

## INTERVIEW OF THE ECUMENICAL PATRIARCH BARTHOLOMEW I

Antonio Spadaro S.I.

To climb the narrow staircase, in their understated elegance, which connect the floors of the Building of the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople, gives rhythm to the clear perception that this place, in itself small, is the spiritual heart of millions of Orthodox Christians worldwide.

For 1,700 years, it has transcended a tumultuous history, yet remained constant in its mission of service. Its truly global role unfolds from a historic district of Istanbul where the *Phanar*, as it is pronounced in Greek, is found. Directly overlooking the Golden Horn, the estuary encroached on by the sea is located in the part of Turkey which is geographically Europe, and which divides the city of Istanbul in two: the ancient Byzantium–Constantinople to the South and the Genoese colony of Pera–Galata in the North.

The name *Phanar* dates back to the Byzantine era and is derived from the Greek word «lantern» as used to assist navigation. After the fall of Constantinople (1453), the district's neighborhood became home to many of the Greeks who returned to live in the city and also to the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople.

The church of St. George, formerly part of a monastery, was elevated to a Cathedral church by the Patriarch of Constantinople, Matthew II, in 1600; here he moved the seat of the Patriarchate, the sacred place «where the Chair of the bishops of this historical martyr Church is, guided by Divine Providence of the ministry of

high responsibility to be the First Throne of the Most Holy Local Orthodox Churches», as it was defined by the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I<sup>1</sup>.

*The Patriarch and the Pope*

In late November 2014, Pope Francis traveled to Turkey and was welcomed «with love and great honor, but also with profound gratitude»<sup>2</sup> from the City of Constantine's Church and by Patriarch Bartholomew's embrace. After a day spent in Ankara, in fact, he moved onto the city located on the Bosphorus, entering the Phanar twice: the first occasion, on Saturday 29 for an ecumenical prayer in the Patriarchal Church of St. George and then for a private meeting in the Patriarchal Palace; and once again on Sunday 30 for the Divine Liturgy in the Church itself and then for the ecumenical Blessing and the signing of a joint declaration.

The schism between Rome and Constantinople occurred in 1054, and was sanctioned in 1204 because of the Fourth Crusade with what St. John Paul II defined the «disastrous sack of the imperial city of Constantinople» by those who «who had set out to secure free access for Christians to the Holy Land, turned against their own brothers in the faith»<sup>3</sup>. But it was, in actual fact, the churches of Rome and Constantinople who resumed dialogue of charity with Paul VI and Athenagoras' historic embrace in 1964, and whom, in addition, revoked mutual excommunications of the two Churches. That gesture was confirmed and extended further in with Pope Francis and Patriarch Bartholomew's encounters, first in the Holy Land, then in the Vatican<sup>4</sup> and in November at the Phanar.

1. In his short allocution to Pope Francis during the doxology in the Patriarchal Church on the occasion of his official visit to the Ecumenical Patriarchate (29 November 2014).

2. Homily of Patriarch Bartholomew during the Divine Liturgy for the Feast of Saint Andrew the Apostle in the Patriarchal Church of St. George, November 30th 2014.

3. Sermon of St. John Paul II to His Beatitude Christodoulos, Archbishop of Athens and All Greece, May 4, 2001.

4. G. SALVINI, «Papa Francesco in Terra Santa. L'invocazione per la pace in Vaticano», in *La Civiltà Cattolica* II 575-584.

These encounters were experienced as a prophetic sign of a long-awaited and desired unity which is today revealing its beauty in a sincere friendship. This is why the Patriarch has expressed his «ineffable joy» caused by «the appropriate honor of the presence of the person of Your Holiness»<sup>5</sup>.

