THE ANNUAL CHRISTMAS TREE LIGHTING CEREMONY AT JAFFA GATE

Per the annual tradition of lighting up the Christmas tree at the entrance of the Christian Quarter of Jerusalem, the Imperial Hotel in Jaffa Gate was immersed this evening, December 16, with the colorful communities of the Holy City as His Beatitude Patriarch Theophilos III, Patriarch of the Holy City of Jerusalem, along fellow Heads of Churches and their representatives took to the balcony of this significant hotel, the opportunity to welcome everyone to this event.

As His Beatitude delivered a heart-warming speech from the balcony, the crowds listened attentively as the entrance to the Old City was lit with the candles of Christmas cheer and hope.

Fellow leaders of the various Churches in Jerusalem were joined by the respective members of the diplomatic cord, as several civil society organizations participated in this seasonal festivity.

A Christmas reception was held soon afterwards at the Imperial Hotel as a gratitude from the Heads of Churches for the members of the diplomatic cord.

His Beatitude’s full speech can be read as follow:

” Your Beatitudes,

Your Eminences,

Your Graces,

Reverend Fathers,

Beloved Members of our Communities,

Respected Members of the Diplomatic Corps,

Sisters and Brothers,

At the beginning of this great festive season, as we gather here to light this Christmas tree, we recall these words from the Gospel of Saint John:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

(Jn 1:1-5)

This Light of Lights, the Sun of Righteousness, that rose in the Holy City of Bethlehem from the Cave of hope, is Christ himself, the Word made flesh. This same Light shone again in this Holy City of Jerusalem from the Tomb of hope when our Lord Jesus Christ was risen from the dead. And so today we, as the sons and daughters of the Light of the Sun of Righteousness and of the hope of the resurrection of Christ bless the lighting of this Christmas tree, which stands as a symbol of this Light and this hope.

We pray that this light may shine in the hearts and minds of the rulers of this world as well as in the hearts and minds of those who govern our region, so that peace, righteousness, and reconciliation may reign over us all.

For, as Saint Paul reminds us, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us (2 Cor. 5:19). The work of peace, righteousness, and reconciliation is the responsibility of all people of goodwill.

In the lighting of this Christmas tree, we celebrate all that represents the true character of Jerusalem and the Holy Land and our centuries-old unique experience of our multi-cultural, multi-ethnic, multi-religious life together and our history of co-existence and mutual respect. This is a powerful reminder that Jerusalem is a beacon for the whole world, especially in the face of the turbulence and violence that affect the lives of so many. Christians have become the target of repeated and continuous attacks by radical Israeli groups, especially in the Holy City. For the past decade, countless crimes have been committed against Christians, including physical and verbal attacks against priests and clergy, attacks have been targeted against churches, holy places have been vandalized and systematically desecrated, in addition to continuous intimidation of Christian citizens, who all they want is to live normal lives as the God-given right of all humans. These radical groups are committing their crimes in a deliberate attempt to expel Christians from Jerusalem and other parts of the Holy Land.

This is the society we seek so eagerly to preserve and continue to build. We long for peace, and so let us not rend this fabric of our historic common life that has provided room enough down the ages for all who call the Holy Land their home. Divine Providence has set us in this Holy Land together and given us a matchless heritage. This simple ceremony of the lighting of a tree shows us the way and shines as a sign of hope in the darkness. We stand with our good friend Abu Al-Waleed Dajani and his family in their struggle to protect this pillar property. May this season of

light and of the hope of new life bring us together in a new resolve.

We wish all our people many peaceful years and a happy Christmas season.

Thank you.”