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Ecumenical Patriarch speaks at the Plenary Session of the Council of Europe in Strasbourg



On Monday, 27 January 2025, His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew addressed the Plenary Session of the Council of Europe, responding to an official invitation from the President of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council, Mr. Theodore Roussopoulos. The Patriarch was accompanied by His Eminence Elder Metropolitan Emmanuel of Chalcedon and His Eminence Metropolitan Dimitrios of France.

The Council of Europe is based in Strasbourg, France. It is the oldest European political organisation (established by the Treaty of London (5.5.1949) and its operation is based on three pillars: Democracy, the Rule of Law and Human Rights. The purpose of the Council of Europe (CoE) is “to achieve a closer unity between its members in order to safeguard and promote their common ideals and principles and to foster their economic progress”.

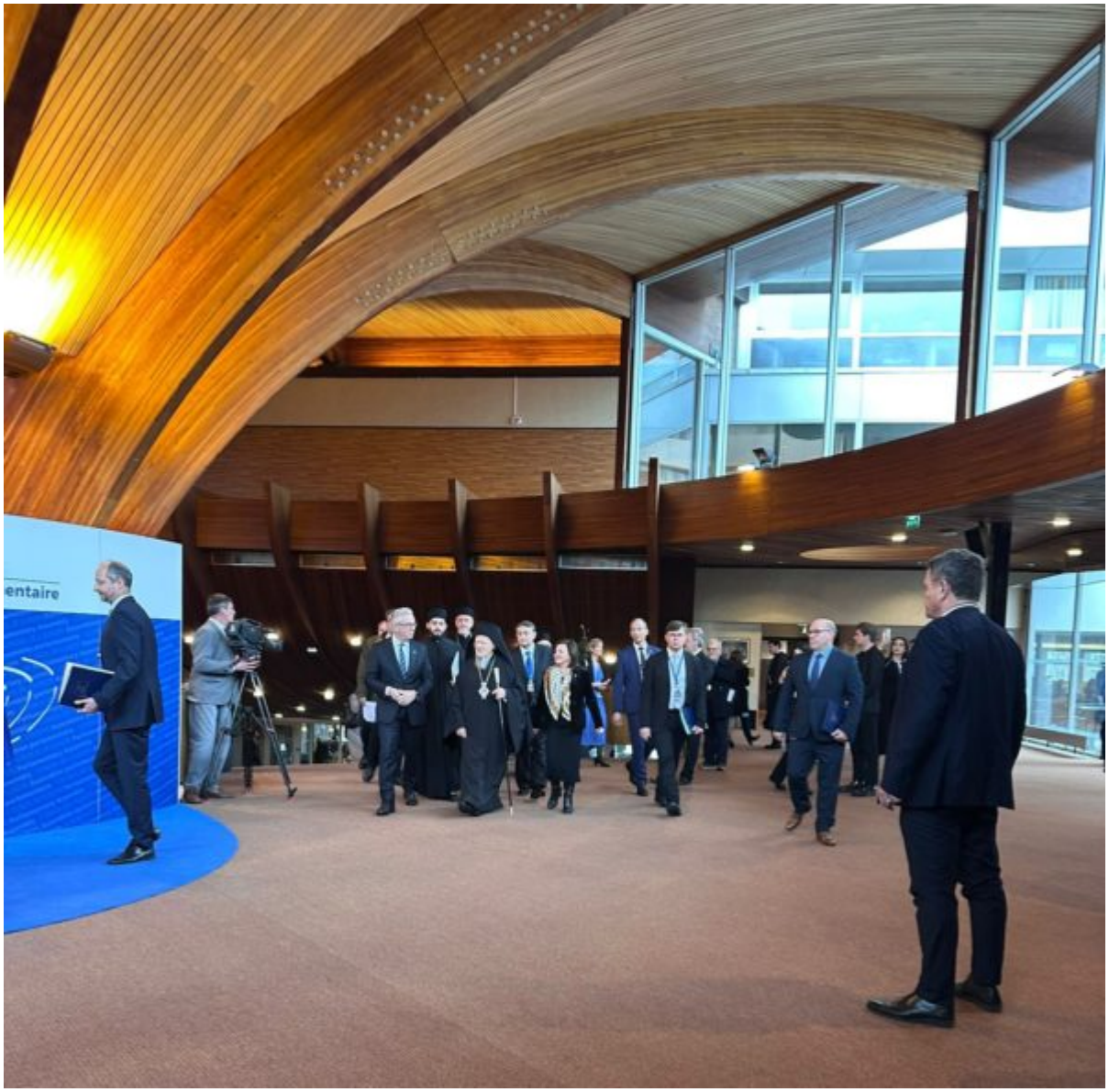
The Ecumenical Patriarch was welcomed by Mr. Theodore Roussopoulos, who was unanimously re-elected on Monday in Strasbourg as President of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. The Patriarch spoke before the Assembly of 612 members, on issues related to human dignity, peace, social justice and environmental protection.

