

# REMARKS AT THE SEASON'S GREETINGS RECEPTION HOSTED BY THE ISRAELI MINISTRY OF TOURISM – MERCAZ SHIMSHON BEIT SCHMUEL.

13 December 2016

Your Excellency, Mr. Levin,

Your Excellency, Mr. Halevi,

Respected Members of the Ministry of Tourism,

Fellow Heads of Churches and Religious Leaders,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Once again, as we approach this rich and evocative season of religious observances, the eyes of the world are focused on the Holy Land. And we are reminded that Jerusalem holds a unique place in the hearts of millions of believers around the globe.

It is the dream of a lifetime for thousands of people to be able to come to this Holy City and to this Holy Land on pilgrimage at least once in their life, and so many come more than once. For so many the chief object of their journey is the Holy Tomb of our Lord Jesus Christ, and we see their eagerness, their deep desire for spiritual nourishment. As the Psalmist says, so we experience:

*As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you,  
O God.*

*My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.*

*When shall I come and behold the face of God?*

*(Ps. 42:1)*

Countless pilgrims come here driven by this very basic spiritual longing, and pilgrimage has increased as we have been giving attention to the restoration of our most sacred site, the Sacred Edicule of the Holy Tomb of our Lord Jesus Christ – a destination not just for Christian pilgrims, but for pilgrims of other religious traditions as well, who are prompted by the yearnings of their hearts to venerate this most sacred spot.

So we to whom Divine Providence has entrusted the role of servant and guardian of the Holy Places understand the meaning of pilgrimage not in terms of ordinary tourism, but in terms of something more enduring, something more fundamental to our human life and community.

For pilgrimage has to do with the soul of the people, both of the indigenous community of faith as well as of those who journey here from other lands. Pilgrimages give to individuals and to communities a dimension that is not visible to the eye, but is only perceivable by the heart.

The culture of pilgrimage promotes and deepens many aspects of our common human experience that are good in themselves; for example, unity, peace, reconciliation, and mutual understanding. When people from different countries and cultures gather at a Holy Place in prayer and devotion, every difference between them falls away, and they are united in a divine-human encounter that reveals to them that they share a common humanity and that they share a common destiny.

We must, therefore, not simply promote pilgrimage and do all in our power to make it as easy as possible for the faithful to have access to the Holy Places, especially at the time of the Great Feasts. We must not simply count numbers. We must not simply look to the bottom line.

More than anything we must create an atmosphere that positively values pilgrimage and pilgrims, and understands the role that pilgrims play in deepening all those aspects of our common life to which we are all committed.

Ordinary tourists simply come to look, but pilgrims come to open their hearts and souls

to the Divine. When pilgrims come to the Holy Land, they embrace the land and its peoples without distinction. They understand the integrity and unity of the Holy Land and its complementary cultures and religious traditions. They sense the importance of the historic significance that Judaism, Christianity, and Islam give to the full identity of the Holy Land. Pilgrimage therefore is the great witness of the sacred history of our Holy Land.

So pilgrimage helps diverse peoples from many lands near and far understand each other at a deeper level. And we know the testimony of so many pilgrims, who have been changed as they come from their own countries and cultures to a place where all countries and cultures gather, mingle, worship together, and understand the spiritual mission of Jerusalem as the city that gathers the nations in its embrace.

Pilgrims bring great hope when they come here, hope for an encounter with the living God, hope for a deeper spiritual life, hope for eternal meaning in a world of fleeting superficialities. They bring hope to us.

In their turn, pilgrims take away from the Holy Places a fresh energy when they return to their homes. This has been so from

the beginning, when the earliest pilgrims would come to the Holy Land, participate in worship here, and then return to their own communities to bring our customs and religious observances to those who would never have the chance to come here.

We are therefore always vigilant to keep the Holy Places as places of spiritual encounter.

The Holy Places are a tangible sign of hope for our world, precisely because they are the focus of this divine-human encounter, and therefore of the infinite possibility that peace, mutual respect, and reconciliation give to the human community. The Rum Orthodox Patriarchate, along with our sisters and brothers of the other Christian communities of the Holy Land, continues to facilitate the spiritual journeys of all who come here in the humility and longing of pilgrimage.

We wish to express our gratitude to you, Your Excellencies, and to all those in government, who display the necessary sensitivity to the true nature of the Holy Places that is rightly theirs.

We value and appreciate this initiative that gives us the opportunity to be together and share our common concerns and commitments so that together we can improve the accessibility of the Holy Places to all who come here. So far our co-operation and mutual understanding between the Ministry and our Churches has been proved to be extremely conducive to the encouragement of pilgrimages to the Holy Land, and for this we are appreciative. And we look forward to a deeper co-operation so that pilgrims have the basic services which they would normally expect to have, as they do in the area around the Sea of Galilee, including Kafer Nahum.

We wish you peace and happiness in this holiday Season.

Thank you.

His Beatitude

**THEOPHILOS III**

Patriarch of Jerusalem