Bartholomew greeted the Pope by giving a reading of the months of his pontificate: «Your still short path as the guide of your Church has consecrated you into the consciousness of our contemporaries, herald of love, peace and reconciliation. You teach with your speeches, but mostly and mainly with the simplicity, humility and love for all, in the name of those you exercise your high office. You inspire confidence in the incredulous, hope to the hopeless, expectation for those who expect a loving Church toward all.»<sup>6</sup>

Many people were moved, in particular, by the Pope and the Patriarch's embrace, and by Francis's bowing before Bartholomew with a request to be blessed and to pray for the Church of Rome.<sup>7</sup> The Patriarch kissed him gently on his white zucchetto<sup>8</sup>.

These gestures, along with the sentiments of faith and communion which provoked them, have founded a profound desire for dialogue with the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I.

«I am grateful to the Jesuits, he tells me: I was a student of yours at the Pontifical Oriental Institute.» In fact, of the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I's long and extensive theological training, the five years in which he studied Eastern Canon Law in this institute receiving his doctorate in 1968 should be considered central. His words remind me of the fact that the Pontifical Oriental Institute is

5. Ibidem.

6. Patriarch Bartholomew's homily during the Divine Liturgy for the Feast of Saint Andrew the Apostle, cit.

7. See PANI G., «Per giungere alla piena unità». Dal Concilio di Firenze all'abbraccio di Istanbul», in *La Civiltà Cattolica* 2015 209-217.

8. The episode is the symbol of the end of any judicial pretense of Peter's primacy and also of the sincere willingness, based on the Gospel, for a future reconciliation. The gesture recalled the one made in 1975 by Paul VI celebrating Mass in the Sistine Chapel in the presence of Metropolitan Meliton of Chalcedon, sent by the Ecumenical Patriarch Dimitrios I. At the end of the liturgy, the Pope came to the Metropolitan, knelt before him — which at that time represented the Orthodox Church — and kissed his feet.

just a short walk away from the Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore, where the former student Dimitrios Archondonis – this is the the Patriarch’s civil name – went to pray, just as Francis does today before and after his apostolic journeys.

*Your Holiness, our world is changing rapidly. We live in a difficult time in some ways, but the believer knows that the Lord is present and active in the world. What is today the biggest challenge for the life of faith and the proclamation of the Gospel?*

A mere glance at global news and social media reveals the unprecedented rapid changes that are taking place all around us. We are, therefore, becoming increasingly faithful and hopeful in God, who alone can stabilize our hearts and all humanity. He is the Alpha and the Omega, who is and who was, the same yesterday, today and forevermore.

At the same time, however, there has never been a time in history when people can exercise more influence on their surroundings. Our age is unrivalled in terms of our awareness of the connections between our convictions and our conduct, between what we believe and what we practice, between our spirituality and our lifestyle. Never before have human beings been in a position to decide and determine the future of our community and planet. We can literally choose and change the way we live in order to inform and influence the challenges that we face – especially human displacement and climate change, as well as economic inequality and social injustice.

*And what is, in your view, the most important task that we have before us? What is the biggest challenge at the moment?*

Still, the greatest task — and, indeed, the greatest test! — before us is the willingness and readiness to make these connections. The unfortunate reality is that we are reluctant and even resist the call to recognize our own responsibility for the difficulties and divisions that plague our world. And here, we believe, lies the heart of the problem: How will we acknowledge the direct relationship between ourselves and our world? How will we discern that what we do and what we have are immediately related to the way the rest of the world lives

and lacks? Ultimately, how can we live in such a way that promotes harmony and not division, gratitude and not greed in the world?

*Faith can not be extraneous to this immense task...*

Of course. In light of this dilemma, the world of faith can prove a powerful ally in the effort to address issues of social justice. It can provide a unique perspective – beyond the merely social, political, or economic – on the need to eradicate poverty, to provide a balance in a world of globalization, to combat fundamentalism and racism, as well as to develop religious tolerance in a world of conflict. It is precisely the role of religion to respond to the needs of the world's poor as well as to vulnerable and marginalized people. As such, religion is arguably the most pervasive and powerful force on earth. For, not only does faith play a pivotal role in people's personal lives, but it also plays a critical role as a force of social and institutional mobilization.

