

CHRISTMAS GREETINGS FROM H.H.B. THE PATRIARCH OF JERUSALEM THEOPHILOS TO THE FRANCISCAN CUSTODY OF THE HOLY LAND

Your Paternity Father Francesco,

Your Eminences,

Your Graces,

Beloved Members of our Respective Fraternities,

Dear Fathers,

It is with great joy that we greet you, Your Excellency, dear Father Francesco, and your community as you celebrate the Incarnation of the Divine Logos, our Lord Jesus Christ, especially in this year in which you also mark the 800th anniversary of the presence of the Custody in the Holy Land. We recall that Saint Francis himself had a deep devotion to this feast, and is credited with the creation of the first Christmas crèche. Saint Francis himself said:

I want to do something that will recall the memory of that Child who was born in Bethlehem, to see with bodily eyes the inconveniences of his infancy, how he lay in the manger, and how the ox and donkey stood by.

The whole world looks to the Holy City of Bethlehem and the Holy Land with this same longing, the longing to see with our own eyes, and to know in our hearts, the mystery of this

divine-human encounter.

As we celebrate the Christmas feast, we remember in thanksgiving the great event of this year as we celebrated the renovation of the Sacred Edicule. A momentous event in itself, it also represented a new and deeper level of co-operation between our two fraternities, to whom Divine Providence has entrusted the care and guardianship of the Holy Sites. Even now the discoveries that lay beneath the Edicule are capturing the religious and spiritual imaginations of the world. On this occasion we wish to express our gratitude to you and your fraternity once again for this special co-operation.

We look forward to the second phase of this important work, which encompasses the area beneath the floor of the rotunda.

Our deeper co-operation has also found important fruit in our joint response to less happy events of this year, most especially the proposed law that is circulating in the Knesset that will alter the provisions, rights, and privileges of the Status Quo, as well as the unacceptable attack on our "Jaffa Gate" in which radical settler groups are attempting an intrusion into the Christian Quarter in an attempt to strike at the heart of the multi-cultural, multi-ethnic and multi-religious character of Jerusalem.

Our unity as the Heads of the Churches, Your Paternity in our opposition to these common threats not only to our historic rights, but also to the integrity of this Holy City and Holy Land, is so important. In our pastoral ministry we are all committed to a vital and vibrant Christian community here, and we are also committed to keeping open to all people without distinction access to the Holy Sites as places of devotion and worship.

As we rejoice with you in the spirit of Saint Francis, who recognized the importance of the Holy Places as a source of spiritual renewal and refreshment, let us remain united in our

resolve in the ministry that has been entrusted to us. The earth and the heavens exult as heaven comes down to earth and the incarnate Logos takes on our human flesh and our human life. As Saint Francis himself wrote:

Let the heavens and the earth praise him, the Glorious One,

Let us praise and exalt him above all for ever.

We wish you, Your Excellency, and all your brethren and communities, a blessed Christmas and a peaceful New Year. May the light that shines from Bethlehem bring hope to our world, and strengthen us all.

Thank you.