for all.

The mission of the Church has been, and continues to be, the maintaining of the ecumenical uniqueness of the Holy City of Jerusalem, to which all are welcome without distinction. For

Jerusalem is the spiritual home of all humanity, and it is the river of grace to which all come to drink:

As the deer longs for the water-brooks, so longs my soul for you, O God.

(Ps. 42: 1)

The Psalmist articulates for us the universal human longing for God, a longing that it is the divine destiny of Jerusalem to fulfill for all. This is not a metaphor, but a profound reality, and this reality is shown in the ongoing – indeed, increasing – flow of pilgrims to these walls. This unbroken procession of pilgrims, which has existed since antiquity, builds the mission and identity of Jerusalem as the city of peace and reconciliation.

Jerusalem gathers the peoples of many nations and affiliations, as again the Psalmist tells us:

Jerusalem is built as a city that is at unity with itself; to which the tribes of the whole world go up, to praise the name of the Lord.

(Ps. 121 [122]: 3-4)

This mission requires our vigilance if it is to keep its integrity, and we are all called to strengthen this mission. It is a truth that the vast majority of tourists to the Holy Land are pilgrims, and we must always keep before us the vital role we all play in ensuring that all people of good will, without distinction, may continue to find here in Jerusalem and in the Holy Land, the spiritual refreshment and renewal for which they so desire.

We stand united in our condemnation of terrorism of any kind, from whatever quarter it comes. Jerusalem must always be a beacon of peace and harmony between peoples, especially at this season when the world looks to Jerusalem in hope.

We wish you, Your Excellency, and the staff of the Ministry, a very happy New Year, and we pray God's blessing on all the peoples and communities of our beloved Holy Land. Thank you.

His Beatitude

THEOPHILOS III

Patriarch of Jerusalem