28/05/2021

EU’S SPECIAL REPRESENTATIVE FOR THE MIDDLE EAST PEACE PROCESS AND EU’S TOP REPRESENTATIVE TO PALESTINE VISIT THE PATRIARCHATE



On Thursday, May 27, His Beatitude Patriarch Theophilos III received Mr. Sven Koopmans, EU’s Special Representative for the Middle East Peace Process, and Mr. Sven Kühn von Burgsdorff, European Union’s top representative to Palestine, accompanied by a delegation of European diplomats and ambassadors, at the headquarters of the Jerusalem Patriarchate.

Alongside Heads of Churches in Jerusalem, His Beatitude welcomed the representatives and ambassadors on behalf of all the Churches of the Holy Land, expressing his appreciation for the visit, which comes at a sensitive time the region is going through. His Beatitude also affirmed the good relations between the people of the Holy Land and Europe, and the important role the European pilgrims to the Holy Lands, especially Jerusalem, play. Eager for their return after the travel

restrictions of the COVID-19 pandemic are lifted. Highlighting the great economic hardships this pandemic have and continue to cause to various parts of the Holy Land. The Patriarch of Jerusalem and the Heads of Churches indicated that the recent events in the Holy Land, chiefly the war on the Gaza Strip, complicated the scene furthermore and deepened the wounds that were already caused by the pandemic.

Church leaders warned of the growing power and influence of Israeli radicals, who target Christians and Muslims in the Holy Land. Noting that this radicalism has reached the point of carrying out repeated verbal and physical assaults against Christian clergy without being prosecuted or legally punished. The last of which was the physical assault on two Armenian clergies outside the walls of their monastery, which lies at the heart of the Armenian Quarter, in addition to the assault on the Greek Orthodox theological seminary school on Mount Zion, and the arson attack on the Church of All Nations -the Gethsemane, explaining that these attacks, which occur too often, have unfortunately become part of daily life.

On his part, Patriarch Theophilos affirmed that the Christian clergy are working for justice, peace and security in the Holy Land, but their greatest concern is to protect their local Christian communities, especially in Jerusalem, “as Churches, we have stood strong and united in the face of ongoing violence and vandalism. But the situation has changed significantly. Were we simply dealing with harassment, we could manage that. But the stakes are now too high. For we are face-to-face with radical groups who seek, and are working systematically for, our eviction from the Holy City, whether in the threat to seize church properties, and specifically at the Jaffa Gate – which is the entrance to the Christian quarter and the route of pilgrimage to the Holy Sepulchre – or in Sheikh Jarrah – where attempts forcefully to displace local citizens in recent days erupted into the violence which we have seen on our TV screens.”

During a Q&A session, Church leaders emphasized that saving the authentic Christian presence in the region preserves its diverse nature, true identity and unique features, and that all of this is now facing a great danger due to the Israeli radical groups, adding that the Churches and Christians have historical rights in the Holy Land, and that they are committed to peace despite what they are exposed to. Their Paternities and Graces also stressed that the doors of Jerusalemites will remain open to pilgrims from all over the world, pointing out the importance of the Hashemite custodianship of the Christian and Islamic holy sites in the Holy Land, and the distinguished leadership role that His Majesty King Abdullah II plays in preserving this guardianship and protecting the sanctities in the Holy City.

Lastly, Heads of the Churches demanded the support of the international community, in efforts to confront the radical Israeli groups, in order to defend the authentic Christian presence in Jerusalem and the rest of the Holy Land, within the framework of true cooperation and partnership that respects international resolutions and legitimacy, and preserves the Status Quo agreement in the holy places.

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