*Is there something in Orthodox spirituality that helps you in a special way to live this broad vision and to understand this social power of faith?*

From the perspective of Orthodox Christian spirituality, the light and power of Christ's Resurrection provides a source of optimism and realism, particularly when everything around us appears to contradict the hope that lies within us. Orthodox Christians glimpse this hope each year on the eve of Easter Sunday, when the bishop or priest exits the altar, which symbolizes the tomb of Christ, and triumphantly chants: «Come, receive the light!» With these words, the light from a single candle lights up the entire church, previously waiting in darkness. It is the conviction that the light of God is brighter than any darkness in our hearts and in the hearts of all those in church, indeed brighter than any darkness in the world.

*On May 25, during the prayer in front of the Holy Sepulchre, you said that fifty years ago, Pope Paul VI and Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagoras, had shed the fear that, for a thousand years, had kept apart the West and the East Churches and sometimes even saw them opposed. I remember your homily in the Patriarchal Church of St. George at*

*the Divine Liturgy for the Feast of Saint Andrew the Apostle. Before Pope Francis you said that in that meeting fifty years ago, «the course of history changed direction» and that «the cooled love had been rekindled and had refreshed our willingness to do all that we can so that our communion could emerge in the same faith and in the common chalice.» Today, how do you see the way forward for the two sister Churches?*

There is no doubt that the historic meeting of our venerable predecessors, Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagoras and Pope Paul VI, who was recently beatified in the Roman Catholic Church, marked a new beginning for relations between Roman Catholicism and Orthodoxy. We cannot ignore that this event occurred after an entire millennium of mutual mistrust and theological estrangement between our two great traditions. During that painful period of separation, despite our common history of Scripture and Tradition, our two «sister churches» ran the risk of damage through isolation and self-sufficiency, having followed separate ways since the eleventh century. The meeting between Patriarch Athenagoras and Pope Paul in Jerusalem on January 6, 1964, was an extraordinary starting-point for a long journey of reconciliation and dialogue, which the succeeding generations were called to continue and build upon. Looking back at the last fifty years, we can be grateful to God for what has been achieved both through the «dialogue of love» and, subsequently, through the «dialogue of truth.»

*A path maybe long and sometimes arduous, but with no return...*

Thankfully, today, the spirit of fraternal love and mutual respect has replaced the old polemic and suspicion. Since 1964, we may not have achieved full communion, which must always be the ultimate goal of Christ's faithful disciples. Nevertheless, we have learned to forgive one another for the mistakes and mistrust of the past; and we have taken significant steps toward rapprochement and reconciliation.

*Were these steps also significant from a theological point of view?*

At the theological level, of course, the Joint International Commission of the Theological Dialogue of our Churches has produced several important common documents. However, we

recognize that there is still a great deal to be done both between our two Churches as well as within our own Churches. There is no doubt that the path will be long and difficult. But as disciples of our Lord, who prayed to His Father and urged His disciples «that they may be one», we have no other alternative but to pursue this path of reconciliation and unity. Any other way would be a dishonorable betrayal of the Lord's will and an unacceptable return to our estranged and regrettable past.

*In your homily for Saint Andrew's feast you told the Pope that «our duty does not end in the past, but principally stretches, above all to our days, to the future.» I seem to perceive in this historic moment an emergency, a positive tension, even greater than in the past. What are your thoughts on this?*

We would dare to say that, today, perhaps even more so than fifty years ago, there is a greater and more urgent need for reconciliation. This is why our meetings with our dear brother Pope Francis in Rome, Jerusalem and Istanbul were events of great significance and consequence. They are, as we must humbly realize and realistically confess, only a first step of reaching out toward the world, a modest affirmation of our desire to increase our efforts toward Christian and peaceful reconciliation on a global level. Nonetheless, they clearly demonstrate our shared willingness and common responsibility to advance along the path paved by our predecessors and mandated by our Lord Jesus Christ, «the founder and perfecter of our faith.»

