

THE FEAST OF CHRISTMAS AT THE PATRIARCHATE

1. On Friday, 25 December/ 7 January 2022, the Patriarchate celebrated the Feast of Christmas according to the established Status Quo.

On Wednesday 23 December 2021/ 5 January 2022 H.H.B. our Father and Patriarch of Jerusalem Theophilos presided at the reading of the Royal Hours of Christmas to lighten the program of Christmas Eve in Bethlehem.

On Christmas Eve the Patriarchal Entourage headed for Jaffa Gate accompanied by the Police Force

and the Scouts to get on the vehicles to go to the Monastery of Prophet Elias by the ancient Monastery of the Seat.

At the Monastery of Prophet Elias, His Beatitude was welcomed by the Mayors and Officials of the Beit Jala, Beit Sahour and Bethlehem, the representatives of the Israeli Civil Authorities and the representative of the Ministry of Religion of Israel Mr Cecar Marjieh. A prayer was read the Caretaker of the Monastery Monk Achilius offered a reception for all.

Then the Patriarchal Entourage left with the Israeli horsemen leading the procession until Rachel's tomb. From there the Palestinian motorcycle riders escorted the Patriarchal Entourage to the Square of the Basilica of the Nativity, where His Beatitude was welcomed by the Patriarchal Representative in Bethlehem, His Eminence Metropolitan Benedictos of Diosaecarea.

From the square, the Hagiophite and Arab-speaking Priests along with a large crowd of people led the Patriarchal Entourage to the Basilica, under the chanting of Christmas hymns. The Entourage entered the Church through its humble

door and proceeded from the Catholicon to Saint Nikolaos' chapel, went down to the Cave and the Manger for veneration and came up to the Catholicon through the north gate.

The Service of the Royal Hours of Christmas began, followed by Vespers, the blessing of bread and the Liturgy of Saint Basil the Great, under the Greek and Arabic chanting with the attendance of local faithful Christians but not pilgrims due to covid restrictions. The Service finished at 15.30 according to the Status Quo.

The Service was followed by a reception.

In the evening the Hegoumen, His Eminence Metropolitan Benedict of Diocæsarea hosted a formal reception for his distinguished guests, among whom were, the Representative of Palestinian Autonomy, Prime Minister Mohammad Ibrahim Shtayyeh and the representative of Jordan, Mazin Abdellah Hilal Al Farayeh, Minister of Interior. His Beatitude our Father and Patriarch of Jerusalem Theophilos addressed those present with an address which was read by Fr Issa Mousleh in Arabic.

In his address, His Beatitude underlined the pressures that the Christian Community faces by the radicals in Jerusalem and the power of the Church through the risen Sun of Righteousness to face and overcome those challenges, offering projects of benefit, such as the recent beginning of the construction of the project Lana/Jerusalem and the restoration of Prophet Elias Monastery.

This was the conclusion of Christmas Eve by the Patriarchate in Bethlehem, in anticipation of the main Christmas Feast the next day.

2. Christmas Day

The Christmas Feast began with Matins on Friday night 25

December through the official entry from the Baptism Gate, with the Entreaty and the Six Psalms, led by the Patriarchal Commissioner, His Eminence Metropolitan Isychios of Kapitolias.

During Matins, His Beatitudo our Father and Patriarch of Jerusalem Theophilos and His Entourage came from the Catholicon to the Holy Altar, where He put on His Patriarchal Liturgical vestments and by His blessings the Archbishops and Priests put on their liturgical vestments.

With the beginning of the Kathisma “Come all ye faithful let us see where Christ was born...” procession went from the Altar to the Holy Cave from its south gate, while the Representative of Palestinian Autonomy, Prime Minister Mohammad Ibrahim Shtayyeh, the President of the Palestinian Committee on Christian Affairs, Ramzi Chouri, and the representative of Jordan, Mazin Abdellah Hilal Al Farayeh, Minister of Interior followed on the right side, along with the Consul General of Greece in Jerusalem Mr Evangelos Vlioras.

The Gospel narrative of the Nativity was read in the God-receiving Cave, followed by His Beatitude's Christmas message, which was read in Greek by Geronda Secretary-General, His Eminence Archbishop Aristarchos of Constantina, and in Arabic by the Patriarchate's press representative, Priests Issa Mousleh. The Christmas message follows below:

“Heaven and earth are made one today
for Christ is born.

Today God is come upon the earth
and man is gone up into the Heavens.

Today He Who by nature is invisible, for man's sake is seen in the flesh”.

(Sticheron 2 of the Christmas Entreaty)

This event, this mystery, is celebrated today in a solemn way in praise and thanksgiving throughout the world by the Orthodox Church of Christ, especially by the Church of Jerusalem and the city of Bethlehem. The Church celebrates the superficial event of the meeting and union of heaven and earth, the fact that God descended to earth, to ascend man to heaven.

This happened "as God was pleased, as He knew". The Father was pleased, the Word became flesh and we saw God become Incarnate. In His immeasurable love for man, according to the traversing into heaven Paul, "when the fulness of the time was come, God sent forth his Son, made of a woman, made under the law, to redeem them that were under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons" (Gal. 4:4-5). According to the hymnographer of the Church, "the One Who was born before Lucifer from the Father without a mother, became man from the Virgin on earth, without a Father". "He Who Is, became for our sakes what He was not". The Only Begotten Son and Word of God became also the Son of man from the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary, a God-man, in one hypostasis and two natures. He became poor for us, so that we may become rich, He emptied Himself, so that we may become full, He came down to earth for us, so that we may rise up to heaven, He became an infant for us, so that we may become adults, "unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ" (Eph. 4:13). According to Athanasius the Great, "for our salvation, He appeared to us in a human body" (On Incarnation, P.G.1, p. 228). According to Saint Chrysostom, "God of Whom no one can speak about, Who is without form and beyond knowledge and equal to the Son, came through a Virgin's womb and condescended to be born by a woman" (Homily 2, On the Gospel according to Matthew).

