

# **INTERVIEW OF HIS BEATITUDE THE PATRIARCH OF JERUSALEM TO THE WORLD COUNCIL OF CHURCHES**

On Monday, April 14/27, 2020, His Beatitude the Patriarch of Jerusalem Theophilos III was interviewed by the World Council of Churches (WCC). The interview follows below;

## **WCC questions posed to His Most Godly Beatitude Patriarch Theophilus III of Jerusalem**

27 April 2020

National, religious and ethnic borders are of no relevance to the COVID-19 virus. As we watch its effect on the entire world, we are reminded of the interconnectedness of the entire human family. In the next few weeks, Christians, Jews and Muslims will participate in central aspects of their ritual calendars; normally a time for festive gatherings, all are struggling to find a way to celebrate given the precautions we must take to protect ourselves, our loved ones and our communities. Christians, Jewish, and Muslim communities are responding to all the challenges of this unprecedented time: fighting hate and bigotry that has emerged because of the pandemic, providing frontline services to those in need, maintaining community, and seeking creative alternatives for observing and celebrating in a world of social distancing and quarantine.

**In what ways is Your Beatitude seeing churches adapt to life amid the coronavirus outbreak? In the Holy Land, and worldwide.**

In the long history of our Church, of course, the world has passed through countless difficulties. We are able to proceed with clarity by following the instructions of our Lord and

Saviour Jesus Christ, who said, "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's" (Mark 12:17). In this way, particularly during our present situation dealing with the coronavirus, we maintain our prayer life as we should, but within the confines set by the authorities for the purpose of public health and safety.

**How can we protect lives? What can we, as church/religious communities do?**

Our Lord Jesus Christ summed up all the law and the prophets in two commandments: to love God with everything that we have, and to love our neighbour as ourselves, even our enemies. These commandments guide our Christian mission, and our Church has restated its commitment to philanthropic mission easing the burdens of others where necessary, both materially and morally. In this way, as servants of Christ and as spiritual leaders, we should engage ourselves into any acts of assistance that we can looking after the elderly and the vulnerable, and asking God's mercy upon His creation and delivering us from this pandemic.

**Your Beatitude, please share some of the liturgical work at the Easter celebrations in Jerusalem? How did you celebrate in the midst of COVID-19?**

Since Jerusalem is the physical place of the human-divine encounter, our services during Holy Week and Pascha were held notwithstanding the difficult situation and the inability to welcome pilgrims and members of our local community to be physically present at the Holy Sepulchre, because of the necessary health guidelines. These services were streamed online and watched by hundreds of thousands here in the Holy Land and around the world.

**Your Beatitudes' reflections on more than two-three million followers in social media for the Easter celebrations in Jerusalem?**

As we confront this current crisis, it is clear that people around the world from all religious and even non-religious backgrounds prompted by a deep need to connect with the holy places. It's a consolation for them to know that there is hope that is embodied in our prayers for the whole world and for each one of us, and for relief from this virus. Likewise, people realize that without Heavenly protection life has no purpose and is uncertain. The hope of Resurrection that is Easter is in God's victory over evil powers and His never failing light over darkness is the pledge of eternal life with Him.

### **Your Beatitudes' strongest personal memory from the Easter in Jerusalem in 2020?**

Our Easter celebration in Jerusalem might have been experienced in an unprecedented situation, but its purpose remains the same. God is not confined to local premises, for the human being is the church where the Holy Spirit dwells in him.

"for God's temple is holy and that temple you are" (1 Cor. 3:17)

### **In what ways can the Heads of Churches and religious leaders in Jerusalem be a role model in the midst of COVID-19?**

Christian churches in the Holy City of Jerusalem and the Holy Land continue to be a living witness which is expressed in and through prayers on the very site of the crucifixion, burial and resurrection of our Lord Jesus. As shepherds of Christ's flock, we continue our mission to keep the spirit alive and to spread the message of hope; for we are commanded:

"do not quench the spirit" (1 Th. 5:19)

And we are exhorted to encourage the faint hearted, help the weak, the needy and the sick in our society, and support each other through moments of uncertainty, fear and suffering. At

the same time, as religious communities, we ask all people to abide by the guidelines set forth by the authorities in order to keep each other safe and healthy.

**As Your Beatitude confronts unprecedented challenges, what can the global fellowship pray for?**

Let us thank our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ for His abiding love and for never abandoning us. We must pray for the manifestation of God's love in deeds and compassion to our fellow human brothers and sisters; for Saint John teaches us:

“If a man say, I love God, and hates his brother, he is a liar: for he that love not his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen?” (1 John 4:20).

**Questions prepared by the WCC director of communication Marianne Ejdersten.**

**WCC member churches in the Holy Land**

**Religious leaders in Jerusalem offer joint prayer for end of coronavirus**

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**SIGNING AGREEMENT ON THE  
INTEGRATION OF WORKINGS OF  
THE SACRED EDICULE AND THE  
ROTUNDA AROUND THE HOLY**

# SEPULCHRE

On Monday afternoon, May 14/27, 2019, at the Franciscan Monastery, there was a meeting of H.H.B. the Patriarch of Jerusalem Theophilos, Geronda Secretary-General Most Reverend Archbishop Aristarchos of Constantina, and Dragouman Archimandrite Mattheos, with the Franciscans, the Custos Fr. Francesco Patton, Fr. Dobromiro, Fr. David, and with the Armenian Patriarch in Jerusalem Archbishop Nourhan Manougian, the Hegoumen of the Armenians at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre Fr. Samuel and Fr. Gurion, for the signing of the agreement for the completion of the maintenance and restoration project of the Sacred Edicule and the Rotunda, after the maintenance and restoration works of the Sacred Edicule that were completed two years ago under the technical supervision of the Technical University of Athens.

His Beatitude our Father and Patriarch of Jerusalem Theophilos made the following interview regarding the signing of this agreement:

*"Your Paternity,*

*Your Beatitude,*

*Dear Brothers,*

*It is a great blessing, for us to be here in this very special place, and it is a great blessing, because what we are about to sign is the confirmation of what is being mentioned in your script, it is the confirmation of the initiative that was taken some years ago, for the restoration of the Holy Edicule of the Holy Sepulchre.*

*It is true that our common initiatives and joint venture and common action that we altogether work for the restoration of the Holy Edicule of the Holy Sepulchre, that opened a new phase I would say, in our history, in our cooperation, in our*

co-existence, and above all, in our mission and as witness to the Holy City of Jerusalem and of course to the Holy Places, with the Crown of them, the Holy Sepulchre, which as you said, indeed has become the main destination not only for our own pilgrims the Christian pilgrims, but also the destination of all other visitors and non-Christian pilgrims as well.

Today is really a special day, not only for us and for our Communities, that we are in charge of the custody of the Holy Places, but it is important for the Holy City of Jerusalem because everybody is now realizing and acknowledges that if Jerusalem maintains her Christian character as well, it depends on us as well. Therefore our mission is very important, not only in religious terms but also in diplomatic terms and inevitably in political terms.

