



CUSTODIA TERRÆ SANCTÆ

Message from the Custody of the Holy Land

In the name of the Custody of the Holy Land, which represents the Latin Catholic community in the Basilica of the Nativity in Bethlehem, I convey to President Mahmoud Abbas and to the Presidential Committee for the Renovation of the Church of the Nativity my best greetings and congratulations on the successful completion of the restoration works.

This holy place certainly has a long history, which begins with the birth of the Messiah – Our Lord Jesus Christ – in Bethlehem, a history that is narrated in the Gospels according to Luke and Matthew. The place was the subject of great veneration that, during the time of Emperor Constantine and thanks to the strong will of Queen Saint Helena, led to the construction of the splendid basilica in 333, which was first restored by Emperor Justinian in 531, and then again between 1165 and 1169 at the wish of Bishop Rudolph, with the contribution of the Latin King Amalric I and the emperor of Constantinople, Manuel Porfirogenetos Comnenos. This was a restoration that marked, already at that time, a close collaboration between the churches of East and West.

Now we have finally arrived at the point of celebrating this last intervention of restoration, accomplished through the initiative of President Abbas, under the supervision and coordination of the Presidential Committee chaired by Mr. Ziad Albandak, and with the consent of the Christian communities responsible for the property and those who have the right to use the place for worship. This important work has restored a revered place that has particular significance for all of us and has given it back to us in its composite beauty, the result of many centuries of devotion. It indicates that collaboration between civil institutions and the churches is the path to reaping abundant fruit. It is a praiseworthy achievement as well because of the professional way in which the experts have worked in order to give back to the faithful as well as to visitors the treasures of art that had been covered over throughout the centuries or that



had become virtually invisible. It is a work that has also seen the economic contribution of many nations and public and private institutions; notable among them is the contribution of the Holy See, as well as those of individual faithful.

For us Latins and Franciscans, this place has a particular significance. Here, in the fourth century, Saint Jerome found the perfect environment for translating the Bible into Latin. Here, in 1219, Saint Francis could venerate the Grotto and the Manger in which the Virgin Mary placed the Child Jesus. He was so touched by this place that he wanted in some way to replicate the experience of the mystery and its beauty in the celebration of Christmas in Greccio in 1223.

We would once again like to express our acknowledgment and gratitude to the Authority and to the Palestinian institutions for their commitment and dedication in the restoration of the Basilica of the Nativity in Bethlehem. Our desire is that it continue to be a place of prayer and pilgrimage, accessible to both local Christian faithful as well as pilgrims and visitors – not only Christians – who arrive here in great numbers to venerate the birthplace of the Child Jesus, the Child of Bethlehem whom we Christians venerate as the Word made Flesh, the Prince of Peace, our Messiah and our Redeemer.

Jerusalem, 18 November, 2019

