

ADDRESS TO THE HEADS OF THE CHURCHES & THE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES OF THE HOLY LAND ON THE OCCASION OF THE FEAST OF THE NATIVITY

His Beatitude Theophilus III

Patriarch of Jerusalem

9 January 2017

Your Excellencies,

Your Eminences,

Your Graces,

Beloved Members of our Respective Fraternities,

Dear Fathers and Pastors,

We thank you for your greetings for the great Feast of the Nativity of our Lord Jesus Christ, and we rejoice in the words of this hymn:

Today Christ is born of the Virgin in Bethlehem!

Today he who knows no beginning begins to be,

and the Word is made flesh.

The heavenly powers rejoice,

and the earth with humankind makes glad;

The Magi offer gifts to the Master,

and the shepherds marvel at his birth.

And we cry aloud unceasingly:

Glory to God in the highest,

and on earth peace, good will among all people.

(From Matins of the Nativity)

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 that 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 disrupting 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.

This is the visible sign that our mission is not in vain. Those who are critical of the Church must understand that our spiritual and 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 a challenge to our role, and we

must be prepared to assume this greater role, which must increase in importance with respect to the establishment of a 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 have been brought to earth by the Incarnation of the Divine Logos. This fruit of new life the world rejects, but we know to be the way, the truth, and the life.

This coming to earth of 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 our gathering in 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 of the Holy Land, that we may work for the fruits of truth, justice, 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