

MEETING OF SPECIAL ENVOY AND CONSULS OF THE EUROPEAN UNION WITH LEADERS OF LOCAL CHURCHES AT THE PATRIARCHATE

On Thursday 14/27 May 2021, a meeting was held at the Patriarchate under the care of H.H.B. our Father and Patriarch of Jerusalem Theophilos with Mr Sven Koopmans, Special Envoy of the European Union for the Middle East matters, and representatives of the local Churches of Jerusalem; the Custos of the Holy Land, as well as the representatives of the Lutheran, Anglican and Ethiopian Churches respectively.

In this meeting, Mr Sven Koopmans expressed the intention on behalf of the European Union to support the Churches in their difficulties and requested to be informed on the existing problems, especially after the recent hostilities in Jerusalem, Gaza and other regions.

Thanking Mr Sven, His Beatitude referred to the cooperation of the Churches with the European Union, and especially to the visit of the Heads of Primeval Churches to the European Union, when the latter offered funds with which the Patriarchate constructed a School in Birzeit, adding the Status Quo issue was also discussed. Moreover, His Beatitude raised the issue of the illegal rental of the Jaffa Gate Hotels by radical groups, as this Gate is the main and of vital importance entrance for the centuries-long Christians to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, and also mentioned the problems created by the same groups in the Hill of Zion. Advocates to His Beatitude's words were the representatives of the Franciscans, Fr. Patton, of the Anglicans, His Eminence Bishop Housam Naoum and of the Lutherans, His Eminence Bishop Azar.

Next to this meeting was that of the Head of the Delegation of the European Union, and the Head of the Delegations of the other member-countries of the European Union which are interested in the Status Quo of Jerusalem and at the presence of the aforementioned representatives of Churches, His Beatitude welcomed them with the following address:

“Respected Delegates of the European Union in Jerusalem and Ramallah,

Your Beatitudes,

Your Eminences,

Your Graces,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is our joy and privilege to welcome you to the Holy City of Jerusalem and to the Patriarchate of Jerusalem. On behalf of our fellow Heads of the Churches, please allow us to express our appreciation for your visit. You come to us at a crucial moment in the life of the peoples of this region, and we are heartened by your presence and commitment to our life and well-being.

The Christian community in the Holy Land has enjoyed deep historical connections and rich relationships with the peoples of Europe for almost two thousand years. In this place where the Church was revealed in all its fulness, we are mindful of Europe’s role in the development of Christian faith and culture. The centuries-long partnerships between leaders of Europe and the Holy Land have enabled the mission of the Gospel to reach every country and continent.

Equally for centuries pilgrims have come here to be refreshed at the Holy Places, which are oases of spiritual renewal for all who visit them. When restrictions have been lifted and travel is possible, we look forward to welcoming many

thousands of European visitors to Jerusalem once more.

As in every corner of the world, the last months have been extremely challenging for us in the Holy Land. Because of the pandemic, our Churches and Holy sites have suffered significant restrictions and prolonged closure. We have been unable to share hospitality with pilgrims and tourists from around the world and our own communities have suffered significant hardship and deprivation. While covid-19 has radically diminished our economic resources, we have continued to try to meet the great spiritual, physical, educational, and financial needs of our local communities by God's grace.

After this period of prolonged hardship, the conflicts of recent weeks in the Holy Land have proven extremely difficult and devastating. The violent outbreaks have served only to deepen the problems that the pandemic has caused. For many in our communities, a crisis has become a catastrophe.

Over the last weeks, the never-ending news cycle has brought global attention to our local suffering. Despite all this coverage, the true beginning of this most recent conflict remains largely untold. These tragic events are the direct result of years of the growth of extremist ideologies and attacks by a growing number of radical groups which have gone unchecked and unpunished. These radical groups are intent on driving out Christians, Muslims, and even some of the Jewish groups, for the Holy City of Jerusalem, and other communities of our region.

The attacks range from verbal abuse to physical attacks against clergy and worshippers as we go about our daily business to the frequent desecration of Church property and Holy Sites. Just in the last few days, we have seen the vicious assault of two Armenian clergy right outside their monastery in the Armenian Quarter and an intrusion into our School on Mount Sion by radicals. Sadly, and worryingly, these kinds of incidents are no longer exceptions; they are a

regular part of our life. And it is intolerable.

As spiritual leaders, we have no desire to enter into politics, nor make political statements. Our only concern is the safety and continuing flourishing of the Christian community in Jerusalem and the Holy Land. As Churches, we have stood strong and united in the face of ongoing violence and vandalism. But the situation has changed significantly. We are simply dealing with harassment and could manage this. But the stakes are now too high. For we are face to face with radical groups which seek and are working systematically for our eviction from the Holy City, whether by the threat to seize Church properties, and especially Jaffa Gate – which is the entrance to the Christian Quarter and the pilgrimage route to the Holy Sepulchre – or in Sheikh Jarrah – where attempts to forcefully displace local citizens in recent days erupted into the violence that we have seen on our TV screens.

The Christian presence in the Holy City and in the Holy Land is vital for the well-being and integrity of this region. For centuries we have inhabited a multi-cultural, multi-ethnic, multi-religious landscape that has given this region its unique character as the land of the divine-human encounter. And while all the three Abrahamic faiths have Holy Sites here, it is the Christian Holy Sites that guarantee a truly universal welcome to all people of goodwill without distinction. This unique character is now under serious threat as never before.

The Churches and Christian communities of the Holy Land remain firmly committed, even in the face of unprecedented opposition and attack, to act as peacemakers and to carry out our spiritual mission. Furthermore, we will continue to welcome to the Holy Sites all who come here on pilgrimage.

However, we cannot resist the growing challenge to our very existence from radical groups alone. We need our partners in the international community, and especially our traditional

friends and allies in Europe to do this, and through you, we call on the leaders of Europe to a robust defence of the Christian presence in the Holy Land against those who would work to undo our life here.

May God grant success to your mission. Through you, we seek to extend and renew these European partnerships. We look forward to working together, with the conviction that, with your support, we can continue to enable peoples of all faiths to thrive together in our beloved Holy Land.

Thank you.”

To this, the Diplomatic Representatives replied that the Churches in the Holy Land are the guarantee for maintaining the Status Quo of Jerusalem as the Holy City of the three monotheistic religions, as well as for the peaceful coexistence of the faithful people of these Churches, with respect for their religious beliefs, according to the Status Quo, and expressed their willingness to provide humanitarian assistance to those recently affected in Gaza.

The Representative of the European Union Mr Kühn von Burgsdorff replied in particular, saying that he has been aware of the religious background of the hostilities in the Middle East since his youth, as well as of the international role that the religious leaders are capable of displaying towards their mitigation and resolution.

On this occasion, His Beatitude offered each of the attendees in the meeting His blessings from Jerusalem and the memorable John Tleel’s book “I am Jerusalem”.

From Secretariat-General