I would like very much from the bottom of my heart to express on behalf of our Brotherhood, and myself personally, our thanks and appreciation, and we hope and pray that this initiative, to not just restore the foundations and the pavement of the Holy Sepulchre, but that this would be the completion of the restoration of the Holy Sepulchre, that has started so many years ago. And I think that this will bring the Holy Sepulchre to a new era, to a new phase, because, so far, due the restoration works which are going on, there is no doubt that the Holy Sepulchre suffers from its holiness and sanctity and reverence. But by completing the restoration works, the Holy Sepulchre will recover its splendour.

And I must rest you assured that our technical team is ready to join forces with your own technical team, as well as with the technical team of our Brothers the Armenians. And we are ready also in any possible way, to make our contribution, so that the works will go smoothly, as it happened with the restoration of the Holy Sepulchre.

Thank you very much indeed! Christos Anesti! Christ is risen!"

# REFLECTION OF HIS BEATITUDE IN ADVENT

Reflections of His Beatitude our Father and Patriarch of Jerusalem during Advent while on official visit to the United Kingdom

“As the leader of a Church that has had a presence in the Holy Land since the very birth of Christianity, Patriarch Theophilos III can trace his succession 2.000 years to St. James, the brother of Jesus, the First Bishop of Jerusalem.

**Sam Hailes** meets the Greek Orthodox leader

**It won't surprise you to learn that I don't have much in common with the Patriarch of Jerusalem. He's 67 years old, speaks mainly in Greek and lives in the Middle East.**

The services he presides over are full of bells, incense and chanting. It's a world away from the evangelical contexts in which I typically find myself, where guitars and skinny jeans abound.

Following his recent meetings in London with Most Rev. Justin Welby, the Archbishop of Canterbury, and Prince Charles (both have a keen interest in the plight of Christians in the Holy Land), Patriarch Theophilos III shared the following reflections with *Premier Christianity*.

In the process of meeting the Patriarch, I had the opportunity

to relearn a vital lesson: styles of clothing, worship and liturgy might appear to divide us Christians but, in reality, when it comes to the fundamentals of our beliefs we have far more in common than most may think.

**You are charged with administering many of the holy sites in Jerusalem, including the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, which is built on the place Jesus is traditionally thought to have been crucified and buried. How does it feel to stand in those places?**

Jerusalem is the place of the divine-human encounter. It is there that you realize what the mystery of the incarnation is, because the typography and geography are an undeniable testimony to this great event of the incarnation of the divine Logos.

To be on the very spot which is connected with the earthly life or the ministry of our Lord Jesus Christ, of course, has a very specific impact. The Holy Land in general is a place of divine energy.

**Some Christians here in the UK have taken sides in the political conflict, supporting either Israel or the Palestinians. What is your message to those who are taking sides?**

In the Holy Land, and especially in Jerusalem, there are more than 15 Christian denominations. What is good is that we as churches get together and discuss all issues. And we try, of course, not to turn ourselves into politicians; this would be a disaster. But, at the same time, it doesn't mean we are indifferent to what is happening, and from time to time we have to raise our voices. But we do this always in the context of the love of the gospel, because this is actually what must be our mission – not to just speak about peace; it's not enough. We have to always speak of reconciliation. We are, I think, the only body, the only institution – the Christian

Church and the Christian community – that can really bring the two groups to an understanding of each other.

**You've talked before about Jerusalem not just being a place of history but you've said it's also where the last days will take place...**

Correct, this is true. Although, not me; it's St. John the Evangelist.

**Well, many Christians will read the words of St. John in Revelation and they'll come away scratching their heads, thinking: "I'm not sure if I understand any of this." Can you help?**

When we read the gospel, always we hear about the last days, about the last judgment etc. We should take into account what is going on around us, all this phenomena, these so-called natural disasters. Be ready, be at work. But, at the same time, remember the day has not come yet. We should not talk too much about the last days or about the antichrist as much as we must talk about Christ himself and look after our own personal spiritual advance and commitment to our faith.

**How do you personally share the Good News with those who perhaps have no concept of what it means to be a Christian?**

The core of the political conflict is about the holy places; it's about religion. So we have a mission, and our mission is precisely this: to keep these holy places as spiritual oases, so that people who are visiting today can drink from this water. No matter what people say about themselves in public, within the human being there is the inner man. This is the soul, and as much as the body needs biological food, so the soul needs very special food. This is our mission – to provide people with spiritual food. I've had many experiences of people saying: "I had nothing to do with faith, I was totally indifferent, but I don't know, after I entered the Holy Sepulchre something happened to me."

**The Christian Church around the world is divided into different denominations. What should Christian unity look like in our context today?**

There is a nice and very special word that can be found only in the dictionaries of the Church Fathers – *autexousious*: that is to say, every human being has been made not just after the image and likeness of God, but they have the gift of God to be free. Nobody is forced to believe in God. Therefore, it makes sense that everyone has his own understanding in interpretation of faith.

What is important to me is to be ecumenical but not ecumenist. Ecumenical means you stick to your own tradition, the way you were brought up.

**So, we don't apologise for our differences...**

On the contrary.

**...but we see to bless one another at the same time?**

Yes. This is a healthy ecumenical spirit.

**We sometimes hear that Christians in the Holy Land feel forgotten by the rest of the Church.**

You have touched on an interesting point. I am receiving pilgrims around the clock every day, and I meet people that have been to the Holy Land five times, six times, ten times. Everyone who has been to Jerusalem for pilgrimage rally wants to come back again!

I'm telling the Christians: "Your presence here, your pilgrimage, is a blessing for you, and your families, your country, but it's a blessing for us." And when I say "for us", I mean for the Christian Community. Why? Because the Christian Community here, by your presence, feel that they are not abandoned, they are not forgotten."

Sam Hailes is editor of Premier Christianity.

Hear the full interview on The Profile podcast. Download it at: [premierchristianradio.com/the-profile](http://premierchristianradio.com/the-profile)

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# **ADDRESS OF H.B. THE PATRIARCH OF JERUSALEM IN THE COUNCIL OF THE CHURCHES IN JORDAN.**

Amman, 5-12-2013

*“Behold, now, what is so good as for brothers to dwell together in unity?”, says the Psalm, [Ps. 132(133)]*

Your Beatitudes

Your Eminences

Dear Reverend Fathers

The grace of God has brought us together, in order to inaugurate the recently established Council of Churches of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. The formation of the National Council of Jordan, which was initiated by His Highness Emir Ghazi, and with the blessing of His Majesty King Abdullah II, constitutes an indeed historic event for our recognized churches, which are called to play a decisive role vis a vis the challenges which our Middle East region is confronted with, in general, and in particular our Christian faithful in this very critical time through which we are passing.

We give glory to God as we commence our deliberations during this blessed and hopeful season of Christmas. The main purpose of our gathering here in Amman is to address structural and administrative issues, which concern the functioning of our Jordanian Council of Churches such as:

- a) The appointment of a coordinator for the council, and
- b) Confirmation that this Council of the Churches is the sole legitimate body authorized to communicate with the official governmental and civic offices in Jordan in relation to all general Christian affairs and issues of common concern. It shall be made clear from the outset that each Church will continue to sustain the right to communicate directly through its spiritual leader in relation to all its specific and private affairs.

Furthermore, to agree that the new by-laws shall be effected for the Council. For this purpose, we need to appoint a committee comprised of representatives of our Churches.

It should be mentioned that an administrative office should be set up, sponsored by the Church currently in charge, which will change on a rotating basis.

