

Dear Children of the Armenian
Apostolic Orthodox Church,
In Armenia and in Nagorno-Karabakh,
In Jordan and in Palestine,
In Jerusalem and in Israel
And dispersed in the Diaspora.

We greet you from the Grotto of the Holy Manger of the Nativity Church, in the city of Bethlehem, where we are gathered on the Feast of the Birth and Revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ, together with the members of the Saint James Brotherhood of the Armenian Patriarchate of Jerusalem and the pilgrims and the faithful of our people.

And until dawn, we shall celebrate three times Holy Divine Liturgy and perform the Services commemorating the Nativity, the Epiphany and the Baptism of Christ by the ceremony of the Blessing of Water, and in accordance with the centuries old prerogatives of the Armenian Apostolic Orthodox Church in the sanctuaries of the Holy Land.

We are pleased to have with us joined in our prayers,

- ❖ The Honorable President of the Palestinian National Authority, His Excellency Mahmoud Abbas Abu Mazen, accompanied by the representatives of the Palestinian National Authority.
- ❖ Also the participation of His Beatitude Archbishop Mesrob Mutaflan, the Armenian Patriarch of Istanbul and of All Turkey, accompanied by a group of pilgrims from Istanbul.
- ❖ Also five clergy and a group of pilgrims from Armenia, with the blessing of His Holiness the Catholicos of All Armenians.

We extend our best wishes:

- ❖ To His Holiness the Supreme Patriarch and Catholicos of All Armenians, Karekin the Second, of the Holy See of Etchmiadzin, Armenia;
- ❖ To His Holiness Aram the First, the Catholicos of the Great House of Cilicia in Antelias.

We pray God to have mercy upon our perplexed world and to lead all nations to live in a harmonious co-existence, with the spirit of tolerance and not by the intolerable acts of violence.

The Birth of Christ, in the Manger of a modest cave in Bethlehem is the beginning of the message of universal brotherhood, which the thirty years old Master, Jesus, would commission His disciples to go and to teach all nations all that they witnessed and heard during the three years they accompanied Him and lived with Him. And he promised to be with them always, "even unto the end of the world".

And the disciples of Jesus preached and visited wherever they could, in the world of their time, and transmitted to the faithful of the Church the Gospel and the commandments of the New Testament of Christ.

Today, the world is in dire need of the Gospel and the commandments of Christ, so that every individual, family, community and nation, may attain the realization of its ideals and aspirations in harmonious co-existence.

Considering the general conditions of the peoples living within the boundaries of the Holy Land and under the jurisdiction of Israel and the Palestinian National Authority, and considering their national and domestic unfulfilled aspirations, it is difficult to address the Lord with prayers of thanksgiving. In the past twenty years many times we were given the hope and the assurance of establishing peace and harmonious co-existence between the antagonistic authorities, and we were frustrated.

Therefore we turn to the mercy of Almighty God, the creator of the universe, beseeching Him to gather around the table of

brotherly love, the vengeful souls of His children, and to guide them in their pursuit of the realization of justice and the peaceful co-existence of all nations.

And this will be a great blessing, especially for the people of the Holy Land. They are faithful believers of their Hebraic, Christian, and Islamic monotheistic holy traditions and the Holy Book, and they do invite to their sacred sanctuaries for pilgrimage all the dispersed children of their family and their Faith.

It is with this faith and confidence, with this hope and assurance, with this love and compassion, that we, as Armenian Patriarch of Jerusalem, appeal to the heavenly and merciful God to anoint the troubled souls of mankind with the balsam of peace, and especially grant the peace of co-existence, so much coveted by the Holy Land and its inhabitants.

It is in this same spirit that we extend our invitation to the dispersed children of our nation to embark on their vow of pilgrimage to the sacred Manger of the Nativity of Christ in Bethlehem, as well as to the sanctuaries related to the Person of Christ and His Mission.

The presence of Christian Armenia and the Armenian Apostolic Orthodox Church (since 301 A.D.) in the Holy Land has left its indelible and memorable imprints from generation to generation.

It is the vibrating voice of the faith and the wisdom of our people, when wishing-well a pilgrim, especially on his first visit to Jerusalem, we remind him saying: "Once in Jerusalem, may you return seven times".

And indeed, every Armenian should, at least once in his lifetime, kneel before the sacred sanctuaries of our faith, and visit the magnificent Cathedral of Saint James of the Armenian Patriarchate of Jerusalem.

It is this beatific blessing that we wish to convey to all the children of all nations, so that they may joyfully sing their own songs, joining the Gloria and the message of the Angels: "Glory to God in the highest; and peace on earth; and good-will among men."

T. A. M