

ADDRESS OF H.H.B. THE PATRIARCH OF JERUSALEM TO THE FRANCISCAN CUSTODY FOR THEIR VISIT TO THE PATRIARCH FOR THE FEAST OF THE NATIVITY

9 January 2018

Your Paternity, dear Father Francesco,

Beloved Members of our respective Brotherhoods,

Dear Fathers,

We welcome you to our Patriarchate for this happy Feast, and we thank you for your kind greetings as we celebrate the Nativity of our Lord Jesus Christ. We sing with jubilation

Your nativity, O Christ our God,

has illumined the world like the Light of Wisdom.

The Uncreated Light that shines from the cave at Bethlehem not only illumines us; it gives hope to our region and our world. For this is the Light that the darkness can never overcome.

As we look back over the year that is past, we recall the 800th anniversary of the arrival of Father Elia da Cortona and his friar companions at Akko in the year 1217. We were pleased to be able to be a part of your celebrations in Assisi by the presence of our representative, His Eminence Archbishop Nectarios, and we are glad that this year also saw the significant collaboration between us in the restoration and

rededication of the Sacred Edicule of the Holy Sepulchre.

For all this we give thanks to God, and we wish to express to you, dear Father Francesco, our gratitude to you for your commitment to the security and well-being of the Holy Places. Our unity of purpose in this endeavor is of supreme importance for the good not just of our respective Brotherhoods and communities, but also for the Christian presence and witness in the Holy Land and the Middle East.

Our co-operation has not only accomplished a great deal, it has laid an important foundation as we look to phase II of the work on the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, and as we look to the renovation and restoration of the Sacred Grotto of the Basilica of the Nativity. Both these projects will require our ongoing relationship of trust and mutual respect.

Even as we celebrate all these good things, we share a mutual concern for threats against the Christian community that have increased in recent months. The Bill of Church Lands would, if passed, significantly alter the provisions of the Status Quo and intrude on the historic rights of the Churches. We are all deeply concerned that such legislation is even being considered at all. And the Jaffa Gate case represents an assault on the Christian Quarter by a group of radical extremists who seek to destroy the multi-cultural, multi-ethnic, and multi-religious integrity of Jerusalem.

We are encouraged by the support we have received from the international community, both from Church and governmental leaders. There have been many public expressions of concern and support, and this is an encouragement to both our Brotherhoods to remain resolute both in our pastoral ministry to our communities and to pilgrims, and also to ensuring the Christian patrimony that Divine Providence has entrusted in our care.

The Incarnation of the Divine Logos, who deigned to accept our

human nature and our human life, and who therefore knew our suffering in himself, is the source of our joy and our hope in this mission. As we celebrate the Nativity, we ask His Most Holy Mother the Theotokos to pray for us, that the one who contained within her womb the Uncontainable One, may give us strength by her prayers, that we may be embraced by the Light of Wisdom.

We wish you a happy Christmas and New Year.

Thank you.