

ADDRESS TO HIS HOLINESS POPE FRANCIS ON THE OCCASION OF THE VISIT OF HIS BEATITUDE THE PATRIARCH OF JERUSALEM THEOPHILOS TO THE VATICAN

23 October 2017

Your Holiness,

Your Eminences,

Your Graces,

We greet you, Your Holiness, with the blessings of the Holy City of Jerusalem, and we bring with us the hopes and aspirations of the many peoples of our region who long for peaceful co-existence and the restoration of the true integrity of our multi-cultural, multi-ethnic, multi-religious society.

We recall with great joy your pilgrimage to the Holy Land in 2014 with His All-Holiness the Ecumenical Patriarch, which marked the 50th anniversary of the joint pilgrimage of the late Pope Paul VI and the late Patriarch Athenagoras. We remember especially our joint witness before the All-Holy and Life-Giving Tomb of our Lord Jesus Christ. We also have in mind today the gathering here a month later with President Shimon Perez and President Mahmoud Abbas, in which the multi-religious nature of our region was highlighted.

We are here today for this fraternal visit on a pastoral mission. We have come to Rome to express our concern to you, Your Holiness, about the profound threat that has been

developing in recent years to the integrity of the Holy Land and the Middle East. As Your Holiness is aware, the Middle East is, by its very nature, evidenced by our history and the presence of the holy sites of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, a pluralistic society. For millennia we have lived a common life in which our many cultures, ethnicities, and religions have flourished in mutual respect and co-operation.

In recent years we have seen fresh attacks on the very nature of our society and the well-being of various religious and ethnic groups. We have seen the rise of new persecutions, and an increase in displaced populations. All this is well-known and well-documented.

We come now to share with you the new and deeply disturbing situation in the Holy Land, in which the historic rights of the Christian community are being undermined. Recently there has been introduced into the Knesset a proposed bill which, if passed into law, would change fundamentally the rights of the Churches over their land and property. This would encroach on historic and legal protections that have supported our multi-cultural, multi-ethnic, and multi-religious society for centuries and that have been upheld without challenge by successive governmental authorities in our region.

Furthermore, we now face a direct affront to the integrity of the Holy City in a wrongful and, we believe, unjust judgement against the Patriarchate, and in favour of right-wing settlor groups, with respect to some of our historic properties in the Christian Quarter of the Old City. We hold that the judgement in favour of the sale of these properties is incorrect, and we are engaged in an appeal through the proper channels. However, we are deeply concerned about the path of both these actions, and the threat that they represent to the well-being of the Christian presence in the Holy City in particular, and the Holy Land in general.

In this regard we have come to Rome not in our capacity as the

Patriarch of one Church only, but in the name of all the Heads of the Churches and Christian communities of the Holy Land. We to whom the pastoral oversight of the Christian communities of the Holy Land have been entrusted have met and are fully united in opposition to what we see as an attempt to change the provisions and the spirit of the historic Status Quo and the delicate balance that must exist if the Holy Land is to be sustained in its integrity as a region where many peoples can live and flourish and be witnesses to the divine-human encounter of which the holy sites are a tangible sign.

We are asking all those who love Jerusalem and the Holy Land, and all people of good will, around the world to join us in opposing these incursions on the life of the Christian community, and we wish to inform Your Holiness in person of these matters. We are encouraging all to assist us in opposing the draft bill and to rectifying a wrongfully concluded judgement, thus giving a clear message of international support to the Christian presence in the Holy Land and the wider Middle East. In this way we shall help in the best way we can to ensure that our region remains what it has always been, a place where peoples of many cultures and religions may live in peaceful co-existence and mutual regard.

Thank you.