

CHRISTMAS EVE AT THE PATRIARCHATE

The Feast of Christmas, the Metropolis of the Feasts according to the Church Fathers, was celebrated by the Patriarchate according to the old tradition in Bethlehem and at the place of Christ's Nativity in the flesh.

1. On Christmas Eve

On Christmas Eve, Monday morning, December 24, 2019/ January 6, 2020, the Patriarchal Hagiotaphite Entourage marched from the Patriarchate to Jaffa Gate, bells tolling, got on the cars and reached the Holy Monastery of Prophet Elijah which is located midway between Jerusalem and Bethlehem.

H.H.B. our Father and Patriarch of Jerusalem Theophilos was welcomed there by the Hegoumen of the Monastery Archimandrite Paissios, the customary Israeli State officials of the Political Civil Administration of Bethlehem and Hebron district, by the representatives of the Palestinian State and by the representatives of the flock of the Patriarchate from Bethlehem, Beit Sahour and Beit Jalla.

After the veneration at the Church of the Monastery, the prayer and the reception at the Hegoumeneion, the Patriarchal Entourage left, led by the customary five Israeli Police horsemen and reached the check point at Rachel's Tomb.

There, Palestinian Police motorcyclists received the Patriarchal Entourage while on either side of the road faithful Christians, old and young people, children and infants were waiting to receive His Beatitude's blessing. The Patriarchal Entourage reached Bethlehem Square, was received by the Patriarchal Representative Most Reverend Archbishop Theophylaktos of Jordan, the representatives of the Municipality and Prefectures, Hieromonks, and the married

parish clergy of the Patriarchate and by many people, while the Byzantine choirs with Mr. Vasilios Gotsopoulos in Greek and Mr. Samour Lawrence in Arabic where chanting the Christmas apolytikion on the way to the humble door of the Basilica.

Upon entering the Basilica, they were welcomed by the Greek Consul General on the right and the Mayor of the town on the left, and marched through the middle of the Basilica, which is a unique right of the the Rum Orthodox, and going up to the ikonostasion, they turned on the right, through St. Nikolaos' chapel and went down to the God-receiving Cave for veneration.

Going up through the north gate of the Cave, the Royal Hours of Christmas were read at the Catholicon, officiated by His Beatitude, our Father and Patriarch of Jerusalem Theophilos. The service was completed with the insence offering, and was followed by Vespers and the Divine Liturgy of St. Basil the Great, with the dismissal at 3.30 p.m. according to the Status Quo.

This was followed by the marching to the Monastery from the Baptisery Gate, where a festal meal was offered.

In the evening, around 6.00 p.m., with the hospitality of the renovator of the Monastery, Patriarchal Representative Most Reverend Archbishop Theophylaktos of Jordan, His Beatitude hosted a reception for the Palestinian President His Excellency Mr. Mahmoud Abas- Abu-Mazen, His Excellency Minister Sami Daoud the representative of His Majesty Kind Abdullah II of Jordan the Hashemite Custodian of Christian and Muslim holy sites, His Excellency the Palestinian Prime Minister Dr. Ramzi Khouri Palestinian Minister and Chairman of the Supreme Presidential Committee for Church Affairs as well as many other officials and diplomats.

In addition to wished of a blessed Christmas and a happy and prosperous New Year, His Beatitude assured the audience that "In addition to our active local role, and efforts to relay

the voice of Jerusalem to the world, the Orthodox Patriarchate of Jerusalem is exercising its historic role at the international level as well". His Beatitude further stressed that we must view in the strength of Orthodox Unity as the strengthening of the Orthodox faith, and in its weakness, a weakening of our faith.

The complete text of His Beatitude's address is found below;

"Mr. President Mahmoud Abbas

Mr. Prime Minister Dr. Mohammad Shtayyeh

Representative of His Majesty King Abdullah II, Mr. Sami Dawood

Chairman of the Supreme Presidential Committee for Church Affairs, Dr. Ramzi Khoury

Ladies and gentlemen,

We gather today in the birthplace of Christ, the source of light that reached out to the world, the land of the Redeemer, to celebrate the birth of the Messenger of Love and Peace, in a land that longs for peace, and under a leadership of which the main concern is to achieve peace to ensure a bright future for its people. People that have long sacrificed for their dignity, freedom and the realization of their legitimate dream of independence and self-determination.

