

HIS BEATITUDE PATRIARCH THEOPHILOS III LEADS THE OPENING CEREMONY FOR 'BETHLEHEM REBORN PALESTINE: THE WONDERS OF THE NATIVITY' EXHIBITION IN GENEVA

His Beatitude Patriarch Theophilos III , Patriarch of Jerusalem and all Palestine, spoke today, Tuesday September 12, at the opening ceremony of “Bethlehem Reborn Palestine – The Wonders of the Nativity” exhibition held at the Ecumenical Center of the World Council of Churches (WCC) in Geneva, Switzerland.

“The exhibition shows the renovation of the church building itself and the beauty of the mosaics, the columns, and the different types of tiles and crafted wood. It is of crucial importance that this unique architectural structure be carefully and faithfully preserved, but the basilica is more than a building of historical or artistic interest, and Bethlehem is more than just another city.” With these words His Beatitude started his opening speech as one of the key speakers at this monumental event.

“As we struggle to preserve a vital and vibrant Christian presence in the Holy Land in the face of a resurgence of radicalism and hatred in the society, and as our world is plunged deeper and deeper into confusion and despair, the universal spiritual vocation of Bethlehem and the Basilica has never been more urgent.”

His Beatitude emphasized that the church is not a mere archaeological site or museum but rather “it is a living

witness to hope and to light and to life.”

Giving a small history background to the audience regarding the Church of the Nativity, His Beatitude added “There has been a church on this site since the early 330s and the present structure dates from the reign of the Emperor Justinian in the 6th century. It was one of the first of the Holy Places to be reconstructed by the Emperor Saint Constantine and his mother Saint Helena, and it is the oldest complete church in the Christian world. The Rum Orthodox Church has been the guardian and servant of this church from its very foundation, and has been a witness down the ages to the embodiment of our common sacred history in the region and to the divine-human encounter. For here the divine Logos was revealed.”

Towards the end of his speech His Beatitude thanked the World Council of Churches (WCC) for their tremendous efforts to establish this exhibit and their unwavering support to the Church in Jerusalem and the communities. Patriarch Theophilos also thanked His Excellency the President of the Palestinian State, Mr Mahmoud Abbas, who took the initiative and has been instrumental in the restoration work and who continues to show concern about preserving the Church of the Nativity, “which is a symbol of hope and peace and a symbol unity and co-existence for the Palestinian people, both Christian and Muslim.”

His Beatitude was accompanied by a high-level delegation from Palestine, including: Dr Ramzi Khoury, member of the Executive Committee of the PLO and chairman of the Higher Presidential Committee of Churches Affairs in Palestine; Ambassador Ibrahim Khraishi, permanent observer of the state of Palestine to the UN-Switzerland; Ambassador Issa Kassisieh, ambassador of the state of Palestine to the Holy See; Ambassador Omar Awadallah; assistant minister for UN and specialized organizations; Minister Khouloud Daibes, executive director of the Bethlehem Development Foundation; Ambassador Amira Hanania, Higher Presidential Committee of Churches Affairs in Palestine; Ahmad

Hammoudeh, chargee d'affaires at the Embassy of the state of Palestine to the Holy See; and Doa Nofal, second secretary at the POM of the state of Palestine.

On his behalf, Dr Ramzi Khoury, member of the Executive Committee of the Palestine Liberation Organization and chairman of the High Presidential Committee for Church Affairs, said that "Our demand is for our people to live a dignified life free from occupation, like any other nation in the world, to build a prosperous future and preserve, with your assistance, the remaining Palestinian Christian presence in the Holy Land." Mr. Khoury added "our people, despite all obstacles mentioned and more, are a resilient people who safeguard their heritage and sanctities."

The exhibition is promoted by the State of Palestine; Higher Presidential Committee of Churches Affairs in Palestine; Presidential Committee for the Restoration of the Church of the Nativity; and the Embassy of the State of Palestine to the Holy See in cooperation with Bethlehem Development Foundation; Piacenti S.p.a and with the participation of University of Pavia.

The exhibit will be available to the public from 13 September-5 October daily. Marking the first renovation of the Church of the Nativity in hundreds of years, has toured different world cities, including Paris, Rome, and other parts of Italy. After four weeks in Geneva, it will move to Washington, DC, in November.



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