

ADDRESS OF H.H.B. THE PATRIARCH OF JERUSALEM AT THE CONFERENCE ON PLACES OF WORSHIP AND HOLY CITES IN CYPRUS

Conference on Places of Worship and Holy Sites
sponsored by the Conference of European Churches

Jerusalem as a Holy Site

His Beatitude Theophilos III
Patriarch of Jerusalem

9 November 2017

Your Beatitude Archbishop Chrysostom of Cyprus,

Dr. Elizabeth Kitamovitch,

Respected Participants in this Conference,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The matter before us is one of the utmost seriousness. The invitation to this conference outlined, in a concise and clear way, why the status and protection of Holy Sites is of such urgent importance.

Holy Sites are, of course, first and foremost holy to the particular religious tradition of which they are a witness. They are primarily places of worship and spiritual refreshment, and they are often the destination of pilgrims as well as frequently the regular places of worship for local religious communities.

But, as this conference recognizes, the significance and importance of Holy Sites are broader. To quote from a document preliminary to this gathering, "holy places can be sources of tensions which can affect peaceful coexistence instead of fostering social plurality and diversity." This conference recognizes that holy places have a wider significance and are "not only the concern of believers."

Fundamentally this conference acknowledges that the international community must understand and support the fact that there is "a particular right to manage holy sites, a right to own them, to gather there for religious purposes, and to perform religious ceremonies...we are speaking about the living heritage of holy places."

We cannot overstate the crucial nature of these primary points in any discussion about holy places, and we wish to elaborate on them by considering Jerusalem as a holy site.

When we think of Jerusalem, we often think of the city as a place of holy sites, and this is true. Contained within the Old City there are scores of holy sites, and in the immediate vicinity there are many more. But today we wish to think of Jerusalem as a whole as a holy site in and of itself. We believe that this perspective will give us a singular insight into the subject before us.

There are many holy sites around the world, and many holy places that are the object of veneration to more than one religious group. But there is no other place on earth like Jerusalem. Jerusalem is unique in so many respects and this is well enough known that we do not need to enumerate those details here.

Yet we do wish to put forward the concept of Jerusalem as a holy site in and of itself, and not only as a geographical area that contains holy sites.

What is the significance of this position?

First, to say that the city itself is a holy site is to say something about its fundamental religious and spiritual identity. While there are or have been other cities and towns that have taken the adjective “holy” to themselves – one thinks of Constantinople and Rome, for example – no other city has had an identity similar to Jerusalem. And no other city has borne this kind of identity for anywhere near as long as Jerusalem.

When we consider that Jerusalem is holy not to one, but to three of the world’s major religious traditions, we find that Jerusalem sets itself apart in every respect.

But as we know, holiness is not just about geography. It is also about a less tangible, but just as compelling landscape – the landscape of the divine-human encounter.

The Holy Land is the only place on earth where, so the Abrahamic traditions affirm, God has communicated with humanity in clear and direct ways, and Jerusalem has been at the centre of this divine-human activity for millennia.

This is the only place on earth that has been visited by all the prophets, that has been nurtured by their blood, and that has been nurtured by the blood of the Righteous One, Jesus Christ.

This is the place on earth that gives hope to countless millions of people, near and far, who understand deep within their souls that Jerusalem is not simply an earthly city, but a promise of the peace and unity of all humankind. There is no more compelling evidence of this than in the thousands of pilgrims who flock to Jerusalem every month and who long to drink from the spiritual springs of the water of life that Jerusalem provides.

We cannot deny that Jerusalem is a contested holy site. Human failure and human sinfulness scar Jerusalem as much as they scar every other endeavour. But this is itself also evidence

of the fundamental identity of Jerusalem as a holy site, for in these difficulties the eye of faith sees the force of evil that attempts to destroy the power that Jerusalem holds in its vocation as the true spiritual home of all humanity.

We must also always remember a great truth about holy places. While it is clear that holy places fall under the care and protection of particular religious groups, and for administrative purposes in our contemporary world we speak of "ownership" and the care and guardianship of them, it is crucial from a spiritual perspective that we understand that we do not possess holy places; they possess us. They embrace us in the mystery of the divine-human encounter. While divine providence has given the holy places into our care, we give ourselves to these holy places so that we may be true witnesses, true servants of the martyria of the holy places.

All of these observations mean that any undermining of the true nature of holy places is a very serious matter indeed. This conference is considering a range of important questions. Here we would like to give examples of how the fundamental nature of Jerusalem as a holy site is being undermined.

For generations the sacred character of the Holy Land has been protected by the Status Quo, which is recognized by both religious and civil authorities and the international community as protecting and guaranteeing the rights and privileges of the Churches, especially with respect to the holy sites and to other religious activity. The provisions of the Status Quo have been upheld carefully by successive civil authorities in our region.

Over the last several months, we have seen a new level of threat to the stability of our multi-ethnic, multi-cultural, multi-religious society of which our holy sites are concrete evidence.

Over the last few years, there has been a marked and

disturbing increase in so-called "price tag hate crimes," which are directed in many cases to the vandalism and desecration of holy places. While these acts have been condemned by all, including governments, they continue, and effective ways of preventing them and punishing the perpetrators are still to be found.

More threatening to the Status Quo and the rights of religious minorities is a proposed bill that is circulating in the Knesset that would, if passed, severely intrude on the rights of the Churches over their properties. Whether this bill has a chance of being passed is not the point; the mere fact that it has gained the signatures of one third of members of the Knesset and should be discussed at all is a new level of threat to the diversity of our society and the manner in which holy places have been managed and cared for.

Most significant and worrying, however, are the underhanded actions of radical settler groups who in the majority of cases acquire property in Jerusalem's Old City and elsewhere utilizing illegitimate methods of coercion and undue authority. The most recent issue concerns the properties owned by the Patriarchate and known as the "I at Jafa Gate" case, in which a radical settler group that has for many years been attempting to take over properties in the Christian Quarter of the Old City and thereby diminish the Christian presence in Serti salem. They have claimed to have acquired these properties through what we consider "illegitimate agreements that lack due authority". Crucially negative was the fact that the District Court handed down a wrongful judgment in favour of the settler group. This judgment was in our view incorrect with respect to matters of the law and we are contesting it in the High Court, and bringing the matter to the international community for support.

The movement of these radical settler groups must be curbed and controlled end their intimidating tactics to rid Jerusalem of non-Jews must be resisted to preserve the crucial multi-

faith tapestry of Jerusalem.

When we understand Jerusalem itself as a holy site, and not just the place where holy sites are found, these threats become all the more serious. And these incursions into traditional rights and protections of the Church in the Holy Land affect not just one religious group, but all.

As we consider in this conference what we all understand to be the "living heritage of holy places," the issues that are currently before us in Jerusalem are of pressing concern to us all.

Thank you.