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AN ENCYCLICAL ON PEACE IN THE HOLY LAND
AND ON CONFESSING THE ORTHODOX CHRISTIAN FAITH
by
His Eminence, Metropolitan Ephraim of Boston

O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, thou that killest the prophets, and stonest them which are sent unto thee, how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not! Behold, your house is left unto you desolate. For I say unto you: Ye shall not see me henceforth, till ye shall say, Blessed is He that cometh in the name of the Lord.
(Matthew 23:37-39)

My beloved Orthodox Christians:

On viewing the terrible conflict in the Middle East, and the real danger of the spread and escalation of those local problems to all the surrounding countries and even, perhaps, the rest of the world, one brings to mind the numerous passages from the Holy Scriptures that enjoin us to pray for the peace of Jerusalem and of Israel:

Ask now for the things which are for the peace of Jerusalem....

(Psalms 121:6)

But them that turn aside unto crooked ways shall the Lord lead away with workers of iniquity; peace be upon Israel.

(Psalms 124:5)

The Lord bless thee out of Sion, and mayest thou see the good things of Jerusalem all the days of thy life. And mayest thou see thy children's children; peace be upon Israel.

(Psalms 127:6-7)

Praise the Lord, O Jerusalem; praise thy God, O Sion....He bringeth peace upon thy borders.

(Psalms 147:1, 3)

This theme is found also in the hymnology of the Church; for example, in the hymns for Palm Sunday we hear:

O thou who proclaimest good tidings to Sion,
ascend the mountain; and thou preacher unto
Jerusalem, raise thy voice with might. Glorious
things are spoken of thee, O city of God. Peace be
to Israel, and salvation to the nations

(Katavasia of the Fifth Ode)

And yet - since the time of our Saviour's advent in the flesh, there has been no peace in the Holy Land. On the contrary, there have been wars and rumors of wars; armies and army camps encircling the Holy City and the other cities of the Holy Land; invasions, and strife, and destruction.

As our Saviour foretold, Jerusalem was destroyed in A.D. 70, at which time not a stone was left upon a stone. In A.D. 135, the year of the Bar Kokhba revolt, the destruction was repeated and was total. It is said that the Roman troops spread salt on the ruins of Jerusalem so that even grass would not grow. Furthermore, the Roman emperor Hadrian prohibited Jews from dwelling in the city. This is why, after many generations of exile and absence from this area, the Jewish people forgot the locations of many of their holy sites, for example, the exact location of the Temple on the temple mount, the tomb of King David - which was known in apostolic times, as the passage in Acts 2:29 testifies.

Some time before the Roman legions invaded the area in the year 132, prophets appeared who predicted the destruction that was imminent, and so the bishop of Jerusalem, Mark, and the small Christian community (all were Jewish Christians at that time) departed and went to Pella in the Trans-Jordan area.¹ Since the Roman authorities did not consider this small Christian community to be of the Jewish religion, our faithful were allowed to return to settle amidst the ruins of Jerusalem.

Therefore, the Christian community has known no break of continuity in its presence in that area. This is why, from generation to generation, the Christians have kept a living memory of the location of the sites of the holy places. Hence, when Saint Helen, the mother of Emperor Saint Constantine the Great, came to the Holy Land in the year 327, the Christians were able to point out to her the site of Golgotha, the location of the life-giving tomb of our Saviour, the place where our Saviour's ascension into the Heavens took place, the cave of the Nativity in Bethlehem, and other holy sites. In some cases, the pagan Roman authorities did the Christians a favor - unwillingly, to be sure - by building pagan shrines over Christian holy sites. Thus the Roman Emperor Hadrian, in order to spite the Christians, built a shrine to Venus in the form of a rotunda over Golgotha, thereby marking the exact location of this holy site. The same tactic was used

¹ Eusebius, *Church History*, III, 5; St. Epiphanius of Cyprus, *Against Heresies*, 29:7 and 30:2.

in Bethlehem, where a "sacred" grove and a shrine to Adonis were established over the cave where Christ was born.²

During the reign of Julian the Apostate (361-363), the Jews revived their hopes of rebuilding the temple, and with the permission of the emperor began to gather materials for this purpose. However, on the eve of the commencement of this work, a devastating earthquake struck. Entire buildings collapsed, and, as Sozomen the Historian recounts from the accounts of eye-witnesses (*Ecclesiastical History*, Book V), the violent agitation of the earth heaved huge boulders from the depths of the earth, "hundreds of the workers and leaders of the Jews perished and many others were severely mutilated and wounded." Shortly thereafter, Julian himself was killed in battle, and so the plan to rebuild the temple was never realized.