Other issues at our immediate attention are:

- a) The proposed changes to the Jordanian matrimonial law, that is,

matters of divorce, inheritance, marriages, etc, especially the civil procedures relating to the ecclesiastical courts. In this regard, we must give our recommendation to the government, and therefore, a committee of legal personnel should be formed.

- b) There are various requests from Christian groups who want to join the council and to be recognized by the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan.

c) Any other business related to the purposes of our gathering

It should be made crystal clear that the intention of the Jordanian authorities is to help and encourage the spiritual and pastoral mission of our respective Churches, especially right now as our Churches in Syria, Egypt and elsewhere are experiencing the precise persecution as that of the early Church, and it in no way intends to interfere with the internal ecclesiastical canons and laws that regulate or dictate the independent governance of our Churches.

In closing these brief remarks, we would like to express our deep gratitude to His Majesty King Abdullah II, and not in the least, our appreciation to His Highness Emir Ghazi for his tireless efforts to support our shared mission.

God Bless our deliberations.

His Beatitude

**THEOPHILOS III**

Patriarch of Jerusalem

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**REMARKS AT THE CONFERENCE OF  
THE SEARCH FOR COMMON GROUND  
ON THE STATUS AND NATURE OF**

# HOLY SITES.

Jerusalem, 30 October 2013.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Good morning.

First, please allow us to thank our dear friend, Mrs. Sharon Rosen, for her kind invitation to address this conference. The subject of Holy Sites is, needless to say, of supreme importance to all the religious communities of the Holy Land, and it is crucial for us to gather together to discuss both the nature of Holy Sites and their meaning for us all today. We would also like to acknowledge and thank Rabbi David Rosen for moderating this part of our conference, as well as his instrumental work in the Universal Code on Holy Sites.

## **The Nature of Holy Sites**

According to the Psalms, “The earth is the Lord’s, and all its fullness. The world and those who dwell therein (Psalms 23:1).”

In the Christian tradition, holiness is the supreme attribute of God. Human beings share in God’s holiness insofar as we share in the divine life. “For it is written, be holy for I am holy.” We call those people “holy” who reflect the divine life, and we call places “holy” where that divine life breaks through into our temporal reality. The goal of true Christian living is precisely this: that by sharing in God’s life in the church we shall attain full union with God for eternity. Therefore holiness cannot be created by us; but we can nurture holiness where it is found, both in places and in people, and we can participate in this dynamic life.

For the Christian, too, a proper understanding of Holy Places flows naturally from our biblical theology of creation and the

mystery of the divine economy of the Incarnation. We believe that God created all things from nothingness, and that all creation will be redeemed and restored by God to its original purpose. Therefore even geography has the potential to mediate the divine life. The Christian monastic tradition is especially sensitive to this, and monasteries have often been built in situations of particular beauty or starkness, as being the most propitious to the ascetic endeavor.

Our theology of the Divine Logos tells the Christian that because we believe that God became a human being in a particular time and place, and because we know from our experience that we may know the presence of God in this life, we have a keen appreciation for the holiness of places. In his own earthly life, our Lord Jesus Christ inhabited specific places, spilling his sacrificial blood, and so made not only human history but geography sanctified. These are precisely the places where, over centuries, the faithful have come to venerate and become an eye-witness to a person in our sacred history – that is, the Christian history of salvation. Holy Sites, therefore, are “the intersection of the timeless moment” where earth and heaven meet, and we are enabled to see a glimpse of eternity.

Holy Sites do not depend on our presence for their true nature to be evident. In other words, particular sites are holy whether there is a solitary pilgrim lost in silent prayer, or whether there are thousands gathered for a great religious feast. We in the Holy Land who are accustomed to great crowds of worshippers and pilgrims also know what it is like to be alone in the quietude of a Holy Place and experience the “gentle breeze” (aura) that is the voice of God.

These remarks naturally bring us to a difficult subject, which is the tendency of Holy Sites to be turned from pilgrimage destinations to mere tourist attractions and archeological sites. We who have been entrusted with the guardianship and service of the Holy Sites are indeed sensitive to this

delicate issue. Of course we acknowledge that even some who call themselves faithful Christians visit Holy Sites more as observers than as worshippers, still, we are aware of the fact that Holy Sites are to be conducive to their primary purpose to be “intersections of the timeless moment.” To allow Holy Sites to become simply tourist attractions is to gravely undermine their true nature. In this regard, one of the great benefits of the “Universal Code on Holy Sites” is to support religious communities in safeguarding and sustaining Holy Sites around the world from this exact sort of misdirection.

### **“Holy Gifts for the Holy” and Others**

Holy Sites are gifts both for the faithful who claim the site as well as for the entire human family beyond the bounds of a specific religious community or group for whom the site is sacred. We know this in the Holy Land, for pilgrims come to us from all over the world. For example, we welcome many pilgrims to sites that are distinctly Christian, but however, are equally sacred to other religious traditions of the Holy Land and beyond. All of us, we must admit, whether Jew, Christian, or Muslim, have observed that pilgrims from other traditions often treat our Holy Sites with more reverence than our own faithful do!

No doubt, Holy Sites testify to the power of the faith and hope of those who kneel there to worship, “as the deer pants for the water brooks” (Psalms 42). In fact, Holy Places possess layers of sanctity for those whose religious tradition and attachment is fully identified; sanctity that may escape even the most pious person from another tradition. “For what person knows a man’s thoughts except the spirit of the man which is in him?” (1 Cor. 2:11). For instance, the Church of the Anastasis (known as the Holy Sepulcher), which encompasses the crucifixion place and tomb of our Lord Jesus Christ, will have spiritual implications that are as much emotional and inexpressible for Christians as they may be explainable to others who are not necessarily Christian. Just as the Western

Wall (known as the Kotel) will have spiritual implications for Jews, and the Haram as-Sherif (known as Al-Aqsa) will have spiritual implications for Muslims. There are levels of religious experience that we can only know in the heart, and for which words are inadequate.

And yet, it seems to us that here is a point of convergence for the faithful of various religious traditions. That is to say, as Christians, we may not be able to perceive what the Kotel means for the Jewish soul, as we also cannot perceive what Haram as-Sherif means for the Muslim heart. But we as Christians know what it is to feel divine intimacy at a Holy Site, just as Jews and Muslims also feel at Holy Sites. This experience can be for us one of deep unity, since we share a common humanity and a common destiny. Needless to say, it is in this respect that through the sanctity of the Holy Sites we find grounds for peaceful coexistence and mutual understanding.

One should not underestimate the undeniable power of holy places to be points of cohesion for religious identities and unique facilitators of unity, not just of the religious kind, but the kind that transcends national and human barriers. It is so often faith that unites people under their national identity and fosters solidarity between nations. One should bear in mind that this is a mighty stronghold against which globalization has not yet managed to influence.

Furthermore, it should be underscored that the unwillingness or failure to take into serious consideration the inherent sensitivities and concerns of various religious communities, both individual and collective, especially in our region and in particular the Holy Land, can turn the Holy Places into a metaphorical volcano that is imminently ready to explode with unpredictable consequences for both the religious and political realms.

We cannot conclude these brief remarks without the observation

that we have not only Holy Sites in our region that are specific to our respective religions; we have Holy Sites that we share in common. It is one thing to have claims of exclusivity over one's own tradition's Holy Sites. It is quite another thing to have discreet access to the sanctity of those places.

