

SPEECHES OF HIS BEATITUDE TO THE FRANCISCAN CUSTODIA AND ARMENIAN PATRIARCHATE FOR THE OCCASION OF CHRISTMAS AT THE PATRIARCHATE

January 9th marked the day of various brotherly Christmas greetings exchanges by the different church leaders in Jerusalem to our Greek Orthodox Patriarchate. During a separate visit, the brotherhood of the Franciscan Custodia, led by Custos of the Holy Land, Father Francesco Pattonton, conveyed Christmas greeting to our father and Patriarch of Jerusalem and our Orthodox Patriarchate, to whom His Beatitude Patriarch Theophilos III delivered the following speech:

Your Paternity, dear Father Francesco,

Beloved Members of our Respective Brotherhoods,

Dear Fathers,

Christ is born!

Glorify him!

We are pleased to welcome you to our Patriarchate in this season of light and hope, and we thank you for your kind and gracious greetings for the Feast of the Nativity of our Lord Jesus Christ. Once again we are brought face to face with the

great mystery of our salvation, and we sing at this time:

*In Bethlehem, in a manger of animals,
from a Virgin now is born a young Child
who is the pre-eternal God.*

O what a wonder is this!

(From Mattins of the Forefeast of the Nativity)

In this grave time, when our region is wracked by war, and where so many innocent victims are displaced and in daily danger, we cannot forget the great wonder of this feast and bear witness to the true spiritual meaning of Christmas. Even when the land of the Prince of Peace is torn by war and violence, the world looks to the Holy Land for reassurance that there is still the hope of a better future, that the human family may find the way to reconciliation, mutual respect and understanding, justice, and peace for all, both here in our region, and around the world.

Once again we wish to take this opportunity of your visit to us to emphasise the importance of our ongoing co-operation in our common work and witness. Your commitment to your pastoral mission in your communities is a testimony to your care for the integrity and well-being of a strong and vital Christian presence here – which has been for some time now under terrible pressure, and which the present conflict threatens even further.

We are also grateful for your participation in the essential renovation work in which we are engaged in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre and that is planned for the grotto of the Basilica of

the Nativity. While we are currently focussed on the efforts to bring aid and support to those in the greatest need in our communities, particularly in Gaza at the Church to the Holy Family and at the Monastery of Saint Porphyrios, still this shared attention to maintaining the Holy Sites as places of worship and as living witnesses to our sacred history is a vital part of our ongoing spiritual mission, especially in times of conflict. As Saint Paul encourages us, Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ (Gal. 6:2).

This great feast, which Saint John Chrysostom calls the "metropolis," or "mother city," of feasts, in which we celebrate the mystery of the Incarnation of the Divine Logos, who comes from the heavenly city to share in the human city, is a reminder to us all of the urgency of true dialogue as the only reliable course to robust and enduring reconciliation and peace. Admittedly this is the difficult path, and yet it is the necessary one, and as the servants and guardians of the Holy Places we remain steadfast in this commitment, and determined to work with those who are pledged to this same effort. We cannot abandon our commitment to dialogue, especially when the possibility of effective dialogue seems to be so elusive.

So we take this opportunity to repeat our call for peace and for an immediate humanitarian ceasefire. The future for which we all long will not be born from violence and war, but from the steady, attentive work of mutual respect, reconciliation, and peace-building. This will mean a new spirit on all sides of the conflict, and a deeper understanding that the future of our region and our world depends on our acceptance of our mutual flourishing. For God is agathos and philanthropos. As we celebrate once again the feast when God makes his home among us, we are reminded that there is room in the Holy Land for all who call the Holy Land their home.

May the Prince of Peace encourage you and the members of your

fraternity, and may all our peoples know the peace that he came to bring to us.

Christ is born!

Glorify him!



Soon afterwards, the Armenian Patriarchate representatives also joined the rest of the Churches in Jerusalem to convey Christmas greetings to His Beatitude Patriarch Theophilos III, to whom His Beatitude delivered the following speech:

Your Beatitude, dear Archbishop Nourhan,

Your Eminences,

Your Graces,

Beloved Members of our Respective Brotherhoods,

Dear Fathers,

Christ is born!

Glorify him!

We greet you warmly, Your Beatitude, and the members of your Brotherhood, as you celebrate the Feast of the Nativity of the Divine Logos in the Church of the Nativity. This is a time of deep joy, and we recall the words of the hymnographer:

O Bethlehem, receive the Mother of God:

for she has come to you to give birth to the Light that never sets.

Let everything that has breath praise the Maker of all.

(From Mattins of the Forefeast of the Nativity)

As we keep the Christmas feast of joy, hope, and light in this time of darkness in our region and in our world, we must not refrain from appropriate rejoicing. For the Light that the darkness can never overcome has come into the world (cf. Jn 1:5), and this great feast renews our faith and trust in

the God who comes to share our humanity in all its fullness.

Our spiritual mission that has been entrusted to us by Divine providence is to remain focussed always on this message of hope, especially when hope seems elusive. There is no doubt that at this present time in human history the human family is facing some of its greatest challenges, and our region is no exception. For we are under particular pressure here in the Holy Land, where so many innocent victims suffer and where so many are displaced from their homes and their lands. As we are fully aware, the Christian community is also confronted by the impact of the conflict, and there has never been a time when our shared commitment to our spiritual mission here has been more urgent.

Just as we are keeping the Christmas feast, which is the feast of God's solidarity with us, we wish to take this opportunity to express our solidarity as well with you and your community in the face of the pressures you are bearing. The situation that you face is not simply an issue for the Armenian community alone; indeed it is an issue for the whole Christian community. We recall the words of Saint Paul, If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it (1 Cor. 12:26). We are committed to remain united in our resolve to defend the integrity of the Christian character of Jerusalem and the Holy Land.

We assure you, Your Beatitude, of our firm support in your endeavours to protect the patrimony of the Armenian patriarchate. As Saint Paul encourages us, we are to bear one another's burdens, and in this way...fulfill the law of Christ (Gal. 6:2). We are deeply concerned at the ongoing harassment that the Armenian community is experiencing in the matter of the Cow's Garden, and we pray for a swift resolution to these problems and the restoration of normal life for the Armenian community.

On this occasion we would like to offer our congratulations for your newly ordained bishops, and we also wish to express once again our condolences at the recent passing away of the late Archbishop Aris, who was a faithful servant of the Armenian Church and of the Christian community of the Holy Land. May his memory be eternal.

In this difficult season for the world and for our region, we must renew our resolve not to let anything distract us from our pastoral and spiritual mission to guard and protect the Holy Places and to serve and support the Christian presence here. Nothing is more important than this. We are to be vigilant for those who cause divisions among us and put obstacles in our way that are contrary to the Gospel (cf. Rom. 16:17). Let this be our special care so that we may always join our efforts and maintain our united front against those who wish to rend the multi-cultural, multi-ethnic, and multi-religious fabric of our society.

In this blessed season of the Prince of Peace, we renew our appeal for peace and for a humanitarian ceasefire so that the innocent victims of the present conflict may receive the essential help and care that they so desperately need. And we encourage the authorities of our region and of the world to do all in their power to bring a swift end to this conflict, prevent any escalation, and engage in a process of dialogue that will lead to lasting and robust peace and security for all our peoples.

As we keep this holy season, Your Beatitude, we pray that the Light that shines from the Holy Grotto of Bethlehem will illumine the darkness of this present time, and enlighten the hearts and minds of all to seek peace and pursue it (Ps. 34:14).

Christ is born!

Glorify him!