During the Justinian era (527-565), Christian shrines were erected on the temple mount to commemorate the feast of the Meeting of Our Lord in the Temple (February 2) and the Entry of the Theotokos into the Temple (November 21).

In 637, the Muslim forces under Omar - a companion of the "Prophet", who had died only five years before - entered the Holy City. At this point, it should be mentioned that much of the mythology surrounding Muhammad was invented in order to make events in his life roughly parallel those of Christ. During His earthly sojourn, our Saviour worked many great and mighty wonders: He healed the sick, raised the dead, cast out demons, commanded the wind and the sea, and He Himself arose from the dead and ascended into Heaven. In contrast, as the Koran itself admits in dozens of places, Muhammad performed no miracles whatsoever (see, for example, Sura 17:91-95). Thus, at a later date, there was invented the story of Muhammad's ascent into Heaven from Jerusalem on the back of the winged horse Burâq.

To quote a remarkable study on the Dome of the Rock,³ "The history of the Night Journey and the Ascension [*sic*] [of Muhammad] is a complicated one. It begins with a very simple verse in the Koran (17:1): 'Glory to the One [God] who took His servant [Muhammad] for a journey by night from the Sacred Mosque [Mecca] to the furthest mosque (*Masjid al-Aqsâ*), whose precincts We [God] have blessed, so that we could show him [Muhammad] some of Our signs; for He is the Hearer and the Seer.' The holy [*sic*] text does not mention Jerusalem or an ascension, but as early as the middle of the eighth century [over one hundred years after Muhammad died], the expression 'farthest mosque' was understood to mean a place in Jerusalem and the first elements of the story of a heavenly journey then made their appearance." But when Muhammad died suddenly and unexpectedly in 632, there was no mosque in Jerusalem! (The Dome of the Rock was not built until 692). Undeterred by these elementary historical facts, the Muslims - to this very day - point out Burâq's hoof marks on the stone from which this steed allegedly leapt into Heaven, carrying Muhammad on his back.

²Eusebius, *Life of Constantine*, III, 26, 28; Jerome, Epistle 58, To *Paulinus*; Socrates, *Church History*, II, 1.

³*The Dome of the Rock*, by Saïd Nuseibeh and Oleg Grabar (Rizzoli International Publications, New York, 1996, pp. 43, 47).

Since they were a nomadic people with no architectural skills, the inhabitants of the Arabian peninsula were obliged to employ Byzantine craftsmen and mosaic artists to build and decorate their Dome of Rock. Since the time this edifice - which, admittedly, is very beautiful - was constructed on the temple mount, it has become the secular symbol of the city of Jerusalem, much as the church of St. Basil in Red Square is a symbol of Moscow, or the Parthenon is of Athens.

With the recent intensification of problems in the Mid-east, many Orthodox Christians have wondered: why is it that in the land where the Prince of Peace was born, lived, suffered the holy and voluntary Passion, was crucified, arose from the dead and ascended into Heaven - why is it that there is no peace? Since His advent in the flesh, throughout the centuries, there have been wars and rumors of wars, whether it be against the Romans, Jew against Jew, or the Samaritan revolt, the Persian and Muslim invasions, Muslims against Muslims, Muslims against Crusaders, Arabs against Turks, Turks against European colonial powers, Kurds against Christians, Arabs against Arabs, Secular Jews against observant Jews, and now Jews against Palestinians, and vice versa. Bitter and remorseless strife, endless bloodbaths, unquenchable lust for revenge, implacable and unforgiving hatred, without respite or apparent hope for any sort of resolution and reconciliation.

