

CHRISTMAS GREETINGS TO THE GUSTOS AND THE FRANCISCAN COMMUNITY.

29 December 2015

Your Excellency, dear Father Pierbattista,

Your Eminences,

Beloved Members of our respective Brotherhoods, Reverend
Fathers,

We greet you warmly today in these days after your celebration
of the Feast of the Nativity with these words of rejoicing:

*Your Nativity, O Christ our God,
has shone to the world the light of wisdom!
For by it, those who worshipped the stars,
were taught by a star to adore you,
the Sun of righteousness,
and to know you, the Orient from on high.
O Lord, glory to you!*

The Uncreated Light of the Incarnate Logos shines in our world
even as the darkness threatens our region, and as we greet you

with the joy of the Feast, we also wish to express our concern and assure you of our prayers as you attempt to locate Father Dhiya Assis, the parish priest of Yacoubieh in Syria, who disappeared in the days before Christmas as he was going to his community. The suffering of all our peoples and the dangers that the Christian communities of the Middle East face, remain at the heart of our pastoral and spiritual mission.

We share this pastoral and spiritual mission, and our common stand and our collaboration have produced tangible results. By working together carefully and attentively within the provisions of the Status Quo, we have continued to preserve the Holy Sites as primary places of worship, and we have kept them open and accessible to the whole world. Here in the Holy Sites the real ecumenical spirit is alive, and we have a great moral responsibility in this mission not simply to our respective communities, but to the whole world.

We live in a time in which many millions have never heard of the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, and even in the so-called developed world, familiarity with the Christian faith and with Christian culture has fallen dramatically in recent years. This places an even greater responsibility on our shoulders as those to whom Divine Providence has entrusted the safeguarding and the *diakonia* of the Holy Places, for Jerusalem and the Holy Land without the Holy Sites would be a lifeless desert.

Time and again, the Holy Places have been the very guarantee of the presence of the Christian community in the Holy Land and in the Middle East, a presence that we know to be of absolute importance to the integrity of the region and its stability.

In the ecumenical spirit that is ours in this common mission, and in this season when the Uncreated Light is born in Bethlehem, we pray God to enlighten our minds and warm our

hearts so that our brotherly co-operation and mutual understanding may grow deeper for the well-being of the Holy Land, our respective communities, and all those around the world who look to Jerusalem in hope.

We wish you, dear Father Pierbattista, all the members of the Brotherhood and all your people a blessed and joyous Christmas Feast. Thank you.

His Beatitude

THEOPHILOS III

Patriarch of Jerusalem