

ADDRESS TO THE FRANCISCAN CUSTODY OF THE HOLY LAND ON THE OCCASION OF THEIR FRATERNAL VISIT TO THE PATRIARCHATE OF JERUSALEM FOR THE FEAST OF THE NATIVITY.

9 January 2016

Your Excellency, dear Father Pierbattista,

Your Eminences,

Beloved Members of our respective Brotherhoods,

Reverend Fathers,

We welcome you warmly to the Rum Orthodox Patriarchate of Jerusalem, Your Excellency, and we thank you for your gracious greeting to us on the occasion of our celebration of the Nativity of our Lord Jesus Christ.

This meeting comes at an especially happy time: when we greeted you after your celebration of the Nativity just a few days ago, we expressed our concern for Father Dhiya Azziz, who had been abducted on his way to serve his community. We now rejoice with you at his release earlier this week, and we hope that he is restored to you well and quickly.

We celebrate this great mystery of our salvation in these words from our worship on the Synaxis of the Mother of God:

*Lord, you have come to Bethlehem
and have made your dwelling in the cave.
You have heaven as your throne,
yet you are laid in a manger.
The hosts of angels attend you on every side,
yet you have come down among shepherds,
that in your compassion you might save humankind.*

Our mission is to be a living witness of this very mystery of the Incarnation, of the Incarnation of peace, the Incarnation of justice, the very Incarnation of the Living God who is our Lord Jesus Christ.

We are glad to be sharing in the joy of this feast with you, dear Father Pierbattista, as we have come to enjoy the fruits of mutual understanding and effective co-operation between our Brotherhoods both in the pastoral sphere, but also in the area of issues touching on the Status Quo. In particular we note in this respect the work to restore the Edicule of the Tomb of Christ. The preliminary report that we given to us recently is a tremendous step forward both in the preservation of the most holy site of our Christian faith and in the affirmation of our shared responsibility.

Our mutual understanding and effective co-operation are, as we know, of crucial importance for the well-being of our two communities as well as for the diverse populations of our region. Time and again we have known how imperative it is for us to remain solidly united in these things in order to ensure that the Holy Places remain places of prayer, worship,

and spiritual refreshment for the whole world. As the Incarnate Logos left heaven for a manger, and the company of angels to dwell with us to save us, let us never forget our mission to serve all those, especially those in the greatest spiritual need, who come to the Holy Places for heavenly succor and the assurance of salvation.

May we be faithful to this proclamation of the Christmas Feast, and may we grow ever more deeply in our common mission to all our people in our beloved Holy Land, and to all who look to the Incarnate Logos in hope.

May God bless you, dear Father Pierbattista, the members of your Brotherhood, and all the faithful of your community in this blessed and holy season.

His Beatitude

THEOPHILOS III

Patriarch of Jerusalem