*During the interview I conducted with Pope Francis, in August, 2013, he told me that now it is the right time to change the methodology of the Synod, because the current one seems static. This, he continued, «will also be of ecumenical value, particularly with our Orthodox brethren. From them we can learn more about the way of episcopal collegiality and tradition of collegiality.» The Synod process in the Catholic Church was opened and is still in progress. On the other hand in Amman, last September, there was a meeting of the Mixed Commission created to address the theological obstacles to full communion between the Catholic and Orthodox Churches. The theme was the relationship between*

*Primacy and Synodality. The dialogue on this point has not made significant progress.*

*What is your wish for our Churches? How would you consider the Pope's words? What is the most important value of collegiality? What should be the relationship between Primacy, Synodality and Collegiality?*

*In the same interview, Pope Francis said, «In ecumenical relations it is important not only to know each other better, but also to recognize what the Spirit has sown in the other as a gift for us too. I want to continue the discussion which commenced in 2007 between the joint Catholic-Orthodox commission on how to exercise the Petrine primacy, which led to the signing of the Ravenna Document. We must continue along this path. We must walk united with our differences: there is no other way to become one. This is the way of Jesus.»*

*From an Orthodox perspective how do you read these words? What is the way of Jesus? At the Holy Sepulcher we saw you and the Holy Father holding hands, walking up and down the steps. An image with a very strong and deep symbolic value. How do you perceive the figure of Francis? Can you tell me something about him and your relationship with him?*

The theological issues of primacy and collegiality in the Church are of course very central and at the same time critical for relations between our two «sister churches.» This has been a thorny debate throughout the centuries; and it is currently on the table for conversations in our official theological dialogue. It is not an easy question to «unpack» and «unravel» precisely because it is connected with so much prejudice and polemic on both sides. Whenever primacy is discussed among the Orthodox, people immediately think of papal authority, especially in light of abuses in medieval times; and whenever collegiality is discussed among Roman Catholics, people immediately fear that the authority of the pope is in question or even overlooked.

So it will take some time to discern people's true concerns and intentions. Nevertheless, meanwhile, the way church leaders conduct themselves will have a significant impact on how authority is perceived in the Church. For example, the way that Orthodox leadership is indeed a genuine model for collegiality – instead of an opportunity or excuse for national or institutional competition – will inevitably determine the veritable and credible nature of our criticism of the Petrine ministry. At the same time, the way that the papal ministry is exercised in humility

and compassion – instead of as an imposition over the rest of the episcopal college – will invariably define the manner in which it is a truthful reflection of our Lord’s crucified love, rather than in terms of worldly power.

Synodality needs a «first», the *Protos*: it is not possible to understand Synodality without the *Protos*. It is he who is the one who has the charisma of diakonia at the service of unity. The *Protos* is the one who seeks for the *consensus* of everyone. And here is where we truly sense that our brother Francis has revealed extraordinary leadership. From the very outset of the election of Pope Francis, we felt that there was something special about him: his integrity, his spontaneity, his warmth. This is why we decided to attend his installation – or inaugural Mass – in March of 2013; this was the first time ever that an Archbishop of Constantinople had been present at such an occasion at the Church of Rome, or indeed vice versa. We have already mentioned our commitment to theological and sacramental unity with the Roman Catholic Church. This will inevitably take much time and intense work. However, there is much that we can nonetheless do together with Pope Francis in order to respond to the vital needs of our world: to the suffering and hunger that increasingly plague our world, to the unjustifiable and sinful gap that is growing between rich and poor, as well as to the urgent crisis presented by climate change, which challenges the fundamental attitudes that we have toward the natural resources of our planet.

The suffering of people in every corner of our planet today; the abuse of religion for political and other secular purposes; the difficulties facing Christians all over the world, and particularly in the areas where the Christian Church was born and grew up, regardless of confessional identities; the injustices inflicted on the weak members of contemporary societies; and the alarming ecological crisis which threatens the integrity and the very survival of God’s creation – all these call for common action and the solution of the problems still dividing us. This is precisely why today, even more than fifty years ago, there is an urgent need for reconciliation, which rendered our meetings with our brother Pope Francis in Jerusalem and Rome as events of great significance and wider impact.

