

ADDRESS OF H.H.B. THE PATRIARCH OF JERUSALEM THEOPHILOS TO THE PRESIDENT OF ISRAEL ON THE OCCASION THE CHRISTMAS AND NEW YEAR RECEPTION

27 December 2017

Your Excellency Mr. President,

Your Excellency Mr. Dery,

Respected Members of the Government,

Beloved Fellow Heads of Churches and Leaders of Communities of Faith,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We greet you, Mr. President, as our communities of faith are celebrating this season of light and hope and preparing for the New Year. We in Jerusalem are keenly aware that at this time of the year the eyes of the world are focused on this Holy City and on our Holy Land. At a time of widespread difficulties and confusion for the human family around the world, Jerusalem is the universal symbol of peace and of the vision of a new future for humanity, in which all will be reconciled.

As a Jerusalemite, we know that you, Mr. President, understand the richness of the meaning of Jerusalem. We know of your firm

commitment to the multi-ethnic, multi-cultural, and multi-religious character of Jerusalem and the Holy Land, even in the face of some criticism. And we wish to express to you our gratitude for the positive action that you have taken to help promote the true integrity of this Holy City and the well-being of all our peoples. We are also aware of your support for both pilgrims and the local faithful to be able to venerate the shrines and to worship freely.

We take this opportunity to re-commit ourselves to working to ensure that this unique character of Jerusalem is maintained, since it is the divine-human encounter that gives our Holy City and our Holy Land its special character. In this regard we recall the beautiful words of the Psalmist,

Pray for the peace in Jerusalem:

May they prosper who love you.

(Psalm 122:6)

In the recent academic dialogue between the Orthodox Church and Judaism, hosted by us in the presence of the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew and with the participation of distinguished Jewish scholars, two issues were highlighted; the spiritual and religious significance of Jerusalem for all people. And it was pointed out that peace cannot be achieved by raising physical barriers, but rather by opposing prejudice and bigotry of all kinds, and by promoting mutual respect in accordance with the witness of the Holy Scriptures that God made humanity in God's image and likeness (Gen. 1:26).

It is in this context that Jerusalem is considered theocentric and not anthropocentric, for Almighty God is the central focus of our universe. This means that the dignity of each man, woman, and child is precisely this divine image and likeness of which we read in the Book of Genesis. Without this fundamental truth, it is impossible to understand the full significance of Jerusalem.

Our Holy City of Jerusalem is passing the most testing of times. Developments are placing huge pressures on our respective communities making them experience unease, anxiety and disquietude. Mr. President, we know that you appreciate how the Status Quo, with its internationally recognized set of rights, rules and customs, enables all the religious communities and the civil authorities to carry out our respective roles in harmony, and that it must remain in full effect so that all may work under its provisions without any alteration or amendment.

Inasmuch as indeed we appreciate your sincere embrace of the communities that live in the State of Israel, Mr. President, we cannot hide our concern about recent developments that relate to our Christian communities in particular. We remain troubled about the proposed bill circulating in the Knesset that intrudes upon the rights of Churches and the provisions of the Status Quo. We are also hoping that present decision-makers will be assiduous in curbing radical groups in our society who seek to make Jerusalem and the Holy Land an exclusive, rather than an inclusive society. We remain confident that we will soon rejoice a positive outcome in the "Jaffa Gate" case that is now before the High Court.

The true identity of Jerusalem and the Holy Land depends on the well-being of all our communities of faith. As you know, and as we are always emphasizing, this is a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural, and multi-religious landscape, and without this diversity, the true nature of our Jerusalem is lost.

We say this because our spiritual responsibilities embrace believers across civil and religious boundaries: for they are within Israel, the Palestinian Authority, and the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, as well as within the three Abrahamic traditions. As communities of the Scriptures, we are committed to promoting peace, co-existence, and harmony among all people, as we read in the spirit of the Scriptures:

For God himself is our peace...he has broken down the dividing wall, and has abolished enmity.

(cf. Eph.2:14)

We take the opportunity of this blessed celebration to thank you once again, Mr. President, for all that you do for all the peoples of Jerusalem and this country.

As we look to a new year, may this season of light and hope, in which all our religious communities are celebrating, be also a season of light and hope for our hurting world. May God bless you, Mr. President, in your leadership, and may God bless all the peoples of our beloved Holy Land.

Thank you.

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