

H. B. ADDRESS TO THE CONFERENCE "THE CURRENT SITUATION OF CHRISTIANS IN THE MIDDLE EAST".

Amman, Jordan- 4 September 2013

Your Royal Highness,

Your Beatitudes,

Your Eminences,

Your Graces,

Reverend Fathers,

Dear Sisters and Brothers,

We meet together at this conference in the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan at a crucial and delicate time in the history of the Holy Land and of the entire Middle East. Each day brings new risks and new opportunities, and there is laid upon our shoulders as the Heads of the Churches and Christian Communities a particular burden of leadership that we cannot and must not avoid.

We share a common humanity, and we share a common human destiny. The future will unfold with, or without, our co-operation and participation, and it is an imperative of both our religious and our cultural heritage that we are called to play our part in the shaping of our future.

Our focus is on the situation of the Christian Communities of the region, and we wish to emphasize three essential issues in the present crisis.

The first is the reality, which we constantly need to keep to the fore, that the Christian community of the Holy Land and of the Middle East is indigenous to this region and an essential part of the fabric of our society. We are not strangers or exiles here, and the native Christian community extends far beyond the strict confines of what we now designate the Holy Land. Indeed in parts of our region the Christian Church and its institutions are the oldest religious organizations in existence. We have been a continuous witness to the sacred history of this land.

This reality gives us a special mission both in our present challenges and in any future make-up of the society of the Middle East. We have no intention of abandoning our history, our heritage, our fellow countrymen, or eventually our life, let alone the Holy Places of which, by God's Providence, we are the guardians and servants. This is our common home, and we shall continue to live here together.

Our second point concerns the value of genuine co-existence and respect. Whatever else the future brings, it will bring increasing inter-relationships. There will never be a time again when we shall have the possibility of living in our own little ghettos, cut off from those who differ from us either in culture, ethnicity, language, or religion. We shall all have to be able to share several "cultural languages."

But we of all people know this here, for this co-existence and respect is of the essence of this region. Here Jews, Christians, Muslims and others have lived side-by-side, spoken each other's languages, appreciated each other's customs, and shared common human values.

The threat comes to us not from our diversity, which is in fact a blessing to us. The threat comes to us rather from violence and extremism, and from those, from whatever quarter, who seek to overturn our common human values of freedom of religion and worship, freedom of expression, and freedom to

live into the fullness of our God-given life and human dignity.

And thirdly we should like to remind everyone of the essential importance of dialogue. The future of the human community cannot be decided by arms, by violence, and by coercion. As His Majesty King Abdullah II said recently during his trip to the Vatican, dialogue is our only option, and we must strive with all our power in any sphere of influence that is open to us to ensure that dialogue, and not war, lies at the heart of the resolution to the difficulties that face us. The forging of our human future here in the Middle East will happen when we engage in the hard work of encountering each other in a dialogue that has about it the same dynamism of reality and purpose that we who are Christians understand to exist in the perichoresis that is at the heart of the mystery of the Incarnation of God.

Our ongoing response, in a word, must be expressed through divine grace and wisdom. We who are religious and spiritual leaders must consider our rightful place alongside governmental and civic authorities both here in our region and around the world to find the solutions that will make for peace, stability, and that rightful coexistence that is at the heart of the strongest societies.

We take this opportunity to express our admiration and support of His Majesty King Abdullah II, who has given, and continues to give, his strongest efforts for freedom and peace not simply in the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, but throughout the Middle East and beyond. As the Custodian of both the Christian and Muslim Holy Places, he has shown exemplary strength of purpose in ensuring the appropriate character of Jerusalem, the Holy Land, and our region, and he has made the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan a living paradigm of co-existence and mutual respect.

Finally we wish to repeat in the clearest possible terms the

call to the international community that the Heads of Churches of the Holy Land made in our recent Statement concerning the situation in Egypt, and we need to broaden this concern now to include our neighboring Syria. Both these countries, which have lived the values of tolerance and respect for centuries, are now torn apart by extremism and seemingly uncontrollable factions. Every day innocent blood is being shed as innocent men, women, and children are being killed and terrorized, ancient communities are being obliterated, and precious and irreplaceable shrines and temples are being destroyed. Bishops, priests, monks, and nuns, and religious leaders of other traditions are being brutalized and martyred. Families are being torn apart, and many hundreds of thousands are now displaced.

This is not the way to any kind of future that is acceptable, and with every act of violence reconciliation becomes so much more distant. The international community has a moral role to play with us in this region in helping to end violence and to set the road to reconciliation and stability on a firm foundation. Those who have the peaceful means to make peace must use all such means at their disposal for the good of all. For "blessed are the peace-makers." This would guarantee the stability and well-being of the Middle East and the rest of the world.

Thank you.

His Beatitude

THEOPHILOS III

Patriarch of Jerusalem