The following is the Patriarchal speech in English:

Your Excellency Theodoros Roussopoulos,
President of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe,
Congratulations for your unanimous re-election this morning. We wish you a fruitful tenure, as it was your first one as President of this auspicious body. Moy God strengthen you in your responsible ministry.

Your Excellencies,
Your Eminences,
Esteemed dignitaries and beloved friends,

It is a unique privilege and special joy to address you, especially in such a significant day, on which we commemorate the 80th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz. We are deeply honored that we are here once again, after 2007, at this prestigious meeting of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, an international organization committed to upholding and promoting the fundamental principles of human rights, democracy, and the rule of law—namely, all that defines the culture of integrity, freedom, and justice. Moreover, it is a particular honor to be here with so many eminent members of this assembly, along with other dignitaries and foreign diplomats.



The presence among you of an Orthodox clergyman may come as a surprise to some, but as the Primate of the Church of Constantinople, Ecumenical Patriarchate, we follow in the footsteps of a long line of church ministers with a universal vision who appreciate how the world of faith can prove a powerful ally in society's efforts to address issues of freedom, justice and peace. This is because religion can provide a unique perspective in the objective to eradicate poverty and hunger, to address fundamentalism and racism, as well as to advance tolerance and dialogue. Churches and religious communities are not only pivotal in people's personal or spiritual lives. They also reserve a critical role in mobilizing institutions and societies on manifold levels. Whether we are dealing with climate change or regional conflict, there is today a heightened sense of common concern and common responsibility, which is felt with particular sensitivity by people of faith as well as—and alongside—those whose outlook is expressly secular.

This is precisely why, at the Ecumenical Patriarchate, we are deeply conscious of our connections with the past and the present. As a church whose history spans seventeen centuries, we are rooted in a rich past, living in the complex present, yet looking to a hope-filled future. It is precisely this living tradition of faith that permits us to speak boldly about critical contemporary issues, such as religious freedom, human rights, and the protection of the natural environment. This is why we have pioneered a series of inter-Christian dialogues but also inter-religious conversations, to build bridges across diverse cultural and racial divides. In a world that is proving to be increasingly divided and divisive, we feel an obligation and vocation to build bridges of peace and unity, as well as of cooperation and collaboration.

The Ecumenical Patriarchate is a living proof that different cultures and different faiths can coexist in solidarity and peace. This is our vision and message. By reaching out to our fellow human beings, across real or imagined boundaries, we are convinced that we are reaching out both to God (in whose image all human beings are fashioned), but also to our neighbor (whom we should always serve and support). There is no doubt in our mind that religious principles and values are undergoing an immense revival and can play a major role in guaranteeing coexistence and security among different races and cultures. So we strive to forge and nurture connections across religious and cultural borders. Thirty years ago, we convened an international conference of world spiritual leaders in Istanbul, officially declaring or repeating: “Any crime committed in the name of religion is a crime committed against religion” (commonly known as the Bosporus Declaration). Rising extremes and expressions of fundamentalism and nationalism have given greater urgency to the cause of East-West as well as North-South unity. The way we treat our fellow human beings persecuted by religious discrimination and racist populism reveals the kind of people we want to be. Today, the world has truly become a global village, and its citizens desire to live in peace and safety. It is up to leaders such as you to make this happen.

In this address, we would like to highlight two areas of importance and interest for us at the Ecumenical Patriarchate, which we are convinced can support the principles that the Council of Europe cherishes so dearly:

The first area is the importance of dialogue. Wherever we live in the world and whatever the nature of our profession, society invariably includes representatives of humankind in all its wondrous diversity. We hear it often stated that our world is in crisis. Yet it is also true that never have human beings—especially influential leaders, such as you—had the opportunity of affecting and transforming our world

so radically as a result of technological advances in social media and travel. So, while it may be true that this is a time of crisis, it must equally be underlined in a spirit of optimism and hope that there is still great tolerance and understanding for respective traditions and cultures.

