



THE PATRIARCHS AND HEADS OF CHURCHES IN JERUSALEM

CHRISTMAS MESSAGE 2004

" The Lord himself will give you a sign. A maiden is with child and will soon give birth to a son whom she will call Emmanuel "

Isaiah 7:14

Brothers and Sisters in Christ ,

Another Christmas is upon us and we go to Bethlehem to adore the Word of God who became flesh and appeared as a new born child there. We go to Bethlehem to listen again to the words of the Angel to the Shepherds: **"Fear not; for behold I bring you good tidings of great joy which shall be to all people"** (Lk 2: 10).

We go to Bethlehem to adore the mystery of Christmas, despite the grave difficulties our people are still experiencing, together with the recent death of the President Yasser Arafat. Our lived reality is still indeed a feeling of despair and hopelessness together with a dramatic rise in unemployment and poverty. Justice and peace are still away. Blood is shed and political prisoners are detained in their prisons. The two peoples of this Holy Land are still in quest of peace and justice, searching how to put an end to hostility, bloodshed and killings in Palestine and Israel, not least in Bethlehem itself, the city of peace towards which all Christians in the world turn their eyes in these days.

With all that, we are aware of the same feeling echoed in other areas around the world, in Asia, Africa and near us in the bloody tragedy of Iraq. In many places in the world, there are confrontations, blood and violence.

Nevertheless there are in these days small signs of hope: promises that soon some political prisoners will be released by the Israelis and hopes of renewed efforts by all sides to resume the peace talks.

It is within this reality, that we welcome Christmas and feel the obligation to think clearly of the mystery that it bears with it, and the new grace it has brought to humankind. Although down the ages, many had declared God's will and purpose for human life, it is only when Jesus is born of a human mother, that we come to know for certain the mind, the love of God and the dignity he gave to all men and women, he the Eternal God, the invisible and the most High.

"No one has ever seen God; it is the only Son, who is nearest to the Father's heart, who has made Him known" (John 1:18)

Many did not know Jesus and did not accept him after His manifestation in Bethlehem. But we also know that those who welcomed Him became "children of God."

"To all who did accept Him, He gave power to become children of God" (John 1:12)

St. John wanted us to know that it is not fleshly descent or human effort which makes men and women "the children of God". Rather it is faith in Jesus, the Eternal Word of God. Those who would be children of God must be committed to Christ; pledge their reliance on Him and manifest a firm trust in Him.

Brothers and Sisters, as we relive the events of that first Christmas we must ask ourselves, especially in these days and in this Holy Land, amidst oppressions and humiliations imposed on so many, if we truly welcome Christ into our lives and if we are true witnesses to him and if the others see through our witnessing in our daily

life Jesus the Saviour and the Prince of Peace and the dignity he gave to all man and woman. Only in this way can we claim to be God's children.

To our Christian brothers and sisters we offer our sincere thanks for all your prayers, solidarity, and for your love to this Holy Land and to all its inhabitants. We express our thanks and joy for the coming back of the pilgrims and look for very many more. The Churches in the world are called to remember that the Holy Land is the land of the roots of all Christians. Therefore it is the duty of all the faithful and of the Churches together to pay a special attention to what is happening in this land, and to take a universal, coordinated action in order to help both peoples together towards reconciliation, built on security, justice and the equality of all in rights, duties and in the dignity given by God to each of them.

The future of Bethlehem itself needs a special attention. Doubtless you will sing time honoured carols about "The little town of Bethlehem". This little town today needs a special support in order to remain the town of peace, where faithful believing in Jesus the Saviour and the Prince of Peace can remain. In these days, just before Christmas, it is being transformed into a big prison with the continuation of the "Wall" around it. Many Christian families have already left the Bethlehem area because of the hardships they have experienced not least from the building of the "separation wall", and the incredible structure at the entrance to the City. All these works have also meant many Christian families have had their land confiscated from them.

As Heads of Churches we continue to endeavour to build bridges of peace and hope as we raise our voices for justice amongst all peoples. But still, dear brothers and sisters, we need you to play your part in your respective countries.

We pray and hope that the days will come when people in Bethlehem and in all the Holy Land will live freely without the need of the separation wall for security. Rather, as the Prophet Isaiah urges us when he says:

"They should beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore" (Is 2:4).

As we celebrate Christmas, we pray God, and we appeal to all men and women of good will to act for the coming back of peace and justice to this Land chosen by God. We remember in our prayers all who have been bereaved of loved ones; all who have been injured; all the political prisoners; all who have been marginalized and all who suffer from any reason in this Land. We pray and ask God to fill your hearts, you our sons and daughters and all the inhabitants of this Land, and you our brothers and sisters in the world, with the joy, the peace and the tranquillity of Christmas.

Happy and Holy Christmas to all.

Patriarchs and Heads of the Churches in Jerusalem

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Patriarch Michel Sabbah, R.C. Latin

Patriarch Torkom I Manooghian, Armenian Orthodox

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