

ADDRESS OF H.H.B. THE PATRIARCH OF JERUSALEM THEOPHILOS AT THE MEETING OF THE EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE OF THE WORLD COUNCIL OF CHURCHES IN AMMAN

His Beatitude Theophillos III
Patriarch of Jerusalem

17 November 2017

Mr Secretary General,

Respected Members of the Executive Committee,

Dear Sisters and Brothers,

We welcome you to Amman in the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan under the leadership of His Majesty King Abdullah II, and we bring you the blessings of the Holy City of Jerusalem. We are delighted to be able to host this meeting of your Executive Committee, and we wish to express our continued commitment to the work of the World Council of Churches.

You come to the Middle East at a difficult time for our region. The world community is united in the view that a vital, vibrant Christian community is an essential part of the multi-ethnic, multi-cultural, and multi-religious landscape of the Middle East. We are indigenous to this region, and indeed

the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Jerusalem is the oldest continuous religious institution here.

The roots of our Christian community are deep. They have been nourished by the blood of the prophets, saints and martyrs down the ages, and by the redeeming blood of our Lord Jesus Christ himself.

In our day, our Christian community is facing an unprecedented and serious threat.

While we understand that you have an agenda that you need to attend to, please allow us to bring to your attention some details of the present situation of the undermining of the "Status Quo": those set of customs and rules that guarantee the Christian presence specifically in Jerusalem of which it is urgent that you are aware. We have been making this very same case to religious and governmental leaders around the world and now wish to bring this matter to our World Council of Churches through you.

As you know, for generations the sacred character of the Holy Land has been protected by the Status Quo, which is recognized by both religious and civil authorities and the international community as protecting and guaranteeing the rights and privileges of the Churches, especially with respect to the holy sites and to other religious activity. The provisions of the Status Quo have been upheld carefully by successive civil authorities in our region.

Over the last several months, we have seen a new level of threat to the stability of our multi-ethnic, multi-cultural, multi-religious society in a number of attacks on religious communities – and especially on Christian communities.

There has been a marked and disturbing increase in so-called "price-tag hate crimes", which are directed in many cases to the vandalism and desecration of holy places and cemeteries. While these acts have been condemned by all, including

governments, they continue, and effective ways of preventing them and punishing the perpetrators are still to be found.

More threatening to the rights of religious communities is a proposed bill that is circulating in the Knesset that would, if passed, severely intrude on the rights of the Churches over their properties. Whether this bill has a chance of being passed is not the point; the mere fact that it has gained the signatures of one third of the members of the Knesset and should be discussed at all, is a new level of threat to the diversity of our society and the manner in which holy places have been managed and cared for, especially in the Old City of Jerusalem.

Most significant and worrying, however, are the underhanded actions of radical settler groups who in the majority of cases acquire property in Jerusalem's Old City and elsewhere, utilizing illegitimate methods of coercion that lack proper authority. The most recent issue concerns the properties owned by the Patriarchate and known as the "Jaffa Gate" case, in which a radical settler group that has for many years been attempting to take over properties in the Christian Quarter in the Old City and thereby diminish the Christian presence in Jerusalem was given the properties. They have claimed to have acquired these properties through what we consider "illegitimate agreements that lack due authority". Crucially negative was the fact that the District Court handed down a wrongful judgment in favour of the settler group. This judgment was in our view incorrect with respect to matters of the law and we are contesting it in the High Court, and bringing the matter to the international community for awareness and support.

It is the firm position of the Heads of the Churches in Jerusalem that the movement of these radical settler groups must be curbed and controlled and their intimidating tactics to exclude non-Jews from Jerusalem must be resisted to preserve the defining multi-faith tapestry of the Old City.

A number of religious leaders, including His All-holiness the Ecumenical Patriarch, His Holiness the Pope, and His Grace the Archbishop of Canterbury, have issued important statements in support of the Christian Community, the Heads of the Churches in the Holy Land, and the Patriarchate. It is important to emphasize to this Executive Committee that we enjoy a deep and complete unity of understanding and purpose among all the Heads of the Churches, and this has been a tremendous encouragement to us all, and of course, it is one of the great fruits in our region of our ongoing ecumenical endeavor. For this unity of understanding and purpose, we give thanks to God.

We hope very much that our World Council of Churches will continue in its mission in the Middle East to secure the position of the Christian Community against the new threats to our existence and freedom. We are deeply thankful for all the support that the World Council of Churches has always shown to the Christian community for the Holy Land and the Middle East, and we look forward to being able to join forces with you in order to increase advocacy for the common benefit of all our peoples and in deepening the peaceful co-existence among Jews, Christians and Muslims.

We pray that God will bless your deliberations in this meeting, and we assure you of our prayers and support. We take this opportunity to thank His Majesty, under whose rule the people of the Hashemite Kingdom enjoy religious freedom, tolerance, and co-existence.

Thank you.