

## **Archbishop Job: “The transfer of the relics of St. Peter from Rome to Constantinople is a prophetic sign.”**



### **EXCLUSIVE Interview with His Excellency Archbishop Job of Telmessos**

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**Was the Pope’s gesture to transfer a portion of St. Peter’s relics to the Ecumenical Patriarchate known beforehand, or a surprise to you and the delegation you led to the Vatican?**

It was a great surprise to all of us, even for the Vatican and ... for the Pope himself! On the feast of the Holy Apostles Peter and Paul, last June 29th, after the Papal Mass in the basilica, when I went down with Pope Francis to the Tomb of St. Peter to pray with him in front of it according to protocol, he whispered to me: “Wait for me after. I have a gift to give you for the Church of Constantinople. I thought of it last night during prayer.”

I did not know what he had in mind. I was surprised, because we already exchanged gifts during his private audience with our delegation. A few minutes later, he brought me to the Pontifical Palace — to the chapel of the Pope. I thought he either wanted to show it to me, or to stop to say a prayer, but at that moment he explained to me that in this chapel were brought some relics of St. Peter from the basilica by the late Pope Paul VI. We venerated them together, and then he said: “I don’t live here. I don’t use this chapel. We have the relics of St. Peter under the basilica. During prayer last night, I thought to myself: this reliquary would be better in Constantinople. Take the relics with you. Give them to my brother Bartholomew. This gift is not from me, but it’s from God.”

**How did you feel when you were informed about the Pope’s decision to transfer the relics of St. Peter?**

I could not believe it! I was so touched that I did not know what to say nor what to do! The Pope had given me the entire bronze reliquary ordered by Pope Paul VI with nine fragments. I remembered from my readings that this was an extremely precious gift since these were the only fragments kept outside of the tomb of St. Peter from the relics discovered in the 1950’s during archeological excavations under the basilica conducted by Margherita Guardacci in a small niche near a wall with the Greek inscription: “Petros eni” (Peter is here), and which scientific analysis had authenticated as being the remains of a man who lived in the beginning of the first century, of a solid body constitution who died at an advanced age.

On them were found fragments of purple fabric with golden. This unique reliquary was the only one ever exposed to the public in Rome on very rare occasions, like in 2013, for the closing of the year of faith. The rest of the relics are only found in the small niche where they were buried for centuries and could not be venerated. Having returned to Saint Martha House where our delegation was hosted with the reliquary in my hands, at the astonishment of all, we had to organize at the very last moment their transfer to Constantinople, which had not been planned at all! But for the rest of the day, I felt as if I had been taken to heaven! I could not believe what had happened!

**For Orthodox, sacred relics are an integral part of liturgical life; can you describe the importance of these specific relics from an Eastern Christian viewpoint?**

We, Orthodox, venerate holy relics just as we venerate the cross and holy icons. Holy relics have always been in Orthodoxy the purpose of pilgrimages. According to

the Orthodox faith, the divine grace that has sanctified the saints is present in the holy relics, and for this reason, we venerate them with piety and respect and pray to the saints in front of them. The saints are bearers of divine grace.

Fragments of relics of holy martyrs are always placed under the altar table during the sanctification of a new church because holy martyrs are considered as witnesses of Christ. Relics of the saints are venerated on the day of their feast. In the monasteries of the Holy Mountain, holy relics are displayed for veneration every evening during Compline. The honor given to the holy relics through their veneration passes over to the saint. Now the relics of St. Peter can be venerated in the Patriarchal Church [of St. George] at the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Constantinople!

**Much has been made of this historic gesture from Pope Francis, including comparisons to the transfer of relics from Sts. John Chrysostom and Gregory the Theologian from Rome to Constantinople. Can you put this recent news in a broader historical context?**

Following the Second Vatican Council of the Roman Catholic Church and the uplifting in 1965 of the anathemas of 1054, many relics that had been stolen in the East by the Crusaders, especially in 1204, were returned by the Roman Catholic Church to their original place as a gesture of love and a sign of repentance. But in the case of the holy relics of St. Peter that were given to the Church of Constantinople this year (June 29), this was not the case. We do not speak of a return of relics, but of a gift of relics.

The relics of St. Peter had always been kept in Rome since the 1st century, in a tomb located in the antique necropolis near the Circus Gaius, where St. Peter was crucified, and over which Emperor Constantine built the first basilica around the year 324, and which was reconstructed several times since then. For this reason, Rome has always been a destination of pilgrimages. Inaccessible since the 9th century, the holy relics of St. Peter were rediscovered in the 1950's during archeological excavations, as I said before. And now, for the first time in history, fragments of the holy relics of St. Peter have been transferred outside of Rome and given to the Church of Constantinople!

**In its official documents, the Holy and Great Council stated the following: The responsibility of the Orthodox Church for unity as well as her ecumenical mission were articulated by the Ecumenical Councils. These stressed most especially the indissoluble bond between true faith and sacramental communion. How should one view the transfer of St. Peter's relics in an ecumenical context, particularly the symbolism of the event versus its impact on unity "between true faith and sacramental**

## **communion”?**

Since the uplifting of the anathemas of 1054 in 1965, the Church of Rome and the Church of Constantinople are not in a consummate schism but remain for the moment in a rupture of communion. In order to restore the communion between the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church, a Joint International Commission for the Theological Dialogue between the two Churches has been established since 1980 in order to conduct “dialogue of truth,” which examines the doctrinal and canonical issues that must be resolved. This is a long and precise work, which is necessary for the restoration of communion between the two Churches.

But the transfer of the relics of St. Peter from Rome to Constantinople is a prophetic sign which encourages all of us, “a gift from God” as Pope Francis beautifully expressed it. Therefore, one can speak of an “ecumenism of the saints.” In the past, the Roman Catholic Church often liked its primacy with the presence of St. Peter, the Chief of the Apostles, in Rome. By coming to the Church of Constantinople, his relics gathered with the relics of the Holy Apostle Andrew — the founder of the Church of Constantinople and elder brother of St. Peter. The relics of the two brothers which are now united in Constantinople is a prophetic sign for the unity of the two sister Churches. And we do believe, Catholics and Orthodox, that the Holy Apostles intercede in front of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ for the unity of the divided Christians!

Nikodemos

– Source: [The Orthodox World](#)