

HIS BEATITUDE OPENING SPEECH IN THE 6TH INTERNATIONAL EURO-MEDITERRANEAN CONFERENCE NICOSIA, CYPRUS.

31 October 2016

Esteemed Dr. Ioannides,

Esteemed Professor Moropoulou,

Beloved Fellow Religious Leaders,

Respected Representatives of all Organizations dedicated to
the preservation of Cultural and Religious Heritage Sites,

Distinguished Participants,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We are delighted to be present at this significant conference that is focused primarily on the protection and preservation of sites, that are of cultural and religious significance and we bring greetings to you from the Holy Land, a region that is rich in such sites, and where for many generations peoples of many faiths, ethnicities, languages, and cultures have lived together and formed a unique tapestry of civilization.

The work before this conference us urgent. The current situation of change and disruption in the Middle East has already resulted in the destruction of precious and irreplaceable historic and religious sites, even to the extent of almost eradicating the communities that have lived by and worshipped in these sites for centuries. The barbarism of

these actions is extreme and the damage that is being done may prove to be irreversible.

We, in the Middle East understand the importance of our uniquely diverse cultural and religious heritage. This diversity is at the heart of our identity and the preservation both of the physical and spiritual witnesses of this diversity as well as of our diverse communities themselves, is absolutely necessary for any truly peaceful future for our region that will be founded on mutual respect and reconciliation. With each act of persecution against a particular religious or ethnic group, with each act of destruction of a holy place, such a peaceful future for the human family is profoundly threatened.

In this situation, the Rum Orthodox Patriarchate of Jerusalem is a beacon of hope. The Patriarchate has always been, and remains, committed to spreading the message of peaceful co-existence mutual respect, and fruitful reconciliation. As our long history has proven, most especially the Church is a beacon of hope that embraces so many nationalities and cultures in the Middle East.

Ladies and Gentlemen, why are we here?

This gathering itself, by being truly international, and especially by representing the principal national authorities and cultures of our region, including the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, the State of Israel, the Palestinian Authority, and Egypt, along with so many others, in a major initiative for peace in the Middle East. We know that peace will only be established through such international co-operation and collaboration and this conference is a major step in this direction.

Most importantly this conference recognizes the centrality of the role of religion in human society. Religious sites are not

simply cultural artifacts of archaeological curiosities. Religious sites are the living testimony to sacred history, and are signs of the deepest human longings and aspirations. While religious sites can and have been places of division, they are properly and in the Holy Land often are, places of unity, where peoples of different traditions find common ground. We, who are the servants and guardians of Christian sites, for example, are often moved by the devotion and respect that those of other faiths show, when they come to these sites.

As you know, we are currently engaged in the most significant joint venture in the Holy Land to have been undertaken in many years. The three Communities of the Patriarchate, the Franciscan Custody and the Armenian Patriarchate have established a joint project for the restoration of the Sacred Aedicule of the Holy Sepulcher. This work is being supported by the three Communities jointly, and the work is being carried out by a team of experts under the supervision and direction of Professor Moropoulou of the National Technical University of Athens, who is with us here.

Once again in this work of technical renovation and reconstruction we see more than simply a feat of extraordinary engineering and scientific accomplishment. For here, in this renovation, we see a new venture in reconciliation. The Holy Sepulcher has been one of the most keenly contested religious sites in history: and today it is being restored on the basis of an innovative and fresh co-operation. This is significant beyond words and we consider it to be a sign of real hope for our Holy Land and for the world. We look forward to the successful completion of the project before Easter next year, and we hope very much that this has laid the basis for other such projects in the Holy Land and around our region.

We have said at similar gatherings that those who engage in the necessary physical restoration of sacred buildings and sites exercise an important role as structural engineers. We,

who serve those buildings and sites exercise that complementary role of

of being spiritual engineers— the spiritual engineers not simply of the religious lives of individuals, but of the religious identities of our cultures and our civilization. As you give yourselves to the protection of sites, so we who are spiritual leaders give ourselves to the oversight of those who worship in them, and whose identity has been shaped by them.

There is a deep *symbiosis* here between our roles and work. Without communities that practice a living faith, religious sites are one-dimensional. Equally, communities of a living faith, especially the communities of the Abrahamic traditions that all have deep roots in both the land and in history are diminished when they are unconnected to the sites of their sacred history.

We wish to commend the deliberations of this body, now holding its sixth conference. This shows a proper commitment to the issues at stake, which are both immediate and long term. It is of special importance that you recognize the role and power of religion with respect to the protection and renovation of cultural and spiritual sites, as well as in dynamics of the difficulties that currently affect the Middle East and other parts of the world. Not to do so is to misunderstand the nature of the human community.

We also wish to acknowledge and thank our dear brother, His Beatitude Chrysostomos, the Archbishop of Cyprus, for his commitment to the Church and the peoples of the Holy Land and for the support he gives to efforts at peace-building, co-existence and reconciliation.

May God bless the work that you are doing at this conference, do that generations to come may continue to enjoy and be renewed by the cultural and religious sites that have for centuries nurtured and sustained the human spirit.

Thank you.

His Beatitude

THEOPHILOS III

Patriarch of Jerusalem