Then the words which our Saviour spoke, which I quoted at the beginning of this encyclical, come to mind, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem.... behold, your house is left unto you desolate." When Israel rejected the Prince of Peace, it also rejected Him Who sent the Prince of Peace. "Whosoever denieth the Son, the same hath not the Father" (I John 2:23).

But that was not yet the full extent of the rejection.

The authors of the aforementioned book, *The Dome of the Rock*, Said Nuseibeh and Oleg Grabar, supplied countless color photographs of this beautiful edifice. In addition to the beautiful photographs of the interior and exterior of the Dome of the Rock, for the very first time, translations of the mosaic inscriptions adorning the interior octagonal base of the dome have been supplied by the authors.

Before the publication of this book, we never knew what these inscriptions said. We assumed, of course, that they were Koranic, but the authors clarify this assumption. They explain that the "mosaic epigraphy contains selections from the holy [*sic*] Koran, interspersed with many pious [*sic*] phrases, supplications, and remarks on the original construction" (p.78).

As a matter of fact, it becomes quite evident that the whole purpose of these inscriptions was to preach against the divinity of our Lord Jesus Christ, Who had "wrought salvation" in the midst of the Holy Land and the city of Jerusalem itself. That is to say, in the very city where our Saviour came to His voluntary Passion, was crucified, died and was buried, where He arose from the dead on the third day, within view of the Mount of Olives where our Saviour truly (unlike Muhammad) ascended into Heaven, Islam erected these blasphemous inscriptions to taunt the Christians and their faith.

Here is a sampling of this "mosaic epigraphy":

In the name of God,
 The Beneficent, the Merciful....
 No god exists but God alone,
 Indivisible without peer.
 Say, God is one,
 God is central
 Birthing no child, nor birthed in turn.
 Nothing and no one is comparable.

In the name of God,
 The Beneficent, the Merciful....
 No God exists but God alone, Indivisible.
 Praise be to God who never fathered a child.
 No peer exists in all of creation,
 nor has God need of counsel.
 In every way elevate and magnify God!

O People of the Book!
 Don't be excessive in the name of your faith!
 Do not say things about God but the truth!
 The Messiah Jesus, son of Mary, is indeed a
 messenger of God:
 The Almighty extended a word to Mary, and a
 spirit too.

So believe in God and all the messengers
 And stop talking about a Trinity.
 Cease in your own best interests!
 Verily God is the God of unity.
 Lord Almighty! That God would beget a child?
 either in the Heavens or on the Earth?

God alone is the best protector.
 Neither Christ nor the angels in Heaven
 scorn servitude and worship of God.
 Whosoever looks down upon worship,
 considering it something beneath him....
 they will be swept unto God in the end.

O God, bless your messenger
 and servant, Jesus, Son of Mary.
 Peace be upon him

the day he was born,
 the day he dies,
 and the day he is raised again.
 Say only the truth about Jesus over whom you
 dispute:
 He is the son of Mary!
 It is not fitting that God should beget or father a
 child.
 Glory be unto God!

Some years ago, in an article entitled "New Age Bishops,"⁴ many quotes were provided from the Koran, comparing them to passages from the New Testament. This comparison was quite startling. On the one side, the Koranic verses, brimming with agitation and anger; on the other side, equivalent verses from the New Testament, filled with a profound wisdom and peace.

Once a Coptic visitor to one of our monasteries related that a Muslim acquaintance of his in Egypt asked him, "Why is it that when someone of your faith becomes more observant, he also becomes more calm and peaceful; whereas when someone of our faith becomes more observant, he also becomes more angry and agitated?" The Copt answered, "You've just answered your question."

It would be well worth your time, my beloved Orthodox Christians, to re-read the above mentioned article, "New Age Bishops," simply to examine and perceive for yourselves the Spirit that moves through the passages of the New Testament, and the vituperation that flows from the mouth of Muhammad, who aside from the many anomalies that marked his career, suffered also from some type of violent seizures.⁵

In the Koran (see Sura 3:59; Sura 4:173; Sura 5:19, Sura 5:75, 78; Sura 9:30), Muhammad insisted that Christ was a mere creature, like Adam. Consequently, says Muhammad, he is a mere mortal; but because of his exceeding virtue, he was adopted and became *a* child of God, not *the* Child of God; he became *a* son of God, not *the* Son of God. Muhammad claimed that it is blasphemy to say that Jesus, the son of Mary, was God.

