

ADDRESS TO THE LEADERCHIP OF THE COPTIC & ETHIOPIAN COMMUNITIES OF JERUSALEM

AUGUST 3, 2016

Your Eminences,

Your Excellencies,

Your Graces,

Beloved Members of our Respective Brotherhoods,

We welcome you, dear Brothers, to our Patriarchate with love in Christ and with pastoral solicitude for the well-being of the Christian communities of the Holy City of Jerusalem. On a previous occasion we have welcomed Your Eminence, Archbishop Bab Enbakom, to Jerusalem when you assumed your new duties here, and today we would like to congratulate Your Eminence, Metropolitan Anba Antonious, on your recent episcopal ordination and appointment to Jerusalem in succession to His late Eminence Dr Anba Abraham of blessed memory. We welcome you to the Holy City and to the group of the Heads of the Churches, and we assure you of our prayers for your archpastoral ministry to the Coptic community of the Holy Land and to the Coptic pilgrims who come here every year.

As the oldest religious institution in continuous existence in the Holy Land, the Patriarchate of Jerusalem takes seriously our role of leadership and our responsibility for the well-being of the Holy Places and the spiritual mission that all the Churches and Christian Communities of the Holy Land share

by virtue of our presence and life here. We have been entrusted by Divine Providence with an awe-inspiring and life-giving mission, and this mission lays upon us all a serious responsibility. Our spiritual mission and our responsibility for the life of the Christian communities of the Holy Land are paramount, and take precedence over every other concern. There is no place in this spiritual mission for pride, self-interest, or conflict between communities. Such things both weaken our mission and put our communities at risk.

In the present time especially, our Churches and our peoples are threatened. We are experiencing heightened persecution, and the Christian presence on our region is under tremendous pressure. As the Heads of the Churches of the Holy Land, we have a special responsibility before God and our people to ensure that nothing undermines the well-being of the Christian presence or the integrity of the Christian identity of the City of Jerusalem or the Holy Land.

In this regard, we take to heart the words of the First Letter of Saint John, who reminds us all:

God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgment, because as he is, so are we in this world. There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. We love because he first loved us. Those who say, 'I love God', and hate their brothers, are liars; for those who do not love a brother whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers also, (1 John 4:16-21).

These words hold us all in judgment, and they are clear about our moral and Christian responsibility. More than anything, the world looks to Jerusalem in hope, and to the Christian

communities here, for inspiration and encouragement. They must see in us the embodiment of these words of love for our brothers.

We serve the most important Holy Place in the world. When pilgrims come here, they are thirsty for spiritual refreshment. They are not edified when they see in-fighting and enmity between us, and when such things happen, we are not being faithful to our call to care for the Holy Places.

Now is the time for us to order our life according to right principles. If we are to preserve the rights and privileges that are ours, and that have been sanctioned both by sacred history and international authority and support, we must stand on our own feet in the resolution of disagreements that arise between us, or we risk the intervention of third parties. This is neither helpful nor appropriate.

We have seen the three major Communities of the Patriarchate, the Franciscan Custody, and the Armenian Patriarchate, come together to agree in the project of the renovation of the holiest and most disputed of all Holy Sites, the Sacred Edicule. This is a significant development in the relations of the Churches here, and it is a shining example to all of what is possible when we place our spiritual mission before our differences, and work to build a new relationship of collaboration between us. We cannot leave the rest of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in the balance.

As the Patriarch of Jerusalem, we take this initiative to be of assistance to you in the Coptic and Ethiopian communities in the resolution of your disagreements. We are encouraged by your willingness to be here at this meeting, and we are also encouraged by the presence of members of the diplomatic missions of your respective countries. While it is never easy to resolve conflict, we to whom the leadership of the Churches of the Holy Land has been entrusted have a special responsibility to do everything we can to heal our own wounds

so that we may be the agents of God's healing for others. We are willing to do all in our power to help, but all must be willing to do this urgent work of reconciliation, and to break down the barriers that divide us.

We therefore plead with you to take the opportunity of your new leadership and the hope that this brings to overcome the differences that wound the Christian presence here in Jerusalem. We know from harsh past experience that true and generous dialogue is the only path to lasting reconciliation, and we urge you to take this new path together, not just for the good of the Coptic and Ethiopian communities, but for the good of our common spiritual witness and mission to the world.

May God bless you in this necessary and urgent work, and may God give us all the grace to be faithful stewards of this Holy Land and all our peoples.

Thank you.

His Beatitude

THEOPHILOS III

Patriarch of Jerusalem