The second area of urgency is the protection of our planet. For more than three decades, the Ecumenical Patriarchate has convened numerous international symposia, seminars and summits on the state of the earth and its waters: on the Mediterranean and the Black Seas, as well as along the Amazon and the Mississippi Rivers. Our goal has been to raise awareness and remind people that respect for and protection of the natural environment constitutes a moral duty for all. We are convinced that what we do for the earth is intimately related to what we do for people, whether in the context of human rights, international politics, or world peace. In other words, the way we respond to climate change is intimately connected to the way we respond to human challenges. This is why our entire planet is affected by the conflicts in Ukraine or the Middle East. For instance, Russia's unjustifiable war has resulted in irreversible damage to the ecosystems of the country, with unseen and unforeseeable impact on climate change for the region and beyond.



In this context, we recognize that this winter plenary session of the Parliamentary

Assembly is focusing its attention on, among other vital issues, the humanitarian crisis in the Middle East and specifically in Gaza. In the Holy Land, Orthodox Christians continue to preserve and nurture their faith despite severe trials. We have therefore expressed our full moral and spiritual support to the Patriarchates of Jerusalem and Antioch—among the most ancient churches in the world and birthplace to Christianity. We have assured them that, in the comforting words of St. Paul: “If one member suffers, then all members suffer together. And if one member is honoured, then all members also rejoice together” (1 Cor 12.26).

Nevertheless, our support for churches in crisis transcends mere moral or spiritual support. The development and maturity of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine demonstrates how solidarity and unity work in practise and not just theory. The bestowal and recognition of its autocephaly, namely ecclesiastical self-administration, by the Ecumenical Patriarchate six years ago, in January of 2019, demonstrates how canonical order and pastoral care can heal divisions and wounds of centuries. It also confirms that the ancient canonical principles of the Orthodox Church can address contemporary problems in a divided world. The entire world is daily witness to how the courageous people of Ukraine have struggled and sacrificed so much for independence from oppression and for religious freedom. However, we have witnessed the same passion for life and liberty in Estonia and Lithuania as well. And the Ecumenical Patriarchate remains dedicated to responding to such appeals for ecclesiastical integrity and sovereignty, respecting the distinct and unequivocal needs of every church and every community. At the same time, in our tradition attained over many centuries, we strive to honour the unique identity of each culture, while encouraging them to engage constructively in encounter and dialogue with the rest of the world, thereby avoiding introversion and discrimination. This balance requires wisdom in distinguishing between essential traditions and adaptable practices, between fundamental principles and contextual expressions.

Dear friends,

Whether speaking of conflict and injustice, of economy or ecology, of discriminatory persecution or forced immigration, we are called to remember that none of us can any longer pretend to live as if the rest of the world does not exist. All of us have an ethical responsibility to consider carefully the way that we inhabit the world, the choices that we choose to make, and the lifestyles that we aspire to adopt. We can no longer live as isolated individuals, disengaged from events in our world. We are created for encounter; and we are judged based on our response to each encounter. We are relational beings and institutions; and, as such, we are

both responsible and accountable for one another. We are social beings; and, as such, we share the world and the planet's resources. In other words, we live in a global community. And, as such, we share common values, which transcend national, political, religious, racial or cultural boundaries. This ethical awareness does not merely depend on our religious convictions, but on the universal dignity of all people.

And here, the far-sighted and at the same time realistic perspective of religion can play a vital role. In a document entitled For the Life of the World: Toward an Orthodox Social Ethos, which was endorsed by the Holy and Sacred Synod of the Ecumenical Patriarchate exactly five years ago, we recognize that "Christian hope lies not in the kingdoms of this world, but in the Kingdom of God, not in sons of men, but in the Son of God who can liberate us from the practices and structures of sin, oppression, and violence that corrupt our fallen world. . . . In this world, we are strangers and pilgrims. But we can also enjoy a foretaste of that final redemption of all social order in God's Kingdom. Indeed, we have been entrusted with a sign to exhibit before the nations, by which to call them to a life of peace and charity under the shelter of God's promises." [Paragraph 8]

We can make a difference in the world. We can bring greater healing to its people. We can provide renewed hope if all of us—political and religious leaders—work together toward a shared goal: namely, to leave behind a better world for our children than what we inherited or created. A world where conflict and war are not the ways of resolving disputes and divisions; where all religions and all races are equally and indiscriminately respected; where people have enough love as the mother tongue of all humankind; and where nature's diversity is protected.

Thank you for your kind invitation and attention.
May God bless your deliberations and decisions!

STATEMENT
By His All-Holiness
Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew

Distinguished guests,
Dear friends,

Thank you for your thoughtful questions. I will try to integrate them and provide a holistic response.

(1) First, regarding the environmental question, as stewards of our planet, we have a sacred duty to protect creation in its entirety and all its creatures. Our unchecked

consumption and relentless pursuit of economic growth have led us to the brink of environmental catastrophe. It is time to reclaim our spiritual connection to the natural world and act before it is too late.

