

THE VISITS OF THE PATRIARCHATE ON THE FEAST OF CHRISTMAS OF THE WESTERN CHURCHES

On Friday December /, the customary visits of the Patriarchate on the occasion of Christmas Feast took place at the Fraternity of the Franciscan Custody in the Holy Land at first, and then at the Latin Patriarchate in Jerusalem.

Our Father and Patriarch of Jerusalem Theophilos who was escorted by Hagiotaphite Fathers, addressed the Franciscans as follows;

“Your Paternity, dear Father Francesco,

Your Eminences,

Your Graces,

Beloved Members of our Respective Fraternities,

Beloved in Christ,

We greet you, dear Father Francesco, and your community, with the joy of this holy season as you celebrated the feast of the Nativity. At this time, when the eyes of the world are directed to the Holy Land, we remember these words from the Orthodox services;

O Joseph, proclaim the wonders to David,

the ancestor of God. You have seen a Virgin

great with child; you have given glory with

the shepherds; you have worshipped with

the Magi; and you have been instructed through an angel.

Entreat Christ our God to save our souls.

(Dismissal Hymn, Vespers after the Nativity of Christ, Second
Tone)

By Divine Providence, Saint Joseph was given the responsibility of guarding and protecting the Mother of God and the new-born Saviour Jesus Christ, and so he is an example to us in our own day, to whom the same Divine Providence has entrusted the guarding and protecting of the Holy Places, as well as the shepherding of the Christian communities of the Holy Land. May Saint Joseph strengthen us for this mission by his intercession.

The responsibility of guarding and protecting the Holy Places as well as of serving the Christian communities rests heavily upon us especially when the Christian communities of the Middle East in general and our beloved Holy Land is particular continue to pass through difficult times. This has been a turbulent year, with many problems and challenges. But by the grace of God we have shown a united front, which has enabled us to defend our rights, privileges, and autonomy.

As you yourself have written, "Christmas symbolises unity, coexistence, new beginnings and hope." Our unity of purpose is essential to ensuring the special character of the Holy City of Jerusalem and the Holy Land as the home of the Jews, Christians and Muslims, and as you have so rightly said, "in the Holy Land it is fitting that there should continue to be coexistence between Christians, Muslims, and Jews.' This is the "message of peace and brotherhood between all religions and all peoples.'

The Churches play an essential role in maintaining this spirit of coexistence. Our duty as Christians and as monastics is to ensure the ongoing nature of the Holy Sites as places of worship and spiritual refreshment not just for Christians, but

also for peoples of all faiths who come on pilgrimage. We know the importance of this mission in the ever-increasing number of pilgrims who visit the Holy Places.

Nor can we underestimate our role in the establishment of true peace and reconciliation. The feast of the Nativity is the feast of peace and reconciliation par excellence, when the Prince of Peace came in the flesh to reconcile humanity with God, and human beings with each other. As Saint Paul has written, he was born in human form (Phil. 2:7).

This is the hope of this Christmas season, and this is our commitment.

As we celebrate this feast with you, dear Father Francesco, we take this opportunity to give thanks again for the productive co-operation between our two Brotherhoods in the ongoing restoration of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre and the Grotto of the Church of the Nativity. This co-operation is unprecedented in our shared history, and it is a real sign of the reconciliation that we are called to preach and to live.

May God bless you, Your Paternity, your Brotherhood, and all the Communities entrusted to your pastoral care. We wish you a very happy Christmas and a peaceful New Year.

Thank you”.

And at the Latin Patriarchate as follows;

“Your Excellency, dear Archbishop Pizzaballa,

Your Eminences,

Your Graces,

Dear Fathers,

Beloved in Christ,

As you keep this Christmas feast, we greet you with the joy of

the angels who proclaimed, "Glory be to God on high, and peace, goodwill among all people". We pray that you may know the pace of this holy season and draw strength and illumination from the Incarnate Logos, who is "the Dayspring from the east, who has visited us from on high", in whom "we who were in darkness and shadow have found the truth" (Exapostilarion from Matins of the Nativity).

As you know well, Your Excellency, this has been a year of many challenges, both locally and internationally.

At home we have had to face the ongoing pressure on our rights, privileges, and autonomy as Churches – a pressure that continues to demand our united opposition for the sake of preserving not only the Status Quo, but also the true character of Jerusalem and the Holy Land as a multi-cultural, multi-ethnic, multi-religious society in which a vital, vibrant, living Christian presence is essential.

On an international level, there has been more migration of refugees within the Middle East and abroad, and our region continues to wrestle with the humanitarian crisis of so many displaced and homeless persons. In this regard we cannot forget the plight of our Lord Himself, who as an infant was displaced from his own home by the political unrest of His time.

We are deeply encouraged by the support we have received from Church and governmental leaders around the world, and we have shown to the world our own unity of purpose in many ways. In particular we have recently shown our common witness at the Christmas Festival in Jordan, hosted by His Majesty King Abdullah and His Excellency President Mahmoud Abbas.

It is essential to our common mission here to protect the Christian community of the Middle East and to do all in our power to encourage and help them to remain in their ancestral homes. Our ancient, native Christian communities must not just

survive the present pressures and difficulties; they must thrive and prosper if this region is to maintain its historic and unique identity as the home of the three Abrahamic traditions.

We recognize, dear Archbishop Pizzaballa, your pastoral zeal and your commitment to the well-being of this Holy City and our beloved Holy Land. Your years of selfless service are ample evidence of your love of the Holy Land and all our peoples. Our deepening relationship of co-operation over the years is yet another sign of hope both for those who call the Holy Land their home, as well as for those who call Jerusalem as their spiritual home and who come here in thousands every month as pilgrims.

Here is our common witness to the world. May we share together the rejoicing of the whole of creation at the birth of Christ, as we sing;

Make glad, O ye righteous;

greatly rejoice, O ye heavens;

ye mountains dance for joy. Christ is born...

Angels sing praises, saying,

“O Lord past our understanding,

Glory to you.”

(Katavasie from Matins of the Feast of the Nativity)

May God bless you, Your Excellency, along with your bishops, clergy, and people, and may the Incarnate Logos illumine all our hearts and fill us with a peaceful, reconciling Spirit.

We wish you a happy Christmas and a New Year of peace and joy.

Thank you.

Afterward, His Beatitude, escorted by Geronda Secretary-General Most Reverend Archbishop Aristarchos of Constantina visited the Apostolic Delegate representative of the Vatican in the Holy Land and the Anglican Church in Jerusalem under the Bishop Most Reverend Suheil Dawani.

From Secretariat-General