It is here where we are presented with both a challenge and wisdom. Our human predicament is the desire to possess and to exclude, while the divine impulse is to give and include with discretion. The Sites that we hold in common are a challenge to the boundaries that have been fixed around our religious and cultural traditions. It should be said that we are not the possessors of sanctity which emanates from holy places; it is sanctity that possesses us. It is our commitment to the sanctity of the Holy Places that holds us in a divine encounter.

Thank you.

His Beatitude

**THEOPHILOS III**

Patriarch of Jerusalem

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**HIS BEATITUDE ADDRESS IN  
HONOUR OF CHURCH LEADERS AT  
THE ORTHODOX HEAD OF CHURCHES**

# MEETING IN AMMAN-JORDAN.

31 July 2011

**An Address at the Dinner in honour of His Beatitude Ignatius IV, the Patriarch of Antioch, His Beatitude Chrysostomos II, the Archbishop of Cyprus, His Grace Bishop Nicholas, the Representative of His Beatitude Theodoros II, the Patriarch of Alexandria and Representatives of the Royal Family and the Government of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan**

Your Beatitudes, my dear Brother Primates,

Your Eminences,

Yours Graces,

Reverend Fathers,

Your Royal Highnesses,

Esteemed Members of the Government,

Beloved Brothers and Sisters

“Your children like olive branches around your table. Thus shall the man be blessed who fears the Lord.” (Psalm 127:3).

It is a great honour for us to host this dinner for all our distinguished guests with us this evening, who are like olive branches around this table. We come here as those who fear and love God, and who seek to serve God faithfully. This gathering is of paramount importance because it takes place at a delicate time for our region, as we experience unrest and change.

This evening we remember our forebears, Patriarch Sophronios and the Caliph Omar ibn al-Khattab, and the foundation that they laid in the Al-‘Udha Al-‘Umariyyah In the year 637 for

the peaceful co-existence of Christians and Muslims in the Holy Land. We recall that Patriarch Sophronios acted not simply on his own behalf, but as the recognized leader of all Christians in the region. And the Caliph Omar, too, entered into this treaty on behalf of the Islamic leadership as a whole. As a consequence, this treaty has formed an historic basis for the relationship between our Christian civilization and our Arab Muslim civilization and our life together in the Holy Land for many centuries.

We who are here this evening are the heirs of Patriarch Sophronios and Caliph Omar. The presence of leaders of the Rum Orthodox Church of our region demonstrates the united witness to the historical relationship of the Church to the land and all our peoples. The presence of representatives of the Jordanian Royal Family and the Government of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan this evening is an eloquent testimony to the ongoing guardianship of the religious heritage of our region that is yours.

We sit round this table today as the descendants of Patriarch Sophronios and Caliph Omar ibn al-Khattab, We inherit their awesome responsibility, and we are acutely aware, as the Scriptures remind us, that we "bear one another's burdens" (Galatians, 6:2).

This great foundation, on which our present work is based, is once again threatened. The religious; cultural, and historic principles and circumstances of co-existence that have shaped and formed us are at risk. It is to ensure that this crucial heritage is preserved that is the primary motivation for our gathering.

To the Rum Orthodox here this evening we would like to emphasize the urgency living out the unity that is ours as we provide leadership in our region. We are called to join with our fellow leaders of other Christian churches and communities for the sake of the well-being of all. And we are further

called to act together with our Muslim brothers and sisters who are our compatriots in our respective countries.

To our Muslim brothers and sisters here with us this evening we have a similar challenge. As you look to the beginning of the holy season of Ramadan, a time of recollection and re-commitment, we encourage you to be leaders in a new collaboration on behalf of peace and justice for all our people.

Whether we are Muslim or Christian, we cannot allow the forces of division to disrupt our historic relationship. And let us not forget that as we share this meal together, this common food is a powerful and effective sign of our common nature as members of the human family and our common destiny.

Thank you all for being at this dinner this evening, and for showing such solidarity for the sake of our region and all our peoples.

And now would you please rise and join us in a toast to His Majesty King Abdullah, under whose gracious encouragement we meet, and who has been instrumental in following in the footsteps of Omar ibn al-Khattab to ensure the great heritage of the Al-'Umariyyah that has been handed on to the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan.

Your Beatitudes, Ladies and Gentleman – the King.

Please would you join me in a second toast to His Beatitude Patriarch Ignatius, His Beatitude Archbishop Chrysostomos, and to the other Church leaders here who labour diligently in our mission of safe-guarding not only the spiritual freedom of our people, but also in protecting and maintaining national order and unity in a time of great difficulty,

Dear friends, I give you Their Beatitudes and our fellow leaders.

Thank you.

His Beatitude

**THEOPHILOS III**

Patriarch of Jerusalem

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# **THE GREEK ORTHODOX CHURCH AND THE FUTURE OF JERUSALEM**

*The Greek Orthodox Patriarch of Jerusalem, Theophilos III, was interviewed by **Palestine-Israel Journal** intern/journalist Anna Koulouris.*

Politically speaking, Jerusalem is often discussed in terms of only two sides Israeli and Palestinian. This fact does not imply denying or ignoring the special role of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, which insisted in its peace agreement with Israel on being a major partner when the status of Jerusalem is decided between Israel and the Palestinians. The religious significance of Jerusalem is kept a separate matter it is simply a city of the utmost importance for the three Abrahamic faiths. The Greek Orthodox Christians, or Rum Orthodox as they are historically called, have had a history in Jerusalem for more than 2,000 years. As the inheritor of tradition, property and leadership, the Greek Orthodox Church aspires to play a significant role in the political future of this city. The jurisdiction of the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate, which includes more than 150,000 Christians, stretches across Israel, the Palestinian Authority (PA), including Jerusalem, and the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. By default, the patriarch takes on a role as a political leader whose voice is

considered integral in many local and international matters. As a local institution, the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate and the Israeli government rely on cooperation in order to carry out many of their respective functions. At the same time, any newly elected Greek Orthodox patriarch has to seek the approval of his nomination by the three parties: Jordan, Israel and Palestine. Members of the synods should have Jordanian citizenship. The primary function of the patriarchate is to preserve and protect the holiest sites in Christendom, as it has done since the birth of Christianity.

The 141<sup>st</sup> Patriarch of Jerusalem, Theophilos III, discusses the Greek Orthodox Church's current and future role in Jerusalem and the peace process, responds to criticisms and shares personal opinions.

### **Palestine-Israel Journal: What is the significance of the Greek Orthodox Church for Jerusalem?**

Patriarch Theophilos III: The role of the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Jerusalem and the church is extremely important for the current and future status of Jerusalem. Its history cannot be dissociated from the political and cultural-religious history of Jerusalem. It has an unbreakable historical presence for 2,000 years and is the only religious institution that has been here throughout the ages. Its purpose and mission continues to be crystal clear and purely religious and spiritual; it does not promote any other interests. Today, if Jerusalem enjoys a certain status and cultural and religious character, it is due to the presence of the patriarchate, which is the inheritor of the spiritual heritage, but also the natural heritage. By natural heritage I mean churches, basilicas, places of worship, holy places that have been handed over to the patriarchate by the Byzantines who left Palestine in the 7<sup>th</sup> century with the coming of Omar ibn al-Khattab. It was at this time that the Patriarch of Jerusalem became both the spiritual and ethnic leader of the

Greek Orthodox community.