We believe that we are able to make peace and live up to its requirements, no matter how difficult it may be. This demands that we transcend ourselves above our own limits, so that we can look at others as God sees them, and accept others as God accepts them, so that we can realize and achieve righteousness and truth for us and others.

This year's Christmas comes, and the Middle East region is

overwhelmed by regional tensions and conflicts. In Lebanon, the Lebanese are protesting against the country's worsening economy, in Syria Christmas still holds hope that the country will see a way out of the current impasse, and hopefully this new year will be a year of security for Syrians of all political, ethnic and religious affiliations. Yemen continues its internal war, which we pray to end as soon as possible, and we pray to the Creator to give Iraq and Libya the stability they have lost years ago.

On the bright side, in the Holy Land, we celebrate the legal victory of the Orthodox Patriarchate of Jerusalem in our battle for the defense of Jaffa Gate properties in the Holy City as part of the consecutive battles fought by the "Mother of All Churches" to preserve its heritage, and the authentic Christian presence in the Holy Land, especially in the city of Jerusalem, which God has blessed. In addition to practicing our duty in protecting the "pilgrim route" between the Church of the Holy Sepulchre and the Church of the Nativity, between the place of Christ's birth and the place of his crucifixion.

We are also celebrating the birth of Christ today as we have completed important housing projects in Bethlehem, Beit Sahour and Beit Jala. In 2020, we are looking forward to executing a project of 400 apartment and a commercial center in Beit Hanina, Jerusalem, where we have been working on obtaining the necessary licenses for years. This huge project will reduce immigration from the Holy City and contribute to strengthen the resolve of its people. In the same context, we are preparing this year for the restoration of St. Dimitri's School Building in the Old City, to provide a comfortable atmosphere for students and to preserve this historic building; in addition to dozens of charitable projects which our Patriarchate is implementing with the support of its flock in particular and the community in general. And the doors of the Patriarchate shall always remain open for the flock of our community and all the Palestinian and Jordanian peoples

Christians be it or Muslim.

Mr. President,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

In addition to our active local role, and efforts to relay the voice of Jerusalem to the world, the Orthodox Patriarchate of Jerusalem is exercising its historic role at the international Orthodox level as well. Our Patriarchate has opened its doors to host our brothers, the heads of the world's Orthodox churches, to meet at our second home in Amman under the Auspices of The Hashemite Custodian of Islamic and Christian Holy Places, your brother Mr. President, His Majesty King Abdullah II, to discuss issues of global Orthodox unity; that in its' strength we view a strengthening to our faith, and in its' weakness, a weakening of our faith.

Your Excellency Mr. President.

Ladies and gentlemen

"The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us" (John 1:14), let us rejoice and pray "This is a great mystery" (Ephesians 5:32) which appeared among us. The message of Christmas is a message of love, humility, peace and a meeting of hearts. Living the love and its consequences becomes permanent through a true relationship and reconciliation between man and God, between man and his/her fellow man, through a relationship of reconciliation and openness between man and himself/herself. This reconciliation in its three dimensions fills the human heart with peace, the peace of God coming from the highest, which helps people to deal with the daily living pressures and difficulties of life, and to meet the challenges with wisdom and love. The heavenly peace, which we all desire, enables believers, with the support of divine grace, to deal properly with economic, political and social difficulties.

Christmas is the feast of joy. Joy is to find power through forgiveness and love in tears, to reap success from failure, and to achieve ascension through humility and holiness. Christmas is the feast of joy built on the rock of faith.

Your Excellency,

In the name of the "Mother of all churches" and its community, we wish you a glorious Christmas filled with holiness and love, and a blessed new year full of goodness, blessings and peace; and we thank Your Excellency for your heartfelt Christmas message.

We lastly take this opportunity to give thanks to the Supreme Presidential Committee for Church Affairs and its' Chairman, His Excellency Minister Dr. Ramzi Khoury. As well as the Head of the Presidential Bureau Her Excellency Ms. Intisar Amarah, Presidential Protocol Department and the Heads, Generals and Officers of the different Palestinian Security bodies for their tireless efforts and contribution to the success of this year's Christmas processions.

Along with the angels, we pray to God, " Glory to God in the highest heaven, and peace on earth ..." (Luke 2:14)."

With the above the Feast of Christmas Eve in Bethlehem ended.

From Secretariat-General