07/01/2026

Address of His Beatitude Patriarch Theophilos III of Jerusalem at the Christmas Dinner at the Church of the Nativity



January 6, 2026

”Your Excellencies,

Representative of His Excellency President Mahmoud Abbas,

Representative of His Majesty King Abdullah II Ibn Al Hussein,

Your Beatitudes, Eminences, and members of the revered clergy,

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,

Honoured guests who have gathered in Bethlehem from across the world,

Glory to God in the highest, and on earthpeace, among people of good will.

From Bethlehem, the City of the Nativity, wherehope entered the course of human history embodied in a Child, we gather this blessed evening in a moment of prayer and responsibility before God and before humanity. Here, in the place that witnessed God’s humility and His closeness to humankind, fundamental questions once again impose themselves concerning the sanctity of life and the meaning of peace, a peace that can only be built on justice and sustained through the protection of human dignity and the safeguarding of the Holy Places.

In this city that carries the memory andprofound meaning of the Nativity, we receive this feast with renewed hope, as Bethlehem dons its renewed attire following the restoration works completed at the Church of the Nativity, a sign of divine care for one of the holiest Christian sites in the world. From this place, we pray and look forward to life returning to its natural course, to pilgrims once again coming from every corner of the world to Bethlehem, so that tourism may flourish, goodness may abound for the city and its people, and the human and spiritual presence that has long distinguishedthis land may regain its vitality. In this context, we also announce that restoration works on theGrotto of the Nativity will commence immediately after the Christmas feasts, in continuity with our mission of preservation and protection of the birthplace of Our Lord Jesus Christ.

We express our deep appreciation for the efforts of His Excellency President Mahmoud Abbas and his commitment to the political path seeking a just peace. We value his steadfast support for the Christian presence in the Holy Land and hisconstant care for church affairs through His Excellency Dr. Ramzi Khoury, the Chairperson of the Higher Presidential Committee for Church Affairs, whom we thank for his tireless efforts, sincere partnership, and continued support for the churches, and whose presencewith us this evening we warmly welcome. We also highly esteem the Hashemite Custodianship undertaken by His Majesty King Abdullah II Ibn Al Hussein over the Islamic and Christian Holy Places in Jerusalem, which embodies a historic and moral commitment to protecting the Status Quo, safeguarding freedom of worship, and preserving the dignity of the Holy Places at a time when these values are repeatedly being put to the test. We further express our appreciation to His Excellency the Minister of Interior of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, Mr Mazen AlFarrayeh, for his gracious presence and

participation in this blessed dinner as the representative of His Majesty.

Esteemed guests,

The Church in the Holy Land stands as a living body, walking with humanity in its suffering and remaining steadfast wherever the Christian presence is under threat. From this deepawareness flows the mission and positions of the Patriarchate of Jerusalem. Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ says in the Gospel of John 10:11, “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep,” In this spirit, the Church has upheld its pastoral and humanitarian duty, carrying concern for both the people and the land, regarding them as a single trust that cannot be separated.

In Jerusalem, the city that embraces the memoryof salvation, the churches have repeatedly expressed their firm rejection of restrictions that hinder freedom of access to the Holy Places,particularly the Church of the Holy Sepulchre during feast days, and especially during the Great Holy Fire ceremony, where we havewitnessed practices by security authorities that undermine the sanctity of the place and the dignity of believers and pilgrims. We have also warned against measures targeting churches and their institutions, including our Patriarchate, affirming that any infringement upon a single church institution affects the entirety of the Christian presence throughout the Holy Land. Preserving the Status Quo is not an administrative or procedural matter, but a moral and spiritual obligation that safeguards rights,protects the unique character of the Holy City, and preserves its universal message.

We stood in solidarity with the people of the town of Taybeh in the Ramallah district following attacks by extremist Israelis on the church, the cemetery, and olive groves, affirming that human dignity and security are integral to the sanctity of the land that witnessed the life of Our Lord Jesus Christ, and that protecting human beings is, at its core, the protection of the spiritual meaning of this land.

As for Gaza, it remains an open and bleeding wound in the conscience of the world. There, the Church has remained with our people under bombardment, siege, and starvation, bearing witness to human suffering pushed to its utmost limits. We have witnessed repeated attacks against Christian holy sites and institutions, including the bombing of the Arab Ahli Hospital, the targeting of Saint Porphyrius Church, and the Church of the Holy Family,with the loss of lives, the wounding of many,and the deprivation of displaced persons andthose with special needs of the most basic necessities of life. For this reason, we carried our pastoral and humanitarian duty to Gaza, in faith that the Church transforms prayer into service,

and hope into genuine accompaniment and active support for those who suffer.

Nor have the Churches of the East been absentfrom our prayers and pain. We were deeply grieved by the attack on Mar Elias Church inDamascus, and we raised prayer alongside our brothers and sisters there, guided by the words of Holy Scripture: “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” (Romans 12:21).

On this blessed night, we listen anew to the call of the Gospel: “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God.” Weare also strengthened by the words of Scripture:“If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone” (Romans 12:18). The peace we seek is a moral and spiritual commitment to protecting life, safeguarding freedom of worship, and preserving human dignity in Jerusalem, Bethlehem, Gaza, Nazareth, and throughout our Holy Land.

From Bethlehem, we raise our prayers that God may grant the leaders of the world wisdom and responsibility, console every broken heart, strengthen our people on their land, preserve ourHoly Places as spaces of prayer and encounter,and keep the Nativity a living light of hopemaking its way through a world yearning for peace.

A blessed Christmas to you all, and may you remain always in the peace and hope of the Lord.”

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