The environmental crisis calls for immediate address and urgent attention, because it constitutes a vital ethical and spiritual challenge, beyond any technical, political, or financial solutions. The Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church in 2016 recognised this crisis as being essentially rooted in human hearts. Religions should remind humanity that earth is a divine gift entrusted to our care for protection, not exploitation.



The principle of stewardship defines our relationship with the earth, affirming our role and responsibility as caretakers rather than owners of its resources for the

sake of future generations. This understanding is what guides our actions concerning environmental protection. We must therefore steadfastly promote sustainable living and environmental justice. And we must act with a sense of urgency on every level of social and civil life.

(2) Second, about the artificial intelligence issue, in light of these concerns, looking at the Framework Convention on Artificial Intelligence of the Council of Europe, the Ecumenical Patriarchate observes notable progress in addressing crucial ethical and social concerns raised by this fast-growing technology. Artificial intelligence has immense potential for positive transformation in environmental protection, education, and healthcare, offering innovative pathways to solve significant human problems. At the same time, from invasions of privacy to rising inequalities and possible compromise of institutions, this great tool also contains inherent risks.

The basic focus of the Convention on human rights, democratic values, and legal systems can be complemented by many Christian values and principles. Technical progress must support human development and serve the welfare of all. Therefore, implementation of artificial intelligence requires respect of individual dignity, safeguard of fundamental freedoms, and advancement of social equity. Inasmuch as they mandate careful study of artificial intelligence systems and their wider impact on society, the established standards of openness and responsibility of the Convention show great relevance.

The methodology of HUDERIA (Human Rights, Democracy, and Rule of Law Impact Assessment) provides a specific means for risk identification and reduction, calling for careful evaluation of artificial intelligence applications on the basis of ethical consequences and technical performance. In this context, the Orthodox Christian tradition would underline moral discernment and direction along with scientific research and development. The Ecumenical Patriarchate invites all nations to participate in this important project for the sake of supporting and shaping a technological growth that satisfies the universal needs of humankind, including the protection of human rights and religious freedom for those facing persecution and injustice, particularly religious minorities who have historically endured discrimination.

(3) Third, responding to the question about the Christians in the Middle East, we would like to draw your attention to a stark example of such persecution in the ongoing crisis faced by Christians in the Middle East. Many Christian communities there trace their roots to the first days of Christianity. Yet, today, their very existence is threatened in regions where they have lived for almost two millennia. For instance, once a thriving Christian community, Deir ez-Zor, Syria, now boasts

just seven elderly people, the meagre remains of three hundred families who fled elsewhere in 2013. Extremist forces have destroyed their holy sites, while efforts toward reconstruction have not brought back the displaced. Political instability only accentuates their suffering.

Moreover, while crucial, current humanitarian efforts concentrate more on meeting immediate needs than on addressing underlying causes. Recent events expose deliberate attacks on Christian communities all over northern Syria causing complete population displacement. Attacks on churches and personal threats cause the Coptic community of Egypt constant anxiety and insecurity. This emergency calls for coordinated responses including better international monitoring, all-encompassing protection plans, and continuous interfaith communication. Material aid for displaced persons must complement diplomatic initiatives ensuring religious freedom.



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On Monday in Strasbourg, Former Prime Minister of Greece Alexis Tsipras met with His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew on the sidelines of his participation and speech at the Plenary Session of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe.

Alexis Tsipras expressed his sincere condolences for the passing of the late Archbishop Anastasios of Albania, while they had the opportunity to discuss global developments, geopolitical instability, the rise of nationalism and the wars in the

region, particularly in Ukraine and the Middle East. They focused on the need to protect minorities and especially Christian communities in the Middle East.

In this context, Alexis Tsipras emphasised the even greater value of the Ecumenical Patriarch’s initiatives to promote interreligious dialogue and protect the environment.

Finally, they referred to the visit that the Ecumenical Patriarch had made to Lesvos in April 2016, giving, together with Pope Francis and the Archbishop of Athens, a message of support for the efforts made by the Greek people in the refugee situation, as well as a message of solidarity and humanism in the face of xenophobia and hatred.

Meeting with former Prime Minister of Greece George Papandreou



Former Prime Minister of Greece, Mr. George Papandreou met with His All-Holiness

Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew on the sidelines of his participation and speech at the Plenary Session of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe.

In a related post, Mr. Papandreou noted:
“We discussed the timeless mission and contribution of the institution of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, which constitutes an important pillar of unity for Orthodoxy and the modern world.



s decisive
ment and

unite us.”


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