**Speaking of heritage, there have been accusations by some local Arab Orthodox residents that the Greeks have maintained cultural dominance and that Arabs have not been promoted to certain official positions in the church to the same degree as the Greeks have. Is this true?**

There is a bigger question here. The name of the patriarchate and all Eastern Orthodox Christians locally here is Rum. This is how they are recognized and identified by the Muslim Arabs and Palestinians, in general. It is a matter of cultural identity or identity crisis that many people have difficulties understanding the meaning of Rum. The West has also brought them confusion about their identity, which could be remedied with education and [an] understanding [of] history. And you have to refer back to your roots. You cannot disregard the Byzantine presence that was here. The stones are talking everything is talking. I have prepared an academic study which gives a very thorough and complete analysis of the meaning of Rum and what it means to be a member of that church.

**Although the Greek Orthodox Church has had a presence in Jerusalem since its existence, looking forward, there is a political agenda on the part of Israel. No one can deny they would like to gain property that the patriarchate owns, especially in the Jaffa Gate area. Has this put pressure on the church?**

You have touched upon a very delicate issue, the core of the importance and significance of the patriarchate's presence and role concerning Jerusalem and the greater area. From the religious point of view, many of the holy places under the charge of the patriarchate have remained accessible to all pilgrims and visitors without any discrimination whatsoever. It is due to the presence of the Brotherhood of the Holy Sepulcher. What has been acknowledged by everybody locally, regionally and internationally is that if it were not for the

presence of the patriarchate here, most of the holy places would have been destroyed, or at the end of the day, turned into museums or archeological sites and tourist attractions. But so far, the holy places have been maintained as places of blessedness and worship.

In terms of culture and even politics, the patriarchate is very important, first of all because it gives legitimacy to the historical claims that the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan and the PA have over the holy places because they both have claims from the Muslim Caliph Omar ibn al-Khattab, when the Muslims took over the city of Jerusalem from the then-Patriarch of Jerusalem Sophronius, and it is well known that they made a peace covenant known as the Covenant of Omar. This fundamental agreement has been the basis of all the legal transactions or legal agreements that have taken place so far between the patriarchate and the states and their respective authorities. The other thing is that the patriarchate has been the inheritor of the natural heritage, that is to say, churches, monasteries and other properties, which later were augmented. This is what makes the patriarchate important for the natural, the physical and the demographic [aspects] of Jerusalem. The patriarchate continues to hold properties within and around the Old City within politically strategic places.

**Is any of this, the strength of the patriarchate, a source of tension with the Israeli government today?**

Jerusalem is [at] the heart of the political developments here, so it is natural that the patriarchate is part and parcel of the political conflict and interests. But the mission of the patriarchate remains spiritual and religious. Unlike the other Christian churches here and they do have a lot of properties as well the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate is the only church institution that is independent, autonomous and autocephalous. This means the properties of the patriarchate are properties of the country here, the land here they belong here.

As for the properties belonging to the other churches, for example, those belonging to the Roman Catholic Church or to the Russian Church, these are state properties. They do not belong here to the locality, but to the respective states. Some time ago, if you visited Notre Dame you could see written [there] Vatican Property. The same happened recently, the Russians asked for some properties to be restored and returned to their proper owners. But who is dealing with the state about these properties, or with the Palestinian Authority? It is the state, not the church.

The other thing is that all the other churches have their point of reference far away from Jerusalem. The appointments of the leaders of the other Christian churches and institutions are coming from abroad, from outside not from within. So you understand the importance of the patriarchate; it is a local institution.

**How is the relationship now between Jordan, Palestine and Israel, the states within the jurisdiction of the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Jerusalem?**

The relationship today is excellent. After the crisis that the patriarchate passed through, and [when] I assumed my responsibilities as the head of the church here, of course there were all sorts of problems, difficulties and misunderstandings. But eventually everybody realized that my task is to give what is due unto God and what is due unto Caesar.

**How much of a role does the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate play in speaking about Palestinian rights, especially with its close proximity to areas like Silwan? Does the church feel a responsibility to take a political stance on the issue?**

We try not to interfere or turn ourselves into politicians, but at the same time this does not mean that we do not have compassion for the suffering and the affliction through which

the people are passing here. And this is why the churches here have established a kind of council to discuss issues of common concern. We are addressing issues like the recent shooting in Silwan and others. Our purpose is to try, from our position, to contribute to mutual respect and understanding and to peaceful coexistence and symbiosis. This is the duty of the church. This is why we as churches have officially and repeatedly made statements and expressed our position over the status of Jerusalem.

Our position on Jerusalem is that we want it to be an open city, to be accessible to everybody, and that Jerusalem has enough space to accommodate all religious communities. We say it is enough for us to be allowed to visit and venerate the places that are commonly holy to Jews, Muslims and Christians. Even if we do not have claims over the site itself, we have claims to the holiness and sanctity of the place. The Temple Mount is an example. Another example is King David's Tomb on Mount Zion. When we have our holy day of Pentecost, which we celebrate in our monastery and at the school on Mount Zion, after the service we go in our liturgical vestments in a procession to King David's Tomb, which is a synagogue. There we go for worship, to say our prayers and leave. This is what we want. This is our understanding of the holy places. This is why I have said Jerusalem has enough space to accommodate everybody.

Politically speaking, everybody has claims over Jerusalem and everybody wants Jerusalem to be his or her own capital. But from the religious point of view, Jerusalem is the capital of God. And my personal position is that Jerusalem breathes with three lungs: a Christian lung, a Jewish lung and an Islamic lung. And those lungs, they breathe harmoniously. This is how we see the future of Jerusalem.

**What is your opinion about the ongoing negotiations of a taxation agreement between the Israeli government and the Vatican, which could mean that church institutions would have**

**to pay income, property and municipal taxes? Does this Orthodox Church feel sidelined knowing that if an agreement is reached, it will set a precedent for the other churches?**

The situation with the Vatican negotiations is far more complex. The Greek Orthodox Church is not sidelined because the legal status of the patriarchate differs from the Vatican. It is the only church institution with Jordanian law. The patriarchate is a local institution. The Vatican is a spiritual and political entity, so its representatives cannot speak on behalf of the local Christians here.

**There are many videos online of infighting that takes place between the Greeks and Armenians in the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. They seem shameful, and it is hard to understand how such clashes occur in holy places. How would you explain the dynamic here to an observer?**

I understand your question, but people try to limit those religious conflicts and fights to certain events that have taken place between Franciscans, between Greeks and Armenians, Armenians and Syrians, Copts and Ethiopians, and so on. But, in fact, we must think a bit deeper and ask ourselves what the entire conflict is about between Palestinian Muslims and Jewish Israelis. Is it not about religion? It is about religion. What is the importance of Jerusalem, politically speaking? Is Jerusalem important for military or strategic purposes? It is purely religious, nothing else. The conflict here is religious. When you see clashes in Jerusalem, especially over the Temple Mount and al-Haram al-Sharif, what is it all about? Is it not about religious areas? So they focus on a particular point in the Holy Sepulcher; that makes sense; it is natural. But they cannot focus on the broader picture of what is going on here in the Holy Land.

