

ADDRESS OF HIS BEATITUDE THE PATRIARCH OF JERUSALEM AT ICCI & MUSALAHA

On 27th and 28th January / 9th and 10th February 2017, H.H.B. our Father and Patriarch of Jerusalem Theophilos sent his address to the two-day conference of ICCI & MUSALAHA, that is, the International Christian Committee in Israel, which was organized at the Legacy hotel in Nazareth. His address is as follows:

CONFERENCE "Addressing the Challenges of Christians in Israel"

Sponsored by

The International Christian Committee in Israel

And Musalaha

At the Legacy Hotel,

Nazareth

9-10 February 2017

"Mr Elias,

Professor Munayer,

Distinguished Participants,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We greet you, dear Friends, as you gather in your conference, and we welcome this opportunity to send this message to you as you address various serious questions, and propose courses of action, in support of the Christian community of the Holy Land.

As we reflect on the questions before this conference, we remember the fundamental principle that the presence of the Christian community is an integral component of Middle Eastern society. The very roots of Christianity are here in this land, and without a vital, vibrant native Christian presence, the Middle East would be significantly diminished, and the very character of the Holy Land would be compromised.

Christians are not somehow foreigners or late-comers to the scene. To give just one example the Rum Orthodox Patriarchate is the oldest continuous religious institution in the Holy Land, pre-dating all other religious institutions in the region. This is why it is acknowledged by all Christians as the Mother of all the Churches, founded on the blood of our Lord Jesus Christ. This alone is an eloquent testimony to the indigenous nature of the Christian presence here, but there are many others. We must always begin any conversation about the future of the Christian community of the Holy Land by remembering our proper place at the very heart of this region.

Over the centuries this unique identity has been hidden by subsequent political and social developments. Having been a part of his land since the time of the Apostles, over the centuries our identity has been, as it were, separated out in various ways. We have been considered a separate and distinct group – a *tayfeh* – by those who have ordered our society, and the effect of this identification has been to mask the truth of our deep roots in the region. This has been the case with each successive ruler and governmental authority, stretching back hundreds of years.

One of our chief tasks is always to insist on a counter-narrative, a narrative of identity and belonging that emphasizes the truth of our sacred history, and the testimony of the Holy Places to the Christian presence here. This counter-narrative is not just a story; it is a living witness – a true *martyria* – and this living witness must be evident in the ecclesial and social life of the Christian community.

We who are the Christian community of the Holy Land must be appropriately self-critical in order both to understand and to bear proper responsibility for redressing the imbalances of our present situation. On the one hand, we recognize that we depend on the support and encouragement of Christians and others of good will around the world. We see this support and encouragement most clearly in the many thousands of pilgrims who come to this land every year, and we know that when pilgrims have been spiritually renewed by their visit here, they return home as our best ambassadors.

We can see this also through the engagement of our Churches with each other, and also in the work of the World Council of Churches, the Middle East Council of Churches, and all the many organizations that work with us for peace, justice, and reconciliation.

On the other hand, we are clear that we must see in the Christian community of the Middle East a fresh commitment to the visible practice of the Christian faith, to the showing in new and significant ways to the world the fruits of our Christian faith. This means an increased participation in worship as well as in acts of service. We say this because it is precisely in the Eucharistic gathering that we show our unity and oneness, and make visible our Christian mission here. We must have a hand in determining our own life and future, and we cannot expect others always to do for us what we are failing to do for ourselves.

True partnerships expect and require true maturity. The Christian community of this region has given birth to, and embodies, the noblest achievements of our human civilization. We must resist attempts to infantilize or undermine the genuine nature of our life. We cannot consider ourselves to be without a significant contribution. On the contrary, we take pride in our part in the history and culture of the Middle East, for we embody in the life of the Christian community of the Holy Land the divine-human encounter.

This divine-human encounter is at the heart of our faith, life, and values. The Church, as we have mentioned, is a Eucharistic community that celebrates this reality, and without this the heart of the Holy Land ceases to beat and to give life.

We know only too well from our experience of life in this region that religion determines so much in terms of identity and existence. This makes it all the more crucial that Christians must be committed to the values and truths of our faith, so that our actions reveal our *politeia* in Christ. As Saint Paul encourages us in the Letter to the Philippians, "live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ" (Philippians 1:27).

As we look to the future of the well-being of the Christian presence in the Holy Land and the Middle East, our own energy and activity as those whose faith is clear for all to see will be the single most determinative factor. We must learn afresh the meaning of our Lord's words in the Gospel of Saint Matthew, when he said "Let your light shine before others, so that they may see you good works and give glory to your Father in heaven" (Mt. 5:16). If we want to be truly faithful Christians, we also know that we shall experience sadness and sorrow, for we are the community of the Cross. It has been so from the beginning, as Saint Paul says in the Second Letter to Timothy that "indeed, all who want to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted" (2 Tim. 3:12).

This is why we are aware that the tasks before us are not easy. We must not be discouraged or faint-hearted. There is no doubt that we live in a time of unprecedented difficulty and even persecution of Christians and other innocent human beings in our region. This puts an even greater premium on the life of our communities and on the role that we who call the Holy Land our home are prepared to undertake. Of course, we need the help of our friends; but we need also a renewal of commitment among our own people, so that together we may offer

a new and more visible mission and *martyria* in which the Christian community of the Middle East takes its rightful place in the rich landscape of nationalities and religious communities of our region.

We wish you every encouragement and success in the endeavours of this conference. May God bless you, and all the peoples of our beloved Holy Land.

Thank you.”