On the other hand, in the New Testament, Saint John the Evangelist and Theologian teaches us that, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God... and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:1, 14). And

⁴ This article, originally published in the *Orthodox Christian Witness* (June 4/17, 1990), has been reprinted in the third edition of *Against False Union*, St. Nectarios Press, Seattle, WA.

⁵ In his book, *Islam Unveiled*, (The Scholars Press, Shermans Dale, PA., 1991), Dr. Robert A. Morey writes, "Early Muslim tradition records the fact that when Muhammad was about to receive a 'revelation' from Allah, he would often fall down on the ground, his body would begin to jerk, his eyes would roll backward, and he would perspire profusely." This manner of "prophesying" is very reminiscent of that of the pagan Boxers in China who received "Spirit Warriors" (whatever they were!) through initiation: fixed gazes, intense sweating, falling on the ground - before they sallied forth to massacre the Christians.

again, in his First Epistle, he writes "Beloved, believe not every spirit, but test the spirits whether they be of God; because many false prophets are gone out into the world. Hereby know ye the Spirit of God: Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is of God. And every spirit that confesseth not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is not of God; and this is that spirit of antichrist, whereof ye have heard that it should come, and even now already is it in the world" (I John 4:1-3).

Muhammad teaches that it is blasphemy to confess the divinity of Christ. The Holy Scriptures teach us that it is blasphemy *not* to confess this. Now, both sources cannot be God-inspired. It is either one or the other. The Holy Spirit cannot be inspiring both of these sources.

We, as believing Orthodox Christians, believe that in the Holy Gospels and the Epistles of the holy Apostles, again and again it is demonstrated not only from the very words of our Saviour Himself and those of His holy disciples, but also by the awesome and mighty miracles which He wrought (which Muhammad did not do), and by His triumphant resurrection from the dead (which Muhammad did not do), that He is Light of Light, and very God of very God. This is the central teaching - indeed, the very foundation - of Christianity; that is, the Christ, the Word of God, Who came in the name of the Lord, died, was buried, arose, and ascended into Heaven, is in very truth the Messiah, the Only-begotten of God the Father, and, therefore, the fulfillment of the countless prophecies and oracles found in the Old Testament. He is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of our Fathers. He is the One Who spoke to Moses and appeared to Abraham. As He told the Jews, "Before Abraham was, I am" (John 8:48). He is very God of very God, Who came to forgive and save us. *Only* God can forgive sins. The Jews knew this clearly, and it is for this that they leveled the accusation of blasphemy against our Saviour, charging that He made Himself the Son of God when He told the paralytic in Capernaum, "Son, thy sins are forgiven thee" (Mark 2:1-12).

Up to this point, we have spoken of the Muslims and what they believe concerning our Saviour. Despite their erroneous beliefs, they nonetheless recognize our Saviour as a great and virtuous prophet, who was born of a Virgin. Indeed, they have many good things to say about Christ and the person of the Virgin Mary; however, they vehemently deny His divinity, and they believe that Muhammad is the summit and seal of the prophets.

But what of the Jews? On the one hand, the secular Jews, who make up 80% of the modern Israeli population, are basically atheists, and either antagonistic or indifferent to religion. On the other hand, the remaining 20% who are observant and religious, nurture - if one were to judge from the texts of their Talmud - an implacable and spiteful hatred for Christianity. The Talmudic texts that deal with our Saviour are so filled with filth and seething malice, I cannot repeat or quote any of them. Not only do these texts deny the divinity of our Lord Jesus Christ and His virgin birth, but they literally seethe with the most ugly and blasphemous diatribes concerning the origin and person of our Saviour.

Indeed, in view of these sorry facts, there is no way that modern "observant" Israelis could constitute the "chosen people," "the people of God," or the rightful heirs of the land of Israel, as some misguided Protestant fundamentalists naively believe. God extends His promises to all mankind, first and foremost to the *true* Israel that is faithful to His promises, and also to the nations who believe in and accept the Son and Word of God, Jesus Christ, the Messiah. He does not extend them to those who maliciously and stubbornly curse and reject His Son, the Prince of Peace.