Before the vision of this mystery, even the hymnographer of the Church proclaims in ecstasy: "A strange and marvellous mystery do I behold; the cave is a heaven; the Virgin a

cherubic throne; the manger a space wherein Christ God the Uncontainable One hath reclined" (Christmas Katavasiae, ode nine). Indeed, the cave became heaven. In this cave of Bethlehem in Judea, in this particular time, during the monarchy of Caesar Octavian Augustus, God reveals Himself to men, in Christ, in a bodily form. The One without beginning receives a beginning, the Invisible is seen. God reveals to men the Incarnate epiphany of His Son using elements of nature; a bright star leading the Persian Wise Kings and scientists, who "came and stood at the place where the infant was". This wondrous epiphany He also reveals through His Angels, who were chanting in choir: "Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace, goodwill among men", and calling the hard-working men, the shepherds who kept the night watch of their flocks. God calls both groups of men as witnesses and preachers, as accomplishers and partakers of His work. Responding to the Divine invitation, they came and "falling before their faces, they worshipped...for they saw in the cave an infant without beginning lying down". They came to know and spoke about and proclaimed the mystery they saw, the shepherds in their town, and the Magi to their hometown Babylon, having escaped "Herod as a trifler".

The Incarnation and Nativity according to the flesh of Christ, which we worship, awaiting the coming of the Holy Theophany, is only the beginning of God's redeeming mysteries to man. Its succession of events is Christ's full mission, which He inaugurated on earth "as the great angel of God's will". Having come from the Father, our Lord Jesus Christ, lived on earth and communed with the people, He inaugurated, founded and established the Kingdom of God and His Kingdom on earth, which is one with His body, and that is the Church. The Church continues and perpetuates His mission of conciliation, reconciliation, peaceful coexistence and love among people. The Incarnate Lord established this work with His teaching and blood through His sacrifice on the Cross. He founded a mission of sanctification, remission of sins and of education, taming

and transforming the ethics of the people. Starting from Bethlehem's cave, Christ conquered, or better say, enchanted the whole universe, without an army, without weapons, but only through those illiterate to the world twelve Apostles, who, however, were educated by the Holy Spirit. The Church as the Kingdom of God on earth increased, multiplied and silently became great, without any fan recruitment, but with the integration of members through Baptism. Its head is the Incarnate Lord, the Redeemer of the world. As long as humanity does not agree and follow Christ's message, the King Who was born, this life becomes a living hell, in battles, wars and injustice, which we often see even today; if however, humanity accepts and applies it, its life is transformed into heaven.

This Pastoral mission of sanctification, pilgrimage, reconciliation, the pacifying, does the Church of Jerusalem unceasingly apply since its foundation, at the Places of Grace, and today, at the very place of the Nativity in the flesh of its Founder, in the Holy Bethlehem, at the God-receiving Cave and the Basilica of the Nativity built by Constantine and Justine. From these holy places, it prays for the peace and good condition of the whole world, especially for its Rum-Orthodox flock living in the Palestinian State, as well as for all the Palestinian people, and supports with all its power and through all the peaceful means, its President, His Excellency Mahmoud Abbas Abu Mazen, who honoured our Feast through his representative Dr Mohammad Ibrahim Shtayyeh. It prays to successfully complete its campaign for the keeping of its established by the International Community Status Quo in Jerusalem and the full recognition of the Palestinian State by all the countries of the world.

In the Holy City of Bethlehem, Christmas 2021

Fervent supplicant for all before God

Theophilos III

Patriarch of Jerusalem"

After these, there was the veneration at the Star and the Manger and the procession exited the Cave from the north gate, to continue the litany around the Basilica three times until it stopped in the middle of the Church for a prayer.

The Service continued with Matins in the Basilica, led by H.H.B. our Father and Patriarch of Jerusalem Theophilos, with the co-celebration of their Eminences, the Archbishops; Theophanes of Gerassa, Aristarchos of Constantina, Philoumenos of Pella and Metropolitan Joachim of Helenopolis, Hagiophite Hieromonks, the representatives from the Patriarchates of Mosco and Romania, Priests from Bethlehem and Deacons, as the chanting was delivered by Hierodeacon Simeon in Greek on the right, and the Bethlehem choir in Arabic on the left under the lead of Mr Laurence Samour.

The Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom followed, with the dismissal at 03:30 a.m. according to the Status Quo. The Divine Liturgy was also celebrated in the God-receiving Cave by His Eminence Metropolitan Isychios of Kapitolias.

At the end of the Service, the Patriarchal Entourage went to the Hegoumeneion from the Baptism Gate, where the new Hegoumen, His Eminence Metropolitan Benedictos of Diosaecarea hosted a reception.

At 09:00 a.m. on Christmas morning, the Elder Dragoman Archimandrite Mattheos went down to the Holy Cave for veneration and by this act, the Despotic Feast of Christmas in Bethlehem came to an end.

From Secretariat-General