Now, there is another thing that we should not forget; we have to take into consideration our human predicament. Actually, all the fights and clashes in the past were in the name of

God. The Crusades, what were they all about? Were they not in the name of God? And there are so many others. Today, it is not called in the name of God, but in this game, in one way or another, religion is involved.

**In the World Council of Churches, how does the Greek Orthodox Church view its need to be there or to be a participant?**

The Orthodox Church and the Patriarchate of Jerusalem were among the pioneers, the founders of the World Council of Churches. It was established at the initiative of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople and then all the other churches followed. The council plays an important role in bringing together all the Christian denominations and has done great work because all sorts of prejudices have been dissipated.

The problem is this: During its inception years, the council focused on the unity of the Christian churches and denominations, but then the focus was diverted from a theological discussion to social matters because of the influence of the Protestant churches. Later on, in many cases, it got involved in political matters. Today, the council still plays an important role, but not as prominent as in the past because of many political changes and developments.

Still, the Orthodox Church is committed to the mission of the World Council of Churches. This is why we participate. I myself was the first representative of the patriarchate to become a member of the central committee of the council. Now we have our current representative, and we have recently welcomed the new secretary-general of the World Council of Churches. We are trying to contribute as much as possible because today this is important, especially for our religion. It can help in the peace process and reconciliation, and to bring peace and justice as well.

**After the contact you had with the Greek prime minister**

**recently when he visited Israel, what does the patriarchate expect from the Greek government? Do you believe Mr. George Papandreou will help to better relations in the area? Will you and he act as middlemen in political matters here?**

The visit of Mr. Papandreou was really very important because he made it clear that his mission is to strengthen this initiative of the peace process. It is a well-known fact that he enjoys respect from both the Israeli and the Palestinian leadership. It is known that his father was a great supporter of the Palestinians during the time of President Yasser Arafat. And to come here to the patriarchate, it is another sign that everybody realizes the importance of the patriarchate, not only in the religious but also in the political sphere. Since the conflict, as I said, is religious, all those leaders are slowly realizing that without the assistance or advice of the religious leadership, not only Christian but also Muslim and Jewish, they cannot succeed in their efforts to bring peace and reconciliation to the area.

**Your position is one of great importance and very demanding, yet you seem to have a low profile and live simply. From where do you draw strength on a daily basis?**

It is a very hard question. I think all the strength is from above; it is from the church, from prayer. That is it.

**What kind of advice would you give to people in the world today who may be struggling with the current economic state of affairs and other challenges that modernity and globalization present?**

To people I would say that the exit and refuge from this world's complexities is faith in God.

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## **INTERVIEW WITH HIS BEATITUDE CONCERNING THE SITUATION IN THE MIDDLE EAST.**

During the morning program «*Every day a new day*» broadcast today on the Radio Station of the Church of Greece, the reporters Katerina Houzouri and Kostas Pappas spoke with His Beatitude Patriarch of Jerusalem Theophilos III both about the recent convocation of the Council of Churches of the Middle East and about the current events concerning the uprisings in the Arab world. His Beatitude, questioned about the latest events in the Arab world and on the possibility of a chain reaction of uprisings replied «*The domino effect of uprisings worries us all; however, regarding Jordan I can assure you that what applies to the other countries does not apply to Jordan given that the situation there is completely different. This apprehension does not exist in Jordan, nevertheless this upheaval is being fueled by different situations and that is something that preoccupies everyone*».

Responding to another question with regard to whether these political uprisings can assume another character His Beatitude Patriarch of Jerusalem replied: «*To be frank, it was an unforeseeable situation upon which you hear a variety of opinions and views from various analysts, but the essence is the same, that the situation is unpredictable*».

Finally, following a question regarding the meeting of the Leaders of the Council of the Churches of the Middle East, His Beatitude pointed out that: «*At this moment in time, the*

Council of Churches of the Middle East, the Orthodox Church with the Patriarchates, and the Church of Cyprus, play a leading role since they have assumed the Presidency and, moreover, Myself as the representative of the Orthodox Church, on behalf of the Orthodox Family, as the President at this moment. This Council went through a major crisis for a variety of reasons including the fact that financial support did not exist anymore and also that the Orthodox Patriarchates, for different reasons, ceased to show substantial interest. However, the political situation that has been forming in the region, and all these recent events have required us to become proactive and, thus, we have taken the initiative in re-establishing the Middle East Council of Churches since it is an institution that possesses many capabilities and can convey the problems and the voice of the Christian world in the Middle East».

*Excerpts from His Beatitude's interview broadcast on the Radio Station of the Church of Greece.*

**Chief Secretary's Office.**

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## **INTERVIEW WITH HIS BEATITUDE PUBLISHED IN THE NEWSPAPER «ELEFTHEROS TYPOS».**

Excerpts of the interview with His Beatitude Patriarch of Jerusalem Theophilos III by Valia Nikolaidou for the newspaper «Eleftheros Typos» («Free Press»), December 2010

–Your Beatitude, almost five years have passed since your election to the patriarchal throne. Which do You consider is

## **Your most important work [deed]?**

« Normality in the functioning of the Patriarchate of Jerusalem has returned. Subsequently, the authority and prestige of the Patriarchate has been restored and now the Patriarchate plays a most important role not only in religious practices but also, mainly, in political processes because it is inseparably connected to the status of Jerusalem.

The Patriarchate plays an important role in the abatement of religious fanaticism, contributing the most through its active involvement in various inter-religious dialogues.

Proof of that is the participation of the Patriarchate of Jerusalem in the Council of Religious Institutions of the Holy Land which was created with the initiative of the State Department and is composed of Rabbis, the Jewish religious leadership of Israel, who represent the government, the religious leadership of the Palestinian Authority and the Leaders of the various Churches».

**-Did You encounter any difficulties during that time period and, if yes, what were those?**

«We definitely encountered difficulties which resulted from past mistakes, but, with God's help, we managed to overcome them and to correct them. »

**-In the past, the Patriarchate of Jerusalem faced financial problems. Have those problems been surmounted?**

« For many and various reasons, the Patriarchate had not fulfilled its obligations regarding many abeyances and large debts. Since then, with God's help, many gaps have been filled.

Financial matters are problems that have always required our attention and still continue to engage us, but I want to believe that we are on an upturn track. Today, everything

operates with full transparency and with accountability. Also, another problem is that the Patriarchate owns land and properties which are situated at strategic locations vis à vis the political aspect. You realize that the Patriarchate finds itself between two 'Symblegades' [clashing rocks]».

**-How are the Patriarchate's relations with the governments of Israel and Jordan and with the Palestinian Authority?**

«With all the governments, especially with Israel and Jordan, our relations are excellent and I mean that.

Also, with the Palestinian Authority our relations are very good and continuously improving, even though sometimes misunderstandings arise between people who are known to have personal, financial or ideological interests».

**-Your relations with the Ecumenical Patriarch?**

«We are not talking about relations with The Ecumenical Patriarch, there exists full agreement of views in all matters».

