

VISITS OF THE BROTHERHOOD ON THE OCCASION OF CHRISTMAS FOR THE WESTERN CHURCHES

On Friday morning, December 14/22, 2019, the Hagiotaphite Brotherhood visited the Western Churches in Jerusalem which celebrate Christmas according to the Gregorian Calendar.

The first visit was to the Franciscan Brotherhood in Jerusalem.

There, H.H.B. our Father and Patriarch of Jerusalem addressed the Hegoumen of the Franciscans Fr. Francesco Patton and the Franciscans of his Fraternity with the following address:

“Your Excellency, Father Francesco,

Your Eminences,

Your Graces,

Beloved Members of our Respective Fraternities,

Dear Fathers,

We are delighted to greet you, dear Father Francesco, as you and your community celebrate the Christmas Feast. It was your venerable founder, Saint Francis, who created the first Christmas crib scene, as he attempted to focus the people on the great truth of the incarnation of the Divine Logos and away from worldly pursuits. Ans so we sing at this season:

When the creation beheld you born in a cave,

You, who hung the whole world in the void above the waters,

it was seized with amazement and cried:

"There is none holy save you, O Lord."

(Irmos, Compline of the Forefeast)

This is our proclamation at this and every Christmas season, that there is only One who is holy, our Lord Jesus Christ, who is "the expectation of the nations and the salvation of the world."

As we face the many challenges that beset us in our region, we do so in the conviction that this region in which our sacred history has unfolded down the generations remains able to mediate the essence of the divine-human encounter that finds its fulfilment in the incarnation. And we contend that in this region, the human witnesses to this sacred history – that is our Christian communities – must be able to live and flourish.

We remain, dear Father Francesco, deeply aware of, and grateful for, your firm commitment to the well-being and flourishing of the Christian communities of the Holy Land and your unwavering partnership in guarding and serving the Holy Places, ensuring that they remain places of worship open to all, without distinction. We acknowledge with gratitude your role in the Council of the Heads of the Churches of the Holy Land, and the significant leadership that you exercise.

As a clear sign of this, we have the recent agreement that we have signed together with the Armenians for the completion of the restoration of the foundations of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre.

Our deepening unity of purpose and principle continues to be of such importance as we work together to ensure that the Christian presence in our Holy City and this Holy Land remains strong and vital. We must resist the pressure of radical groups who wish to alter the fundamental integrity of our multi-ethnic, multi-religious, and multi-cultural landscape,

and undermine the Christian character of Jerusalem. We remain firm on the crucial Jaffa Gate issue and pray to God for the grace to be firm in our resolve. For the life of the world depends on maintaining Jerusalem as a home for all people of good will, where all may co-exist peacefully and with mutual respect.

As we celebrate this joyful season, therefore, let us do so confident in our God-given mission. And let us rejoice with the angels at the birth of the Son of God, who is "the Word made manifest", who "has assumed the material substance of our flesh" and who has "in his ineffable providence taken up his dwelling among us" (Compline of the Forefeast, Canticle Four).

We wish you, dear Father Francesco, and your Fraternity, a blessed and holy Christmas and a peaceful New Year.

Thank you."

The second visit was to the Latin Patriarchate in Jerusalem.

There, His Beatitude addressed the Latin Patriarch in Jerusalem Fr. Pier Batista Pizzaballa and the Priests under his command with the following address:

"Your Excellency, dear Archbishop Pizzaballa,

Your Excellency, Archbishop Girelli,

Your Eminences,

Your Graces,

Dear Fathers,

Beloved in Christ

It is with great joy that we greet you, Your Excellency, dear Archbishop Pizzaballa, and congratulate you on the joyful celebration of the Nativity of our Lord Jesus Christ. The whole creation rejoices at the birth of the Son of God, as we

sing in the words of Vespers of the Forefeast of the Nativity;

Lo, the time of our salvation is at hand.

Make ready O cave;

the Virgin draws nigh to give birth.

Be glad and rejoice, O Bethlehem,

For from you our Lord has shown forth like the dawn.

(Stichera Tone two)

The glory of the incarnation of the Divine Logos can never be dimmed. Whatever the concerns of the present moment, whatever the circumstances of our human history, our sacred history, which has unfolded in this Holy Land, remains a true beacon of light, hope, and witness for a confused and anxious world. Even now our sacred history “shines forth like the dawn”.

As we gather once again for our respective Christmas celebrations, we do so in the face of ongoing challenges to the well-being of the Christian communities of this Holy City and our region. We continue to be firm in our conviction with respect to the proper ownership of the Jaffa Gate properties, and our intention to guard and maintain the Christian character of the Holy Places in general and of Jerusalem in particular.

We are also giving our best efforts to encourage the government to take its part in collaboration with us in ensuring that the Holy Places have the essential services that they need to support both the local Christian community as well as the many thousands of pilgrims who come to worship at them every month. As you are well-aware, all these matters are ongoing, and demand constant vigilance.

But we persevere. And we persevere in deep thanksgiving for the growing unity of purpose and resolve that we share. We

shish to take this opportunity to thank you, dear Archbishop Pizzaballa, for your unswerving commitment to the multi-cultural, multi-ethnic, multi-religious landscape of the Holy Land, and the vitality of the Christian presence here. We thank you, too, for working with us and the other Christian Communities in the Council of the Heads of the Churches for the Holy Land, which has been articulating clearly of our common Christian witness in the Holy Land.

Our unity of purpose in maintaining a vibrant Christian presence in this Holy City and in the Holy Land is a matter of hope and encouragement to the world, and in this mission, we must never lose heart. For in this work together, we show to the world the truth that "Christ comes in his love to humankind, "to save the man He fashioned" (Stichera Tone Two). The fundamental purpose of our life here is the proclamation of the Gospel of salvation to the world, and the care of the Christian communities in the place where the salvation was made manifest.

So, as we greet you at the time of this great feast,

Let us celebrate...

raising our minds on high,

let us go in spirit to Bethlehem;

and with the eyes of our soul

let us look upon the Virgin,

as she hastens to give birth to our God,

the Lord of all.

(Aposticha Tone One)

May the true Light that shines from the cave never be dimmed,

and may it be our strength and our consolation as we strive to be faithful to the calling that we have been given.

We wish you, dear Archbishop Pizzaballa, your clergy, and all the communities entrusted to your care, the richest blessings of this Christmas season and a happy New Year.

Thank you.”

From Secretariat-General