



The Holy Land Christian Ecumenical Foundation (HCEF) 18th international Conference

On behalf of my 270 parish communities of the Antiochian Orthodox Archdiocese in North America, I thank you for your invitation to address the Holy Land Christian Ecumenical Foundation 18th International Conference.

I am grateful to the Board of Directors of the Foundation for bestowing upon me this special award, which I accept on behalf of all Antiochian Orthodox Christians in North America, who have and will continue to support their brethren in the Holy Land during these difficult times.

The theme of this conference "*Forging a New Bond of Solidarity for Equality, Prosperity, and Peace,*" shall be addressed by distinguished scholars and academic speakers. However, I, as a religious

leader, would like to make this presentation based on spirituality.

Jerusalem has a special place in my heart. Her suffering people are in my prayers, and I see part of my ministry as one of serving the Palestinian Christian community wherever it may be. I venture to say that **I am Syrian by birth, Lebanese by education, American by citizenship, and Jerusalemite by devotion.** The City of Jerusalem is the earthly font of Christianity, as well as the gathering place of the three monotheistic religions. From all over the world, faithful believers come together to make pilgrimage, worship, and pray, in order to become spiritually uplifted. Christians make their pilgrimage to the Holy Land, in order to imitate the ascension of Christ to the Heavenly Jerusalem.

Since Jerusalem is considered as a place of devotion and sanctity, those who make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem experience the locations of miraculous events that occurred in this holy place. According to us, as Christians, the pilgrimage to Jerusalem

celebrates the great Passover, when Christ passed from death to life. The pilgrims dedicate themselves to remembering Christ who gave His life up for all humanity. They strive to ascend to the Holy City where the Logos of God came and dwelt among us, so that they may live in peace. First and foremost, they are called to escape whatever enslaves them, to attain the freedom of a new life.

This award is not bestowed only upon me as a Metropolitan, but upon our Archdiocese, which encompasses faithful believers from all cultures, nationalities, and races. The Antiochian Archdiocese incorporates clergy and laity who came originally from Lebanon, Syria, Palestine, Jordan, Iraq, and Egypt as well as a large number of American converts of all different backgrounds who found their home in our Archdiocese and have adopted Eastern Orthodox Spirituality. In spite of this diversity, all the 270 communities in my Archdiocese worship and minister in North America in concord and harmony. The Archdiocese had made itself the means of combining all members together. This produced one wonderful result.

Being their mediator, the Orthodox Faith brought them together, doing away with all that estranged them.

For more than a century, the Antiochian Archdiocese has been ministering to the Palestinian communities in North America with open arms, embracing them with genuine love, as beloved children of the Orthodox Church. Since all my congregations are great supporters of the Palestinian people, the Archdiocese did and will not hesitate to employ all means to defend them on all levels.

The theme of this conference serves as a model of the pastoral transformation towards diaconal ministry for the living stones of Jerusalem, i.e., the Arabic-speaking Christians in the Middle East, who inspire us and remind us of the need to revive Church ministry and outreach. By the providence of God, we are planted in this country to minister and take care of suffering brethren in the Holy Land, with a spirit of love and faith.

It is my hope that this conference and our continuing efforts will entice more and more churches and religious communities to become interested in diaconal ministry and transformation, in order to make God's teachings and dispensation come true among the people of the Holy Land. Since the diaconal ministry is the most important purpose of the faith community in the Church, it is our duty to implore God, the benefactor of our souls and bodies, to recompense the faithful believers of the Holy Land for all their sacrifices throughout history, and to replenish their lives with every good thing for His glory.

In his third book *Contra Arians*, Saint Athanasius wrote: "As children of God we become merciful, not by being made equal to God, nor becoming in nature and truth benefactors (for it is not our gift to benefit but belongs to God), ***but in order that what has accrued to us from God Himself by grace, these things we may impart to others, without making distinctions, but largely towards all extending our kind ministry.*** For only in this way, can we anyhow become imitators, and in no other, when we

minister to others what comes from Him.” (Contra Arians 3:19).

For this reasons, the people of faith, we imitators of God, must become active participants in the creation of a solid foundation for our brethren in the Holy Land, so that they may continue to have a life based upon faith, peace, justice, and harmony.

How can we foster ministry to the remaining Christians in the Holy Land? In what way can we cooperate with the Christian Churches and communities to bear witness to Christ in his home?

