

HIS BEATITUDE ADDRESS TO THE PRESIDENT OF ISRAEL & MEMBERS OF THE GOVERNMENT.

29 December 2011

Mr. President,

Honorable Ministers, Members of Parliament, Your Eminences,
Dear Reverend Fathers,

Distinguished Guests,

“For the sake of my relatives and friends I will say, ‘Peace be within you”. (Ps. 121:8)

We greet you, Your Excellency, and all gathered here, in this festive season. Our purpose is to celebrate the heavenly gift of peace that is so dear to our beloved Jerusalem. Jerusalem is the foundation of peace, and is the precious inheritance that we share as followers of the Abrahamic faiths.

We are honored to be here in celebration of the Holy Season and the New Year. The peoples of the Holy Land in general, and the Christian community in particular, are a living testimony to diversity that makes up our common life, and that is essential to the well-being of all. This occasion gives us the welcome opportunity to listen to each other in our common concerns.

The holy mission of the Churches embodies the uniqueness of the Holy Land. At once sacred and spiritual, this region is the home of three monotheistic religions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. We know in our common life the reality of many cultures and ethnic and religious diversity.

The mission of religious leaders throughout the ages has been

essential in safe-guarding the religious character of Jerusalem. It is the role of religion to inspire political leaders to carry out their difficult tasks that are laid on them, for "there is no authority except from God" (Rom. 13:1). But it is also true that the clergy share the burden of leadership in their own moral and pastoral ministry. Just as political leaders must be shaped by the moral principles of their religious traditions, in the same way religious leaders have a role in forming individuals and congregations of faithful people in the exercise of responsible citizenship.

The recent tumultuous events in our region are a prophetic sign which we should all take into serious consideration. We have no choice but to ask ourselves what achievements we must accomplish today, and what leadership we must exercise in the face of these events. Leadership, whether political or religious, should constantly ask itself what can be done to prevent destructive forces from threatening not only our region, but our humanity as a whole. As spiritual leaders our preaching of reconciliation, symbiosis, justice, and peace must always find expression in practice. In other words, we must make courageous decisions now, on the ground for the sake of all, before it is too late.

Mr. President, we commend you highly in standing up against recent sacrilegious acts that were intended to harm the freedom of worship that is practiced in our Holy Land. Your action in condemning strongly all forms of bigotry and prejudice against places of worship, be they Jewish, Christian or Muslim, is a bright example for all leaders to follow.

Jerusalem is the uncontested, shared spiritual symbol of the world, and Jerusalem remains a refuge for pilgrims of all faiths who seek divine encouragement and refreshment of the soul. In this respect, we continue to be appreciative of the efforts of the Authorities in facilitating access for pilgrims and worshippers. Allow us in this regard to underscore concerns that are common to our Christian community as a whole

in which there can be further helpful progress:

- Regular access to Holy Sites;
- Entry visas for clergy;
- The honoring of the tax exempt status that is sanctioned by sacred history; and
- The historic standing of the "Ownership of Church Property."

We continue to affirm that the Patriarchate of Jerusalem, along with our sister Churches, can contribute decisively to stability, reconciliation, and lasting peace in our beloved Holy Land and throughout this region. This is amply illustrated by the work to which we as the Churches have made a commitment in the fully functional Council of Religious Institutions of the Holy Land. As Your Excellency knows well, this Council promotes mutual respect and understanding of each other's religious and cultural heritage, and does crucial work. We take this opportunity to express our thanks to Mr. Caesar Marie for his efforts to help our Community.

In this Holy Season, we uphold the message of the Incarnate Logos, that peace on earth is possible and attainable, for the Lord says "righteousness and peace will kiss each other" and "faithfulness will spring up from the ground" (Ps 85:10-11).

Mr. President, we express our sincere thanks to you for this cordial invitation and for your gracious hospitality. We pray God's special blessing on the approaching New Year: may our hearts be warmed, our minds enlightened, and the lives of all the citizens of the State of Israel be fulfilled.

Happy New Year and Hanukah Samech.

His Beatitude Theophilos III

Patriarch of Jerusalem

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