**-The Patriarchate went through a bad period due to the events that took place with the deposed Patriarch Ireneos. What is going on with his case?**

«We no longer concern ourselves with the case of Ireneos. »

**-To what degree can the different religions contribute to the prevalence of peace in world societies?**

«The religions play a determinative role. The problem of international diplomacy and of the politicians as well, is that, they do not possess a thorough and deep knowledge of the subject of religion and consequently they have not taken into account the role that religion plays on an international scale. However, very cautiously, they have started to acknowledge that, wherever confrontations of a political (or other) nature take place, the reason is clearly religious.

They again try to emphasize the political aspect or the ethnic one; however, the root cause is religious.

I am speaking from experience. Here, in our region, it is finally proven that the root of the political problem and of the confrontation is clearly religious, and for this reason, all the governments today, European and otherwise, contribute financially any kind of initiative that pertains to the inter-religious dialogue.

I receive daily delegations from Europe and America in the political, diplomatic, religious and ecclesiastical fields. The purpose for which they come is to hear our points of view on the subject of the Middle East / Palestinian problem as well as our point of view regarding Jerusalem.

They have finally realized that diplomatic and political efforts do not bear fruit without the contribution of the religious leadership or, if you prefer, of the religion itself».

**-As The Head of the Zion Church, The Church of Nativity of Christ is under your spiritual jurisdiction. What message would You like to convey to Christians from this holy place?**

«That people should open their hearts and accept the message of peace and hopefulness which is Christ».

**-What do You consider is the role of the Church today?**

«The role of the Church is irreplaceable and this is proven by the fact that in countries where the Church (editor's note: I refer to the Western Churches) has lost its spiritual mission and disposition, people find themselves in a state of confusion and disillusion and, as a result, they turn to religions which, instead of renewing them spiritually and supporting them, complicate their lives even more.

Regarding the Orthodox Church, it is proven that in countries

where it predominates, people acknowledge its contribution and turn to it irrespective of the flaws, if any, of its leaders and its clerics.».

**-Is the world crisis a crisis of values?**

«It is a moral crisis because the economic issue is the beginning of everything. The beginning of everything is the transcendence from the person of His self . . . »

**-Because of the economic crisis most people feel disappointed, angry. The feelings of young people who declare that they fear for their future are comparable. What sort of message would You send to these people?**

«I also see that people feel disappointed as I receive thousands of pilgrims from all over the world on a daily basis. This feeling is intensely apparent in their faces. Their fear and their despair are justifiable since they feel that they are betrayed by everyone.

The message of hope is exactly the message of intervention of God in history, which is Christmas. It is the face of Christ, Who is never disillusioned and never lets believers become disillusioned. Christ is the Light of knowledge; The sun of justice. But it all depends on how much someone, young or old, is ready to make the transcendence of his/her self».

**Excerpts of His Beatitude's interview for the newspaper «Eleftheros Typos».**

**Chief Secretary's Office.**

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# **INTERVIEW OF HIS BEATITUDE PATRIARCH OF JERUSALEM THEOPHILOS III TO THE JERUSALEM POST.**

The following article which includes the interview of His Beatitude was published by The Jerusalem Post Christian Edition in July 2010:

## **The 'original' Church**

### ***The Greek Orthodox Church: Patriarchate of Jerusalem***

**By Dov Preminger**

Quietly navigating its way through 1,500 years of history, the Greek Orthodox Church in Jerusalem has had an unbroken presence in the Holy Land since the first centuries of Christendom. The Church considers itself to be the Mother Church of Christianity, and has preached the same doctrine since the time of Jesus.

The Orthodox Church claims its first bishop was James, brother of Jesus, and the Church counts among its holy places both the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem and the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem. Today its distinctive black-robed monks honor these sites with the same liturgy and ritual as in ancient times, holding fast to their traditions through the Great Schism of 1054 AD, the Muslim occupation of Jerusalem, the Ottoman rule, and the Crusades.

More recently, the local Orthodox Church has faced challenges from the Israeli government, and dissent from its mostly Palestinian-Arab flock.

But the Church continues on, led by calm and humble Patriarch

Theophilos III, who deals with modern crises the same way the Church always has. "With prayer, patience, wisdom, persistence, and firmness".

## **ORIGINS**

Interestingly, one might regard the members of the first Christian church as the original Protestants, since the Roman Catholic pope's claim to universal jurisdiction was one of the prime causes of the Great Schism, which split the Church into Catholic and Orthodox denominations.

"Doctrinal teachings in many areas are common", said Patriarch Theophilos III of the two churches. "The big difference between Roman Catholics and [Orthodox] Christianity is the office of a Pope who claims to be the Vicar of Christ on Earth".

Daniel Rossing, Executive Director of the Jerusalem Center for Jewish-Christian relations, noted another difference is that the Catholic Church has a "pyramidal" hierarchy under the Pope, whereas the Orthodox Church's authority derives from regional Patriarchates. The Patriarch of Constantinople is considered first among equals; he does not have authority over the rest.

The Orthodox religion is also different from Protestantism, despite the common absence of a papal authority "A very major difference in the Orthodox Church is that it's very liturgical", said Rossing. "It has a lot of forms, icons, candles, processions... Protestantism tends to be more mental, with less ritual. Also, Protestants don't have celibate monks".

The Greek Orthodox Church, sometimes known as the Eastern Orthodox Church, has its origins in the fracturing of the Roman Empire. In the third century, Emperor Constantine declared the new capital of Rome to be the eastern city of Constantinople. Thus began a gradual distancing between the

eastern and western halves of the empire.

As the Latin-speaking western half and the Greek-speaking eastern half drew apart, theological differences and power struggles within the Church culminated in the Great Schism, in which the leaders of the eastern and western regions of the Church excommunicated each other. They split into the western Latin Church – now Roman Catholics – and the eastern Greek Church now known as the Orthodox Church.

The word *Orthodox* is a Greek one for “correctly believing”, referring to the Orthodox Church’s view that it holds to the original, correct form of Christianity. The Greek Orthodox actually refer to themselves as the Rōm Orthodox; they were named the Greek Orthodox by “the Latins”, and the name stuck.

Today there are about 40.000 native Orthodox Christians in Israel and the Palestinian territories. Most are Palestinian Arabs, save a small Greek clergy which leads them.

### **SAFEGUARDING HOLY PLACES**

Some 120 monks live and worship at a beautiful monastery in the Old City of Jerusalem, which acts as the headquarters of the Patriarchate. These celibate monks are mostly Greek, and make up the core of the Church’s clergy.

The monks live a life of prayer and study (see adjacent story), and count pastoral service among their responsibilities, as well as the maintenance and veneration of the Church’s holy places.

A governing council of 18 bishops, called the Holy Synod, governs the monk’s brotherhood and the Church, and is responsible for the election of the Patriarch. In 2005 it appointed His Beatitude Theophilos III as Patriarch of Jerusalem.

“A main mission of the Patriarchate is to look after the holy

places”, said Patriarch Theophilos. “We keep the holy places accessible to everyone without discrimination”.

Perhaps the holiest place under the Church’s purview is the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. The Greek Orthodox Church owns the land on which the site is built, though its administration is divided between six Christian denominations – the Catholics, Armenian Orthodox, Syrian Orthodox, Egyptian Coptics and Ethiopians.

Although the Greek Orthodox Church tends to get along well with other Christian denominations, the site has a history of flaring tensions.

