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THE AMERICAN SENATOR MR FRENCH HILL VISITS THE PATRIARCHATE



On Thursday, June 25th / July 8th, 2021, the distinguished and honoured American Senator French Hill, accompanied by his associates, visited the Patriarchate.

Mr French Hill was received by H.H.B. our Father and Patriarch of Jerusalem Theophilos and Hagiotaphite Fathers and representatives of the other Christian Churches of Jerusalem, Franciscans, Anglicans, and Copts, addressing him as follows:

“Mr Chairman,

Representative Hill,

Respected Members of your Delegation,

Your Beatitudes,

Your Eminences,

Your Graces,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is our joy and privilege to welcome you to the Holy City of Jerusalem and to the Patriarchate of Jerusalem. You make your visit to us at a crucial time in the life of the peoples of this region, and we are encouraged that by your meeting with this gathering of the Heads of the Churches you understand the supreme importance of the role of religion in our life here, and we know of your concern for our life and well-being.

The United States has a particular and unique relationship with our region. Not only are there long-standing governmental, economic, and political relationships, as well as relationships with a host of non-governmental agencies; there are also religious ties. Jews, Christians and Muslims, both here and in the United States share historic family and spiritual connections. Indeed, many families have members living both here and in your country. And of course, from the United States, many thousands of pilgrims from all the Abrahamic traditions come here every year on pilgrimage to the Holy Places. By choosing to come to our Patriarchate, you number yourselves among those who are true pilgrims, whatever other purposes their trip may have. It is even said that President Lincoln had wanted to visit Jerusalem on pilgrimage, and we look forward to welcoming back pilgrims from the United States when international travel becomes easier.

As in every corner of the world, the last months have been extremely challenging for us in the Holy Land. Because of the pandemic, our churches and Holy Sites have suffered significant restrictions and prolonged closure. We have been unable to share hospitality with pilgrims and tourists from around the world and our own communities have suffered significant hardship and deprivation. While COVID-19 has radically diminished our economic resources, we have continued, by God’s grace, to try to meet the great spiritual, physical, educational, and financial needs of our local communities.

After this period of prolonged hardship, the conflicts of recent months in the Holy Land have proven extremely difficult and devastating. The violent outbreaks have served only to deepen the problems that the pandemic has caused. For many in our communities, a crisis has become a catastrophe.

The broad media coverage and the recent violence has brought global attention to

our local suffering. Despite all this coverage, the true beginnings of this most recent conflict remain largely untold. We think that it is incumbent upon us to be clear that these tragic events are the direct result of years of the growth of extremist ideologies and attacks by a growing number of radical groups which have gone unchecked and unpunished. These radical groups are intent on driving out Christians, Muslims and even some Jewish groups from the Holy City of Jerusalem and other communities of our region.

The attacks range from the verbal abuse of and physical assaults against clergy, and worshippers as we go about our daily business to the frequent vandalism and desecration of church property and Holy Sites. Just a few weeks ago we saw a vicious assault of two Armenian clergy right outside their monastery in the Armenian Quarter and an intrusion into our School on Mount Sion by radicals. Sadly, and worryingly, these kinds of incidents are no longer exceptions; they are a regular part of our life. And it is intolerable.

As spiritual leaders, we have no desire to enter into politics or to make political statements. Our only concern is the safety and continuing flourishing of the Christian community in Jerusalem and the Holy Land. 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 this. 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 and even death which we have seen on our TV screens.

The Christian presence in the Holy City and in the Holy Land is vital for the well-being and integrity of this region. For centuries we have inhabited a multi-cultural, multi-ethnic, multi-religious landscape that has given this region its unique character as the land of the divine-human encounter. And while the three Abrahamic faiths all have Holy Sites here, it is the Christian Holy Sites that guarantee a truly universal welcome to all people of goodwill, without distinction. In other words, the Holy Sepulchre is the main destination of all pilgrims and visitors of Jerusalem. This unique character is now under serious threat as never before.

This is another aspect of our lives here that unites us in a common understanding, for both your great country and this region alike live in a multi-cultural, multi-ethnic, and multi-religious national life. One must understand that this region,

however, because of its historical and religious significance, does not belong just to one group. It is connected with sacred history and with moral values which are of universal significance, and we are both well aware of the importance to our mutual flourishing of protecting and defending this diversity of human, cultural, and spiritual experience.

The Churches and Christian Communities of the Holy Land remain firmly committed even in the face of unprecedented opposition and attack, to act as peacemakers and to carry out our spiritual mission. The mission of the Church has been fundamental in guaranteeing the sacredness of the rich cultural heritage of the Holy Land. Furthermore, we will continue to preserve the Holy Sites as places of worship and to keep them accessible to all who come here on pilgrimage.

However, we cannot remain silent to the reality that we are facing from the growing challenge to our very existence from radical groups. Nor can we do this on our own. We need our partners in the international community, and especially our friends and allies in the United States, and particularly in the government, who espouse respect for human dignity, to do this and through you, we call on the leaders of the Congress to a robust defence of the Christian presence in the Holy Land, against those who would work to undo our life here.

May God grant success to your mission. Through you, we seek to extend our partnerships in the United States. We look forward to working together, with the conviction that, with your support, we can continue to enable peoples of all faiths to thrive together in our beloved Holy Land.

Thank you.”

The address underlined the vital problems faced by the Churches of Jerusalem and the Holy Land, the place of worship of the three Abrahamic religions but also of the current political instability and quarrels.

Replying, Mr French Hill said that one of the basic principles of The USA is the freedom of religion, which is also used by the US for the peaceful coexistence of the religions in the Holy Land and the support of the Christian identity.

On this visit, Mr French Hill offered His Beatitude an album with the title “Congregational Testimonies of Faith”, while His Beatitude offered him in return an icon of the Theotokos and a silver painting of Jerusalem, along with memorable dentist John Tleel’s book “I am Jerusalem”, and blessing from Jerusalem to his companions.











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