*What contribution can the Orthodox Church give to the world today?*

There is a great deal that the Orthodox Church can provide as testimony to the modern world. Of course, so many issues are intertwined – socially, economically, and ideologically. The Orthodox Church has to offer the force of the original faith as it existed during the first ten centuries of our common historical journey with the West. Therefore, what the Church is called to offer is the simplicity and authenticity of the Christian faith. We teach authentic spirituality and ascetic morality. The West was cut off from these values, and this is precisely what justifies the nostalgia that is manifested today. Ultimately, it is essential to change the present mindset and abandon a lifestyle of over-consumption and unrestrained greed that inevitably lead to social injustice and inequality. The Apostle Paul teaches that greed leads us to the worship of material goods, which is idolatry, the greatest sin. The Church teaches not greed but frugality – namely, leading simpler lives. This is the essential message of the Orthodox Church to the contemporary world.

*In 2016 there will be a «Great and Holy Synod» of Orthodoxy. What are your deepest desires for that meeting? Will it address the question of ecumenism?*

At our most recent Assembly (*Synaxis*) of the Heads of the Autocephalous Orthodox Churches throughout the world, which was held at our invitation in Istanbul from March 6–9, 2014, the Primate of the Orthodox Churches deliberated on the matter of the Holy and Great Synod of the Orthodox Church and unanimously decided that, upon expediting the process of preparation, this Synod will be convened in Istanbul in 2016. This Synod will, as you rightly observe, be a vital sign of unity among our Orthodox Churches at a time when our world demands a unified response to its critical challenges.

At this assembly, we informed our Brother Primate of our meeting with Pope Francis in Jerusalem. In this way, they declared their support of the event and affirmed their commitment to theological dialogue with the Roman Catholic Church. This is

important because our meeting in Jerusalem was much more than a strong symbolical confirmation of our willingness to continue the path of love inaugurated fifty years ago by our predecessors in the spirit of faithfulness to the truth of the Gospel. It was also an important opportunity for the world to see a united approach – beyond confessional identities and differences – to the suffering of Christians in so many places, and especially in the areas where Christianity first appeared and developed. Moreover, it provided occasion to address the injustices inflicted on the vulnerable members of contemporary societies as well as the alarming consequences of the ecological crisis.

However, the Holy and Great Council of 2016, will be a vital element in the development and presence of the Orthodox Church throughout the contemporary world. In some ways, the two major issues that will both determine its convocation, while at the same time define its deliberations, are: first, relations between the Orthodox Churches with other Christian confessions and other religions; and then relations among the Orthodox Churches themselves.

*What is the climate of the confrontation? Do you sense that there are tensions or obstacles to overcome?*

Regrettably, there is a growing conservative element in many Orthodox churches and circles, which react to the contemporary challenges of our age by enclosing themselves in a stifling and exclusive existence. Of course, this has never been the practice and promise of the Christian Church, which «has always been prepared to give an answer to everyone who calls on us to give an account of the hope that lies within us» (1 Peter 3.15). Moreover, with regard to fraternal and collegial relations among the Orthodox Churches themselves, there has been an escalating nationalistic and triumphalistic reduction of the Eucharistic and ecumenical nature of the Church, which has always condemned «phyletism» as a dangerous heresy, particularly at the Council of Constantinople in 1872. Nonetheless, «ethnophyletism» appears to be a perpetual temptation of many of our more recent churches.

*What is your desired outcome for this dialogue?*

Our sincere hope and prayer is that the autocephalous Orthodox Churches will be able to convene and discuss freely, in a spirit of honesty and openness, the issues that truly matter to the Church and the world, rather than becoming fixed on self-seeking and self-serving interests of power and privilege. Otherwise, it would be a lost opportunity to address the problems that really matter to the world and plague God's people and God's creation.