In 1853, the sultan at the time issued a “status quo” decree at the Sepulchre, requiring that all six denominations agree on any structural changes to the church. This jigsaw of responsibility resulted in a deadlock in which changes cannot be agreed upon, including important ones such as the construction of a fire escape to supplement the Sepulchre’s single entrance.

The symbol of the Sepulchre’s status quo quagmire is a famous ladder, which was placed against a wall during the 1800s and has remained there ever since because no faction has the authority to remove it.

Even slight structural changes have incited clerical violence. When an Egyptian monk in 2002 attempted to move his chair into the shade, it provoked a brawl with the Ethiopians, who rejected his jurisdiction over the area. However, such incidents are relatively rare, and the shared administration of the Church generally proceeds in good faith.

The Greek Orthodox Church bears the largest share of responsibility for the Holy Sepulchre, and counts several holy relics among its treasures there. Under glass can be seen what is said to be part of John the Baptist’s skull, and the hand of Mary Magdalene.

## **GREEK CLERGY, ARAB LAITY**

Besides the Church's devotion to maintaining the holy places, Patriarch Theophilos said its responsibility is to "take care of the various Orthodox communities all over – Israel, the Palestinian territories and the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan".

However, there have been accusations that too much time is dedicated to the holy places, and that the Church's flock is a secondary concern.

"Some say the Catholics, for example, do much more for educational, medical and charity work than the Greek Orthodox Church", said Daniel Rossing, Executive Director of the Center for Jewish-Christian Relations. "They say the [Orthodox Church] gives too much emphasis to the holy places".

Another concern is that the Arab laity is not well-represented in the Church's leadership, which tends to be mainly Greek.

Rabbi David Rosen of the American Jewish Committee said it's an ancient problem. "There has been historical tension between the leadership and the laity [regarding this issue]. It is the only Christian denomination in the Holy Land whose leadership is not from its rank and file. All the churches led by Arab clergy, except for this one".

Rosen suggested that the clergy remains overwhelmingly Greek because the Church sees its mission as a continuation of original Christianity. "If you ask the leadership, or the Church anywhere in the world, they will tell you it's an historical Church, and its significance goes far beyond the local ethnic constituency. It's part of its historic identity and responsibility.

"But if you ask the majority of the Orthodox faithful in the area", he continued, "they think the clergy should represent the ethnic community. This has been a source of tension for as long as anyone can remember".

Patriarch Theophilos called these claims “totally untrue”.

“In the past there have been problems, but it doesn’t mean the Patriarchate is not looking after its flocks. We’ve taken initiatives to promote education, to built schools.

“Right now there are two members of the Holy Synod who are Arab”, he said. “It’s just a matter of time”.

A notable figure fighting for Arab rights in the Orthodox Church was Theodosios, originally named Atalla Hanna, who was appointed Archbishop in 2005. He was only the second Palestinian to hold that rank in the church’s history.

Although Theodosios declined to comment on the current relationship between the Arab laity and the Greek clergy, before his appointment as Archbishop he was an infamous figure in Greek Orthodox circles.

Theodosios gained popularity with the Arab laity for his fiery denunciations of the Israeli occupation, to the point that in 2002 he was briefly arrested by the Israeli authorities on suspicion of “incitement” and links with terrorist organizations.

The Church clergy was unhappy with Theodosios stance, seeking as always to maintain good relations with the authorities in control.

“Our position here has been always to contribute as much as we can to peace, mutual coexistence, tolerance”, said Patriarch Theophilos.

But despite its best efforts to remain neutral, the Church has sometimes been caught up in the turbulence.

The most recent crisis was about land.

**LANDLORD**

The Greek Orthodox Church is the largest landowner in the Old City of Jerusalem. It owns much of the land from the Jaffa Gate down the street of the Greek Patriarchate, all the way to the Holy Sepulchre.

Besides owning the land on which many holy places and adjacent properties stand, the Church counts among its holdings the land under the Israeli Prime Minister's residence, and under the Israeli Knesset.

The land has belonged to the Church since ancient times. Patriarch Theophilos explained that the Church "is the inheritor not only of great spiritual heritage, but also natural, fiscal heritage".

After the Muslims occupied the Holy Land, then-Patriarch Sophronius remained the ethnic and religious leader for the Christians there. The Greek Orthodox Church inherited the churches, basilicas and adjacent lands that had belonged to the conquered Byzantines. During the course of its history, the Church acquired even more land.

When both the Israelis and the Palestinians place such a high value on Jerusalem, the Church's extensive land ownership has sometimes put it in a delicate position.

## **CRISIS**

In 2005, then-Patriarch Irenaios sparked outrage within the Church after he reportedly sold some of its land to a group of Israeli investors.

The clergy was incensed that the Patriarch would sell Church land, and the Arab laity even more so, because they felt that *their* land had been sold to Israelis. In response, the Holy Synod stripped Patriarch Irenaios of his position, replacing him with the current Patriarch, Theophilos III.

This began a difficult two-year stretch for the Church.

Besides the controversy within the Church, external problems surfaced as well.

The Israeli government refused to recognize Irenaios's removal, citing the need for government approval for the action. By the same token, it refused to confirm Patriarch Theophilos as Irenaios's successor. Some accusations said figures in the Israeli government blocked the Patriarchate's recognition in order to gain valuable church properties.

As Patriarch Theophilos labored to restore the Church to its previous calm, he was challenged with a government freeze of the Patriarchate's bank accounts, the funds of which were needed for maintaining the holy places and the Patriarchate's school system.

The following year, the Israeli government refused to renew visas for many of the Greek clergy, which would have necessitated their exodus from Israel.

Even the Jordanian government, whose Christians fall under the Jerusalem Patriarchate's authority, for a time refused to recognize Theophilos either.

But Theophilos weathered the storm, appealing to the Israeli Supreme Court for recognition. He won his battle in 2007, and was confirmed in his role by the governments of Israel and Jordan.

Asked how he overcame the crisis, Patriarch Theophilos said he did it "with prayer, and with patience. With wisdom, persistence, and firmness. I myself knew what it was all about. I knew that all the problems were stemming not from the government itself, but from certain key persons who had a vested interest". Theophilos declined to name particular persons.

**TO THE FUTURE**

Having weathered its recent crisis, speculations arise on the challenges the Church will face in the future. Rabbi Rosen sees the shifting ethnic makeup as a driver of future change.

“One fascinating thing about the Orthodox Church is the change of attendance over the past 20 years”. He said, referring to the mass immigration from Russia and other former Soviet countries.

Under Israel’s Law of Return, any person with at least one Jewish grandparent is entitled to make aliya – to immigrate to Israel. This has resulted in many Russian immigrants who may have a Jewish grandparent, but practice as Orthodox Christians. Estimates of the number of these immigrants vary, but Patriarch Theophilos says there may be as many as 50.000, which is greater than the native Arab Orthodox population.

Patriarch Theophilos acknowledged the new constituents, but was not concerned. “On the contrary”, he said, “this is something that’s repeating itself from 70, 100 years ago. We had a great influx of pilgrims. We’re very glad for the [immigration]... people are returning from former Soviet republics, communist countries. They feel at home because the Patriarchate represents all of them”.

If history is any guide, the Orthodox Church will welcome these new immigrants and continue to chart its course as it has since the earliest days of Christianity.

**This article which includes the interview was published by The Jerusalem Post Christian Edition in July 2010. The author is Dov Preminger.**

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