In order to answer these questions, we have to review the challenges that are facing the Christian communities in the Holy Land. There has been a sequence of serious challenges to the historic presence of the Christian churches, whose presence can be traced back to the time of Christ and His Apostles. Challenges to the Christian presence in the Holy Land, as well as in the Middle East, show that the Christian community is in crisis. Its position is being eroded on several fronts with little human

prospect of survival. The challenges are numerous, clearly show how the highly charged, complex, and dangerous situation can be solved with world-wide Christian involvement in the area. Here are some of the challenges that face their presence:

First, the most multifaceted Christian problems in the Middle East crisis emerged in part from demographic changes. Demographically, the numbers of Christians have fallen to an unprecedented low level, which is believed to be the community's worst nightmare. Arabic-speaking Christians live as a minority in a non-Christian culture. There are also those people who desire to end those Christian features of the Middle East symbolized by the Church.

Second, Christians and non-Christians leave the Holy Land due to the poor economic conditions brought by the strenuous conditions in which they live. These conditions weaken the Church's ability to maintain her presence in the Holy Land, and to continue her ministries of pastoral care, education, welfare and health. Many Churches and non-profit

organizations provide humanitarian and philanthropic services to refugees and those living in poverty. One such example of difficulties are the tax claims which put the services of the Church at great risk. The heads of Christian Churches in Jerusalem are concerned over the taxation of church buildings and properties.

Third, the ‘scandals’ over the sale or long-term lease of Church properties in the Holy Land. Many Arabic-speaking communities feel that the properties of their own churches have created a situation in which the fundamental interests of the Christian congregation in Jerusalem are being undermined, and their historic properties are being confiscated, sold, or leased against their wishes. If this trend continues, Christian communities will lose their land and their historic sites. Losing the land means losing their hope. Losing the historic sites means losing history and the original evidence of Christianity. In addition, there have been reported events of churches that have been vandalized such as the Monastery of the Cross; a Baptist Church in

central Jerusalem; and various other churches, monasteries, and convents.

Fourth, the denial of freedom of worship in the main religious sites. The Church of the Holy Sepulcher and other crucial religious sites are rendered off limits for Christians and non-Christians outside Jerusalem through a complex network of walls, checkpoints, and security apparatuses. Since East Jerusalem has been cut from the rest of the territories, Christians have been required to obtain special permission to even enter the city of Jerusalem. Christians prevented from entering their churches, monasteries and convents.

Fifth, the lack of pastoral and humanitarian care in certain Christian communities. The humanitarian ministry is not something we do occasionally to alleviate certain needs and sufferings as they arise, but rather an integral part of a living Christian community's concern and pastoral care for every human being, and for all those who come within range of its loving care.

Saint Paul, however, said when sin increases, grace abounds more. God does not leave anyone destitute of his providence, but it helps him to overcome all challenges and atrocities. Jesus came to restore grace to every marginalized person, in fact to give it increase, that where sin abounded, grace might more abound. Grace helps the oppressed to overcome the offense, and gives new life.

Having received this grace, the Christians in the Holy Land have a saying: "We live in a land that has already experienced resurrection, so we always have hope." Despite increasing restrictions on their communities and their freedom to worship, that hope lives among certain faithful members persevering, strong and robust, while quietly bearing the yoke of subjugation.

Yet despite these obstacles, it is the grace of God that perseveres the people, through the ongoing presence of and continuing work by the churches, and the ministry of all non-profit organizations such

as yours, that remain a sign of hope for a different type of resurrection that is yet to come.

Ministry to Palestinian brethren is not an optional action, duty or moral stance in relation to the needy, but an indispensable expression of our faith. Solidarity with the Palestinian people consists in assisting them to overcome their obstacles. It is by fulfilling our ministry to them that we usually minister to our Master and God, the Lord of all.

In reviewing the details of our ministry to them, attention should be turned to developing specific areas of pastoral care. Our solidarity should focus on the following aspects:

- Strengthening their identity: exploring culture and history.
- Promoting leadership development and personality responsibility.
- Fulfilling their needs: eradicating hunger, destitution, and sickness.

- Involving more deeply the churches in developing programs for the community.
- Assisting the Holy Land Churches in their efforts in the field of macro-diaconia, and promoting better forms of communication with a view to the discovery of better and new forms of diaconia.
- Promoting religious tourism to put people in contact with the Palestinian lifestyles. It is important to ensure that it can be carried out under the best possible conditions of freedom of movement and respect for human rights. Tourism to the Holy Land should be conducive to intercultural encounters and dialogue, and to nourish and strengthen their moral in socio-economic systems.

In solidarity with the living stones of Jerusalem and in fraternal community with them, we pray that solidarity to be proclaimed with the Christians of the Holy Land.

+Metropolitan JOSEPH