

OPENING ADDRESS TO THE 11TH GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE MIDDLE EAST COUNCIL OF CHURCHES.

6th September 2016

Amman, Jordan

Your Holiness Patriarch Tawadros,

Your Beatitudes,

Your Eminences,

Your Graces, Your excellencies

Distinguished Delegates to this Assembly

Ladies and Gendlemen,

It is a joy and an honour to welcome you all to this, the 11th General Assembly of the Middle East Council of Churches. We bring with us to all of you the blessings of the Holy Land and especially of the Holy Tomb of our Lord Jesus Christ and the greetings of the Christian community there.

Let the Psalmist have the first words:

Great is the Lord and exceedingly praiseworthy and his greatness has no limits.(Ps. 144(145):3)

We gather here not by virtue of our own strength, but by virtue of God's grace and providence, and we give thanks to God, who is great and exceedingly praiseworthy, who has brought us together from across our region and the world, just as the holy Apostles were brought together by the Holy Spirit for the Council in Jerusalem from their ministry among those of many nations and languages. We give God thanks and praise for this sacred opportunity to be together and we commend all our deliberations to his mercy and the sustenance of his excellent greatness.

We live, as we all understand in a new age of *martyria* – in a new time of Christian witness. Christians, along with many other innocent men, women and children, face persecution once again, and once again our *martyria*, our witness, is of ultimate importance for the Churches and for the world.

The *martyria* of the Christian presence in our beloved Middle East has been the living *martyria* of the Gospel of truth, life, love and righteousness. Our *martyria* has been the witness to the Light of which the Scriptures speak so eloquently:

The people who sat in darkness have seen a great light.

And upon those who sat in the region and shadow of death Light has dawned. (Matt. 4:16).

This is our spiritual mission as servants of the Gospel and as torchbearers of the Light of Christ. This is our divine calling in the midst of the significant challenges that face us both globally and locally.

We all keenly aware of the reality that we are all experiencing on our door-steps in our beloved homelands. The

situation that we face is unprecedented in our life – times, and our response must not be- it cannot be- the response of a cowardly spirit. This is putting it strongly, but we do so because we know that our struggle is not against a human force. As Saint Paul reminds us in the Epistle to the Ephesians (6:12):

We do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places.

It is this that makes the challenges we face so serious and life-threatening, and it is precisely with this understanding that we as Churches and Christian communities across the Middle East have joined our spiritual forces to spread the message of the goodness of the Lord and His mercy and of hope – the hope of the resurrection, the hope of the new life that comes from the Tomb.

So we affirm the theme of this Assembly to give thanks to the Lord for He is good, for 'His mercy endures for ever', (Ps. 135 (136): 1).

Our Assembly has actually emerged from the fiery crucible, because in the midst of this present time, we have never lost hope and faith. This means that we are now summoned individually and collectively to assume fully and without reserve our responsibilities and moral obligations before our fellow human beings and before God.

Our task is first and foremost, to work with all our heart and all our mind to protect our Christian identity, to ensure the Christian character in the region, and to nourish the roots of our Christian community, so that the Christian presence here may always be vital and vibrant.

This is our responsibility. And this means, among other things, that we cannot and must not expect others to do this

for us. As pastors and leaders, it is our obligation to nourish and water our deep roots in this region, so that the Christian presence may continue to flourish. And we do this as Saint Paul encourages us (Eph. 6:13):

Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand.

We are, he says, to gird ourselves with truth, and the breastplate of righteousness. We are to put on our feet the preparation of the Gospel of peace, and take up the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit. And we are to do all this with prayer. Herein lies our strength, and with these we shall be able to shoulder those responsibilities and obligations that are rightfully ours to bear.

As we face the dire circumstances in which we find ourselves, we must overcome our human weaknesses. There has never been a place for antagonism of rivalry in the Christian life, and therefore our present circumstances in which our fellow human beings and our communities are living and struggling leave us absolutely no room for such attitudes and behaviours. Evil respects no boundaries, and huge suffering affects us all. Good must have no boundaries, and we must show in our life together the evidence of this. It is right to remind ourselves of this, and to be re-committed at the outset of our work together to this understanding of our common life.

A tangible illustration of this common purpose is the ongoing restoration of the Sacred Edicule of the Holy Tomb that is the fruit of consensus that has been reached between our communities after 200 years. If we can come together to save one of the most contested of the Holy Sites, we can certainly come together to accomplish the goals of this Assembly and our common mission. Needless to say, a new consensus among us would be of inestimable inspiration in resolving current disputes.

We consider this Assembly a blessing, because it presents us with the strength and the spiritual means to be on the alert, and not to allow the evil powers, both visible and invisible, to discourage us or make us fainthearted. As Saint Paul advises in the First Epistle to the Thessalonians, (5:14):

Now we exhort you, brethren, warn those who are unruly, comfort the fainthearted, uphold the weak, be patient with all.

This is our responsibility to each other.

Now to some specifics of our work.

Given the present situation and the harsh conditions throughout our region, it is imperative that our Assembly focus specifically on the alleviation of the human suffering all around us: the reality of homelessness, migration and starvation; The lack of the basic necessities of life, clothing, and health care; And attention to the rehabilitation from psychological trauma, especially in children and youth.

Most importantly, we must take care not to become entangled in bureaucratic distractions.

We are the community of the self-emptying love of Christ and so we always bear in mind our Lord's example and His commandments. His commandments are clear: we are to love our neighbour, and we are to love our enemy.

These commandments are fundamental for us, if we are to take our place in the re-building of our communities, our societies and our motherlands. We ourselves are firmly committed to the mission of the Middle East Council of Churches that we have been serving and supporting throughout our tenure as the President of the Orthodox Family.

As we begin our Assembly, it would be a serious omission not to express our gratitude to His Majesty King Abdullah II of

the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, who has been instrumental in accommodating, hosting and supporting not only this Assembly, but all our efforts towards peaceful co – existence and reconciliation. The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan remains a shining example in our region of maintaining the natural fabric of mutual good relations between peoples of different faiths, ethnicities and cultures.

We also thank His Royal Highness Prince Ghazi for his presence and his support. And we wish to thank all those governmental agencies and offices that have spared no effort to facilitate our Assembly here in Amman.

We acknowledge with gratitude the many societies, agencies, and groups from the United States, Europe, and the rest of the world who have been supporting and continue to support materially, spiritually, and morally the communities of displaced persons that are hosted here in Jordan. Especially the director and her colleagues of our office here in Amman.

Let us now comment this Assembly and our work together to God. May God bless us in all that we do in His name, and may the work of this Assembly be another positive step forward in our unity in Christ and in the peace of our beloved Middle East. Thank you.

His Beatitude

THEOPHILOS III

Patriarch of Jerusalem