

ADDRESS OF H.H.B. THE PATRIARCH OF JERUSALEM TO THE HEADS OF CHURCHES ON THE OCCASION OF EASTER

His Beatitude Theophilos III

Patriarch of Jerusalem

18 April 2017

Your Beatitudes,

Your Eminences,

Your Graces,

Beloved Monastics,

Dear Fathers,

Christ is risen!

We welcome you here to our Patriarchate as we celebrate Easter on the same day this year, and we thank you for your Paschal greetings. The happy circumstance of our common celebration is a providential blessing on the work that we have done in the restoration of the Sacred Edicule that was completed just a few short weeks ago. While the responsibility of this restoration has rested on the shoulders of the three Communities, of the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate, the Franciscan Custody, and the Armenian Patriarchate, this has been a common witness of all the Churches and Christian communities of the Holy Land.

We celebrate this feast of Pascha in the shadow of persecution in our region. Just last week on Palm Sunday, two churches in

Egypt were the target of violence in which many faithful worshippers lost their lives, and when His Holiness the Patriarch of the Coptic Orthodox Church was imperiled. We wish to express on this occasion to Your Eminence, Archbishop Antonius, our condolences and prayers for the dead and injured. This was an act of terrible viciousness against the Church, and it is a painful reminder that even here in the Middle East, the cradle of civilization as well as of Christianity, people are still persecuted for the sake of faith and of conscience.

Nor can we pass over in silence the despicable acts that are happening right now in our neighbouring country, Syria. We cannot remain indifferent to the fact that the divine image in of our fellow human beings is being sacrificed on the altar of conflicting political interests.

These situations on our doorstep are an imperative challenge to us to join together to lay aside the comparatively trivial matters that divide us, and act in concert. We must together raise our voices to do all in our power to appeal to the international community to bring an end to this untold and arbitrary human suffering. We are surrounded by a horrifying unpredictability in the political sphere, and this unpredictability results in terrible instability, danger and vicissitudes for the ordinary people of our region, and especially the poor and vulnerable.

But even in the face of such persecution and danger, we are not bereft of joy. As the Apostle Paul asserts;

Since it is by God's mercy that we are engaged in this ministry, we do not lose heart...We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed but not driven to despair; persecuted but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies.

(2 Cor. 4:1,8-9)

The Feast of Easter is the fulfillment of the promise of God that death would be destroyed, and that the gate of eternal life would be open to all. This is the ground of our resolve in our spiritual mission, and this is what strengthens us in the face of unparalleled difficulties and challenges in these times.

So we celebrate this Pascha with joy, because life has triumphed over death, light over darkness, love over hate, faith over despair, truth over falsehood. The uncreated Light that shines from the empty Tomb of our Lord Jesus Christ is the testimony of the Incarnate Logos and his victory over death, and so we are able to rejoice with heaven and earth, as Saint John of Damascus wrote:

Now let the heavens be joyful!

Let earth her song begin!

Let the round world keep high triumph,

and all that is therein;

Let all things seen and unseen

their notes together blend,

for Christ the Lord is risen,

our joy has no end.

May the joy of this Easter celebration, which we hold in common this year, renew us in our commitment to the spiritual mission of Jerusalem and the Holy Land, and may God bless all of you to whom the leadership of your communities has been entrusted, and all your faithful.

Christ is risen!

Thank you.