

THE ADDRESS OF HIS BEATITUDE THE PATRIARCH OF JERUSALEM AT THE RECEPTION OF THE PRESIDENT OF THE STATE OF ISRAEL

The annual New Year reception of the Heads of the Christian Churches and their respective accompanying parties, withheld by the President of the State of Israel, took place at the Presidential Residence on Monday morning, December 17/30, 2019.

The President Mr. Reuben Rivlin and the Minister of Economy and Minister of Development of the Negev and Galilee Mr. Arye Deri welcomed the Heads of the Churches and assured them of their continuous efforts to uphold and encourage the peaceful co-existence of the followers of all religions and ethnicities in Israel. They further highlighted their endeavours for the restoration works and projects around the Baptism Site. Best wishes were extended for a merry Christmas and a peaceful and prosperous New Year 2020.

In accordance to the established customs, His Beatitude the Patriarch of Jerusalem Theophilos III addressed the President on behalf of all the Christian Churches as follows;

“Your Excellency, Mr. President,

Your Excellency, Rabbi Machluf Deri,

Your Beatitude,

Your Eminences,

Your Graces,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is an honour for us, Mr. President, to offer greetings to you on behalf of the Christian communities in this holiday season. At this special time of the year, the whole world looks to the Holy Land in hope and expectation, and we are keenly aware of the responsibilities that we all bear in this land of the divine-human encounter.

As we greet you with the blessings of this season, we wish to take this opportunity to express our gratitude to you for the strong and unwavering support that you give to the integrity of the multi-cultural, multi-ethnic, and multi-religious character of Jerusalem and the Holy Land.

We are particularly thankful for your special efforts in supporting the renovation work at Qasr al-Yahud and around the Baptism Site, for protecting and promoting its restoration, and for upholding the sanctity of this holy place. The Baptism Site continues to be a beacon of peace and a spiritual oasis that embraces the various faith traditions and national identities which make up our beloved Holy Land.

Our work together is crucial, for it enables our Christian communities to welcome pilgrims there without distinction and to nourish their spiritual aspirations. We continue to make incremental progress on the restoration of the site, and look forward to the day when the goodness of peace (to agathon tis Irinis) can be celebrated by all; for as we read in Psalms;

Mercy and truth are met together;

righteousness and peace have kissed each other.

Truth shall spring out of the earth;

and righteousness shall look down from heaven.

(Ps. 85:10-11)

The dynamics of the Holy Land and its Holy Places, which of course includes the Holy City of Jerusalem, also lay upon us various challenges. For instance, the well-known case of Jaffa Gate continues to be a source of anguish to all of us, for it is endangering the unique and sacred character of our Christian Quarter. It jeopardises access to our Churches' headquarters, schools, health facilities and places of worship. In addition, it threatens to restrict and diminish the opportunities for pilgrims to walk the "pilgrim way" to the holy sites and the Church of the Holy Sepulchre.

We remain steadfast in our resolve to maintain our historic and sacred rights and we acknowledge all the valuable support accorded to us, locally and globally, from those people of good will who uphold the spiritual significance of our beloved Jerusalem and Holy Land.

In our recent gathering with the Minister of Tourism, we recalled the acknowledgement of the Minister that the commitment of the Churches in encouraging pilgrimages has resulted in the significant increase of the number of pilgrims in recent years. This is a matter not just of the economy; more importantly, pilgrimages build stability and help to ensure peaceful co-existence and mutual witness. In this regard we continue to look to the Government of Israel to take into fuller consideration our request to ensure that the Holy Places can provide essential services, like a water supply to Mount Tabor, which is one of the major destinations for the many thousands of pilgrims who visit our Holy Places on a daily basis. We are committed to this common enterprise, and we look forward to the implementation of this matter.

Mr. President, your recent intervention in facilitating the movement of Christians who live in Gaza to visit Bethlehem for the celebration of the Christmas Feast is highly commendable. This has been a matter of pastoral concern to us all, and we are glad that provisions have been made for this.

As we look to the New Year, and the hope of peace that it brings, we recall the words of the Psalmist about Jerusalem:

You will bless the crown of the year because of your goodness; and your fields will be filled with your richness.

(Ps. 65[65]:12)

Please allow us to express our thanks for the teamwork of Mr. Yacoub Salameh and Mr. Sezar Mrarjleh of the Office for Christian Communities, who have worked above and beyond the call of duty to help facilitate our common life.

We wish you, Mr. President, and your family all the blessings of this season of peace. We pray that the New Year will be a year of progress and deepening reconciliation. MAY God bless you in your high responsibilities on behalf of all of us.

Hag Sarameach.

Thank you."

From Secretariat-General