One writer recently commented on the belief held by some fundamentalist Protestants that the contemporary State of Israel is the fulfillment of scriptural prophecy. He writes, "These people [the Protestant fundamentalists] don't seem to mind that many [actually, the great majority of] Israelis hold their own religion in contempt, and further, they [the fundamentalists] are quite indifferent to the plight of Arab Christians.... Many of the pro-Israel American Protestants seem to hold a crude interpretation of the Old Testament, according to which, just as God specifically commanded the ancient Israelites to exterminate some of their enemies, the modern Israelis would be justified in slaughtering the Arabs. Never mind the minor difference that Ariel Sharon has received, as far as we know, no divine command to kill Palestinians. For these [fundamentalist] Christians, it seems to be enough that a modern secular state, ethnically Jewish, calls itself by the scriptural name 'Israel' " (*The Wanderer*, April 25, 2002).

But an "Israel" that is either supremely indifferent to or blasphemous against the true God of Israel - the Holy Trinity, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit - is *not* Israel.

What does the sacred hymnology of the Church have to say about this? What are the teachings of the holy and God-bearing Fathers regarding this matter?

What - for example - is the significance of the fig tree, which was cursed by our Saviour and which withered away? The following hymns from the Ninth Ode of the Palm Sunday canon for Compline provide us with the proper understanding:

The rod of Moses was turned into a serpent, and the rod of Aaron, which had been withered and fruitless, was changed into a green branch that brought forth leaves; but the lawless synagogue was changed into a fruitless fig tree.

Thou hast cursed the fruitlessness of the law, since it brought forth as leaves the shadow of understanding of the letter, but had no fruit of deeds because of its lawlessness. . . .

On the other hand, what do the ancient patristic texts teach us about the *true* Israel, the *new* Israel, the *new* Jerusalem?

Israel, Thy Church on earth, taken out of the nations. . . . with a full heart and a willing soul sings [in praise of Thee].

Apostolic Constitutions, VII, 35

Through Christ, Thou hast brought home the nations to Thyself as a people for Thine own possession [Deuteronomy 7:6], the true Israel, beloved of God, and seeing God.

Apostolic Constitutions, VII, 36

For the true spiritual Israel and descendants of Judah, Jacob, Isaac and Abraham (who in uncircumcision was approved of and blessed by God on account of his faith, and called the father of many nations) are we [Christians] who have been led to God through the crucified Christ.

St. Justin the Philosopher,
Dialogue with Trypho the Jew, XI, 5.

The word of God speaks to those who believe in Christ as being one soul, and one synagogue, and one church

St. Justin the Philosopher,
Dialogue with Trypho the Jew, LXIII, 5

Even so we [the nations], who have been quarried out from the bowels of Christ, are the true Israelitic race.

St. Justin the Philosopher,
Dialogue with Trypho the Jew, CXXXV, 3.

All who through Christ have fled for refuge to the Father, constitute the blessed Israel.

St. Justin the Philosopher,
Dialogue with Trypho the Jew, CXXXV, 5

[God], through Jesus Christ, introduces to the Kingdom of Heaven both Abraham and his seed, that is, the Church, upon which also is conferred

the adoption and the inheritance promised to Abraham.

St. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, IV, 8.

The patriarchs and prophets sowed the word concerning Christ, but the Church reaped, that is, received the fruit.

St. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, IV, 25.

What the prophets have, according to the aspect of their message, sometimes called Jerusalem, sometimes the Bride, sometimes Mount Sion, and sometimes the Temple and God's Tabernacle, is the Church.

St. Methodius of Olympus,
The Symposium, VIII, 5

In his commentary on the Book of the Prophet Isaias, Saint Basil writes the following:

Indeed, though few from Israel were found to be of the elect, the portion of those that believed in Christ was saved. Wherefore [that portion] became like yeast among the nations, drawing all to its own likeness, so that thereby it might become both Israel and the People of the Lord, and so that he that was of the nations who believed might become a Jew mystically and also an heir of the spiritual promises.