*We Christians have confidence in the work of the Holy Spirit in favor of our efforts to live the Gospel and to achieve the unity of the Church. Pope Francis in his homily at the Catholic Cathedral of the Holy Spirit in Istanbul said that «He realizes everything» and that «when we pray, it is because the Holy Spirit inspires the prayer of the heart.» Prayer is essential and the Spirit «unsettles», «moves», «makes us walk», the Pope said on that occasion. For you, according to your life experience, what does it mean to «pray»?*

There is a saying among the early desert fathers about Abba Joseph: «Abba Lot went to see Abba Joseph and said to him, 'Father, as much as I can, I follow my rule of prayer, I fast a little, I pray and meditate, I live in peace and I purify my thoughts. What else can I do?' Abba Joseph stood up and stretched his hands towards heaven. His fingers became like ten lamps of fire and he said, 'If you want, you can become all flame.'»

In the Orthodox tradition, prayer is not just a stage in the spiritual life; it is a pervasive activity that permeates all aspects and all details of our life. For example, each day here at the Ecumenical Patriarchate, we personally attend morning (matins) and evening (vespers) services, closing each day (with compline) in the small patriarchal chapel. However, our aim is to advance from the stage of saying prayers to the point of becoming prayer, like Abba Arsenios in the fourth-century desert of Egypt. In the words of another early theologian, Origen of Alexandria: «Our entire life should be one extended, unbroken prayer.» This is precisely the purpose and meaning of the traditional practice of the Jesus Prayer.

Prayer is the mirror of our inner life. It is what ultimately reveals who we are in relation to God and to the rest of the world. Through silence and prayer, we no longer ignore what is going on around us; and we are no longer stuck in what only matters to us. Then, we begin to recognize how we are all intimately interconnected and mutually interdependent. And we develop a greater sense of awareness and attentiveness to the world inside us and around us.

*Prayer, therefore, is not a private act...*

How unfortunate it is that we have reduced prayer to a private act, an occasion for selfish complaining to God. In prayer, our concerns should always be the concerns of others, of the world, and especially of the most vulnerable that are unable to protect themselves. Otherwise, prayer becomes exclusive and divisive (which is the literal meaning of the word «diabolical»). Authentic prayer is not the comfortable feeling of self-complacency but rather the experience of reconciliation with all humanity and all of God's creation. In the *Homilies of St. Makarios*, a fourth-century spiritual classic, we read: «Those who pray truly and in silence, edify everybody everywhere.» So, as a universal force, prayer has a cosmic significance. For, we can never include some people in our prayer, while omitting others. Or, to put it more simply: When we say that we love God but do not love our neighbor, we are liars.

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At the end of the interview with Patriarch Bartholomew I, what emerges and imposes itself on our words is the desire for a reciprocal common prayer and for the entire world; a desire which poses challenges to us and urges us.

Returning to Istanbul in February to conclude this interview<sup>9</sup>, I discovered the city unusually snow clad. Crossing the wide

9. We would like to express our gratitude to Rev. Dr. John Chryssavgis, Archdeacon of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, Nikos Tzoitis, official of the

area of Topkapi, the Sultan's Palace that has been incorporated into the site of the ancient Byzantine Imperial Palace, there one finds the Church of St. Irene, the oldest Christian worship place in the city, which is today a concert hall.

It is in this church that the pan-Orthodox Synod in 2016 is expected to take place. Pausing there and pondering the Patriarch's words, what came to my mind was what Pope Francis had said in his address in the Patriarchal Church on November 30: «To meet, to come face to face, to exchange an embrace of peace, to pray for one another are essential dimensions of the way towards the restoration of full communion to which we tend»<sup>10</sup>.

Ecumenical Patriarchate, and Theo Nicolakis, Chief Information Officer of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America, who contributed to the realization of this interview.

10. Pope Francis' words to Patriarch Bartholomew during the Divine Liturgy for the Feast of Saint Andrew the Apostle in the Patriarchal Church, November 30, 2014.