

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

His Beatitude Theophilos III

Patriarch of Jerusalem

9 January 2017

Your Paternity

The Custos of the Holy Land,

Beloved Members of the Franciscan Fraternity,

Dear Fathers,

We welcome you to our Patriarchate on this joyous Feast, and we greet you with words of celebration from the Service of Matins for the Feast of the Nativity:

Our Saviour, the dayspring from the East,

has visited us from on high,

and we, who were in darkness and shadow,

have found the truth,

for the Lord is born of the Virgin!

The Feast of the Nativity is one of great joy, a joy that is a

gift from God the Father, and that is at the heart of our Christian faith and witness. This is the great joy that the angels announced to the shepherds (Lk. 2:10), and this is the same joy that is born again on this Feast in the Holy Cave.

We must always nurture this joy in ourselves and in our communities. Our Christmas celebration has a special significance for our Christian *martyria*, not least because we are experiencing new developments in the challenges we face in our region: the rise of extremism, persecution, and displacement; attempts to restrict some religious practices; and the pressure that is put on our sacred property and on our inheritance. And in the world over we see a disturbing rise in violence of all kinds.

Jerusalem is the place where the members of our local Christian communities, the pilgrims who come to us, and all people of good will, are renewed in the energy of hope, the consolation of the fruits of our faith, and the sacred atmosphere of this Holy Land, that emanates from the Holy Places of which we are the guardians. This is the visible sign that our mission is not in vain. Those who are critical of the Church must understand that our spiritual Eucharistic mission is strong and continues to have a huge impact. We are hearing calls for a fresh understanding of the oversight of the Holy City, with a special body to ensure the Status Quo and the administration of the Holy Places. This is the challenge to our role, and we must be prepared to assume a greater role, which must increase in importance with respect to the establishment of lasting peace. Therefore our unity of heart and purpose is crucial.

Christmas is the feast of peace and justice. We who lay claim to be the followers of the Prince of Peace know that in trusting God there can be no peace without justice. As the Prophet Isaiah proclaims:

The effect of justice will be peace,

*and the result of justice,
quietness and trust forever.*

(Isaiah 32:17)

The peace and justice of God's promise to us are assured to us again by our Lord himself, when in the Sermon on the Mount he says, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled" (Mt. 5:6). Therefore there is no way for peace to co-exist with injustice.

In this Feast of the Nativity, we declare that the fruit of truth, justice and reconciliation are the cause and the sustenance of our joy. As the Christian community we give thanks to God, who has enlightened our minds and strengthened our hearts to join our efforts in the restoration of the Sacred Edicule of the Holy Sepulchre and to continue the renovations of the Church of the Nativity. We are committed together to the ongoing work of the restoration of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, and this is a great sign of encouragement and hope to our region in particular and to the world.

We thank you once again for your Christmas and the New Year visit to our Patriarchate on this happy Feast, and for your greetings. May Christ our God, who is born in the cave of Bethlehem, renew his joy in us and in the hearts of our communities and all the peoples in the Holy Land, that we may work for the fruits of truth, justice, and reconciliation, and may God bless you and the members of your communities this Christmastide.

We pray to our Lord Jesus Christ that the New Year will be a fresh season of reconciliation and co-existence of the Abrahamic traditions in the Holy Land, for this is the work that brings forth the fruit of peace.

Thank you