PG 30:160c-161a.

Saint Cyril of Alexandria, in his exegesis of the same prophetic book, tells us that when the Prophet speaks of "the spiritual Jerusalem," "the spiritual Judea," or "the spiritual Sion," he is proclaiming them as types of the Church of Christ, and as the true Sion (*PG, 70:65d, 68c, d, 781d*).

Elsewhere, in his commentary on the same book, Saint Cyril writes:

As for those that are the remnant, that is, the saved who have believed in Christ, though they be a remnant of Israel, they shall become, it says, a great multitude.

PG, 70:188c.

In his interpretation of Isaias 45:25 ("and in God shall all the seed of the sons of Israel be glorified" *Septuagint*), the same Saint has this to say:

Those who are called the sons of Israel among them, we affirm, are the holy Apostles and Evangelists; for they were Jews according to the flesh. And their sons, in turn, are those who are called through them to the knowledge of Christ
PG, 70:988c.

In the Paschal Megalynarion, we Orthodox Christians chant, "Shine, shine, O new Jerusalem, for the glory of the Lord is arisen upon thee." What is this "new Jerusalem" but the spiritual city of God that presides over the "new Israel," that is the true followers and disciples of the Messiah and God of Israel? Orthodox Christians are, as the Saints teach us, the New Israel, the true Israel, God's Chosen People, a People for His own possession (Titus 2:14).

In his commentary on the Heirmos of the Ninth Ode of the Pascal Canon, Saint Nicodemus of the Holy Mountain writes:

O New Jerusalem, the catholic Church of Christ, shine, shine ...for the glory of the Lord, that is, the Cross of Christ (John 13:31), the divinity of Christ (Ephesians 1:17), and the divine radiance of Christ's countenance [at Christ's transfiguration on Mt. Tabor] have arisen upon thee, the Church from among the nations.
 The people that sat in darkness (that is, the nations) have seen the great light of divine knowledge; but for the unbelieving Jews, Christ the Sun of Righteousness, has hidden [His light], whereas for us who are from the nations and have believed He dawned forth, because we acknowledged the dawn of His divinity, and we have been illumined with the light of piety and virtue. Furthermore, the Melodist tells the New Sion to dance spiritually and to rejoice over the resurrection of Christ her Bridegroom.

St. Nicodemus of the Holy Mountain
Eortodromion, p. 448

Of course, this is only a small selection of what the Church Fathers have to say about who is the true Israel today. Many more sources could be quoted (for example, Saint John

Chrysostom's 18th Homily on the Epistle to the Romans speaks eloquently and comprehensively about "the remnant" of Israel); the citations mentioned above suffice to show us the spiritual insights of the Saints on this particular subject.

As it stands now, my beloved, we have today two warring camps in the Holy Land - the Muslims and the Jews - with unforgiving fanatics on both sides. The Palestinians desire to drive the Jews into the Mediterranean, and the Jews aspire to drive the Palestinians beyond the Jordan. Both the Muslims and the Jews have rejected the incarnate Word of God, the Messiah and Redeemer. Both stubbornly refuse to accept our Saviour as the Son of God and to cry, "Blessed is He that cometh in the name of the Lord."

How, then, can there be peace in the Holy Land when the Prince of Peace is so intractably rejected?

According to our Saviour's prophecy, their "house is left desolate" indeed (Matthew 23:38), and there shall be no peace until both warring camps turn and are converted and acknowledge Christ as the God-man He is, and learn to chant, "Blessed is He that cometh in the name of the Lord" (Psalm 117:26, Matthew 23:39).

We believe and say these things, "speaking the truth in love," that we may confess our Saviour, Who is the Head, even Christ (*cf.* Ephesians 4:15).

If we are to be serious Orthodox Christians who believe in the Holy Scriptures, we are obliged to say to both sides in this conflict: there can be no lasting peace unless you lay aside your mutual hatred and submit to the Prince of Peace. Not to believe this is to gainsay our Saviour Himself and to reject His prophetic words.

