

THE VISIT OF THE PRINCE OF WALES AT THE CHURCH OF THE NATIVITY IN BETHLEHEM

At 11:00 a.m. on Friday, January 11/24, 2020, His Royal Highness Prince Charles the Prince of Wales visited the Basilica of the Nativity, accompanied by a delegation including His Excellency Mr. Philip Hall, the British Consul General of Her Royal Highness Elizabeth, Queen of England and the Agnlican Archbishop in Jerusalem His Eminence Souheil Dawani.

Upon His arrival at the courtyard of the Basilica, His Royal Highness the Prince was welcomed by the representatives of the Hegoumens of Bethlehem, Archimandrite Polykarpos, on behalf of the Orthodox and was led to the Gate of the Basilica. There the Prince was welcomed by the Hegoumens of Bethlehem; the Orthodox Patriarchal Representative Archbishop Theophylaktos of Jordan, the Franciscan and the Armenian Hegoumens, who led the Prince inside the Basilica.

In the middle of the Basilica the first to greet the Prince was H.H.B. our Father and Patriarch of Jerusalem Theophilos, followed by the Custos of the Holy Land Reverend Francesco Patton and the representative of the Armenian Patriarch His Eminence Archbishop Sevan.

From there, His Beatitude led the Prince at the Catholicon, before the Ikonostasion, and standing by the Main Gate, extended to him a symbolic gift being the star of the Nativity made of pearls and addressed His Royal Highness as follows;

“Your Royal Highness, it is a great honour for us to welcome you here in Bethlehem the birthplace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the place that brought peace and justice upon the whole world.

Bethlehem is indeed a symbol of peace here, for Christians and Muslims, who live as a family and a united community, and the Church is also the place that is offering spiritual refreshment to thousands of pilgrims of all faiths and of all cultures and nationalities without any discrimination.

Your Highness's presence here is highly appreciated and heartfelt for our region, which is facing many challenges, and your pilgrimage here is a tangible sign of your commitment to promoting and advancing peace and justice in the very birthplace of peace.

"Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favour rests."

(Luke 2.14)

Please allow us to present to you on behalf of the church communities of the Holy Land this humble blessing.

Thank you."

From this point and through St. Nikolaos' chapel, His Beatitude guided the Prince to St. George's chapel, which is adjacent to the Basilica on the southeast side. There the Patriarchal Representative of Bethlehem, His Eminence Archbishop Theophylaktos of Jordan read the Gospel narrative of the Nativity of Christ in Greek, as per the custom on each Christmas Eve according to the Gregorian calendar by the Anglican Church, the Prince read the narrative of the Beatitudes according to chapter 5 of St. Mathew's Gospel, and each of the Heads of the Christian Churches, without liturgical vestments, read a prayer according to the printed schedule.

His Beatitude the Patriarch of Jerusalem Theophilos addressed the Prince as per below;

"Your Royal Highness,

Your Eminences,

Your Graces,

Beloved Members of our Brotherhood,

Honoured Guests,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Your Royal Highness, we welcome you warmly to Bethlehem and to the Church of the Nativity of our Lord Jesus Christ, and we are delighted that you are in the Holy Land. Your presence among us is a great encouragement to the peoples of our region, and we are deeply grateful for the careful attention that you pay especially to the well-being of the Christian presence here. Whether we are meeting in London or here in the holy City of Jerusalem, we are always heartened by your commitment.

As you are fully aware, the Christian presence here is an integral part of our social fabric and is crucial in maintaining the historic multi-cultural, multi-ethnic, and multi-religious landscape of Jerusalem and the Holy Land. Without a thriving Christian community in the Holy Land, this region would lose its essential character, and no longer be the living land of the divine-human encounter to which the Christian presence here is a living witness;

“You are the salt of the earth: but if the salt has lost his savor, wherewith shall it be salted?”

(Matthew 5:13)

The Church communities are no doubt facing challenges and the Heads of the Churches and Christian Communities are united in our firm opposition to this threat, and we have been supported in this by leaders locally and from around the world both in government and religion. We have had particularly strong support from Her Majesty's Government and other British

political leaders, as well as from His Grace, our dear brother, the Archbishop of Canterbury.

While we emphasise these challenges, we must also say that all the local authorities of the Holy Land have been working with us positively to help in dealing with these threats and challenges, and we are very grateful to all those who have joined in this effort;

"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God"

(Matthew 5:9)

Together with the other Churches and Christian communities of the Holy Land, the Patriarchate of Jerusalem stand ready to partner with all governments and people of good will to ensure the well-being of all the peoples of our region; for this is our pastoral mission entrusted to us by the Divine Providence;

"Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind...Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself".

(Matthew 22: 37-39)

One of the prominent achievements of the growing body of international support for the Christian community in the Holy Land is the recent establishment of the International Community of the Holy Sepulchre [ICoHS];

"Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy".

(Matthew 5:7)

While at the moment this society is drawing membership and support mostly from the United Kingdom and the United States, our hope is for a truly international representation in membership. ICoHS is an intentionally ecumenical society, not bound to any one confession, with the active support of,

among others, the Orthodox, the Roman Catholic, the Anglican and the Protestant communities.

This is the first such ecumenical society of its kind to be established from the Holy Land, and it is our dearest hope that it will be a major source for good, both in bringing Christians from different communities together in common support of the Christian presence in the Holy Land, and in strengthening international attention to the life and witness of the Christian community here.

Needless to say, Your Royal Highness, that we are deeply aware of your personal commitment to the Holy Land and to the Churches, here which keep and guard the holy places not as mere monuments but as places of worship, and we also understand that, in addition to your official and royal mission, you also come here as a pilgrim.

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you and the Sun of righteousness enlighten your mind and warm your heart.

Thank you."

Once this ceremony was finished, led by His Beatitude, the Prince went down St. George's chapel through the stairs of the Altar to St. Nikolaos' chapel. From there the Prince went down into the Cave and therein, by the star and the manger, He was addressed by the Custos of the Holy Land the Reverend Father Francesco Patton.

Thereafter, the Prince went up through the north gate of the Cave to the chapel which is used by the Armenians, and was received by the Armenian His Eminence Sevan. From this chapel, the Prince marched through the courtyard of St. Catherine of the Franciscans, where a group photograph of the visit was taken.

Finally, His Royal Highness offered a reception hosted by the British Consul General to Jerusalem His Excellency Mr. Hall,

at the Casa Nova the adjacent Guest House of the
Fransciscans.

From Secretariat-General