There is yet one more very important element in this problem, and we mention it here only briefly, only because we have touched upon it so many times in other encyclicals and publications of our Church. The Patriarchates of "World Orthodoxy" have not kept their confession of the Holy Orthodox Christian faith pure; indeed, they have been grossly and increasingly negligent in this matter. To be brief, they are quite blatantly in communion with heresy and are no longer Orthodox Christian bishops, whatever they may claim. Also, their lack of pastoral concern for the Palestinian Orthodox Christian flock and the disrespect shown in the holy shrines (in dress codes, etc.) is a universal disgrace. If only the so-called Orthodox Patriarchates were in order in these matters, God is not without strength to bless and increase the numbers and the spiritual progress of the Orthodox Christians in the Holy Land.

We all know that there will be certain individuals today who will say that these sentiments are held only by those who are "bigoted," "uncharitable," "mean-spirited," "intolerant," and so on. But this exercise in name-calling does not alter the fact that it is they themselves who have become bigoted, uncharitable, mean-spirited and intolerant towards anyone who expresses a belief in absolute Truth, in right or wrong, in evil and

good, or in a God Who will hold us accountable and judge us after we have passed from this life.

Recently, one congressman - Thomas Delay - went so far as to say the following to a Protestant congregation in Texas:

Christianity offers the only viable, reasonable, definitive answer to the questions of "Where did I come from?" "Why am I here?" "Does life have any meaningful purpose?" Only Christianity offers a way to that physical and moral border. Only Christianity offers a comprehensive world view that covers all areas of life and thought, every aspect of creation. Only Christianity offers a way to live in response to the realities that we find in this world - only Christianity.

(*Washington Post*, April 21, 2002)

It is necessary to emphasize that these words were spoken *in a church* - not in Congress, nor in some House committee meeting, nor to the United States armed forces, nor even to the Daughters of the American Revolution. The man was simply confessing his personal faith to some 300 fellow Baptist believers.

What happened next? It was as though some Pentecostal minister had crashed an airliner into the White House. Not only secular writers, but even religious commentators were quick to raise voices of alarm. Pandemonium broke loose everywhere! A Washington-based advocacy group, Americans United for Separation of Church and State, released a tape-recording of Delay's speech. The group's executive director, the Reverend Barry W. Lynn of the United Church of Christ, declared that Delay's remarks show that he "lacks appreciation for the religious pluralism" of the United States. Delay, on his part, responded by pointing out that, "I respect people's right to have their own beliefs." Undeterred, the media found its opportunity to point a finger at this congressman who dared to hold an "exclusive" view of Christianity, even if it was expressed in a church. For a society that rejects the very concepts of absolute Truth, right and wrong, good and evil - any expression of the viewpoint that there can be just one true religion is deemed intolerant and bigoted. Of course, the irony is that any society that believes this is itself guilty of intense intolerance and bigotry the very moment it accuses others! In a letter to the editor of the *New York Times* in November of 2001, one Jewish man, David Zwiebel, wrote that "the vision of America as a country where religious belief is welcome only if it abandons claims to exclusive truth is truly chilling - and truly intolerant."

As Orthodox Christians, we know how to respond to these expressions of secular bias and prejudice. What we need to be reminded of is that we must not be intimidated into fearing to proclaim our faith in our Saviour and His unique and saving message to the world - to Jews, to Muslims, to Protestants, to Roman Catholics, to pagans, to the secular and unbelieving. We are duty-bound "to speak the truth in love" when it is

needful and when the moment is appropriate. We have as much a right to our convictions as anyone does. Indeed, our convictions, unlike those of our secular antagonists, carry the weight of long-term consequences, *very* long term.

Let us all avail ourselves, my beloved, of the opportunities that are given us to grow in our knowledge of our faith, and in our love for God and mankind, and to pray for the enlightenment and conversion of all to Christ in the holy Orthodox Christian faith, for the true peace of Jerusalem, and for our attainment to the Heavenly Jerusalem that awaits us. Amen.

Your fervent supplicant unto God,

✠ Ephraim, Metropolitan of Boston

The Holy Apostles Peter and Paul, 2002
Protocol Number 2210