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Address by His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew to the Participants of the 27th International Congress of the Society for the Law of the Eastern Churches at the “FANARION” Orthodox Christian Dialogue Centre (Budapest, September 4th, 2026)



Your Eminences and Graces,

Honorable President and Board of Directors of the Society for the Law of the Eastern Churches,

Esteemed Professors and Members of the Society,

Dear brothers and sisters in the Lord,

It is with particular joy that we meet you upon our arrival in this beautiful city of

Budapest, at the close of the proceedings of the 27th International Congress of the Society for the Law of the Eastern Churches. We thank most warmly the outgoing President of the Society, His Eminence Metropolitan Grigorios of Peristeri, for his kind invitation to address the Congress' participants in person and for his tireless efforts during his Presidential term. We also congratulate the Society's newly elected President, Professor Péter Szabó, the gracious host of this year's Congress, and we extend to him and the other new members of the Society's Board of Directors our Patriarchal benediction for a fruitful and edifying tenure.

The Society for the Law of the Eastern Churches has never been, for us, a distant or unfamiliar institution. It is, "flesh of our flesh." As a young Archimandrite, freshly returned from our doctoral studies in Eastern Canon Law at the Pontifical Oriental Institute in Rome, we had the privilege of numbering ourself among the founding members of the Society in 1969, and of serving as its first Vice-President. In the decades that followed, we had the joy of contributing scholarly papers to several of its International Congresses, and, more recently, in September of 2019, of returning to the halls of our alma mater to deliver the Keynote Address at the Congress marking the Society's fiftieth anniversary — an occasion we recall with particular emotion, surrounded as we were by the memory of our beloved professors, and above all of our own doctoral supervisor, the ever-memorable Father Ivan Žužek, to whom, together with the equally unforgettable Professor Hamilcar Alivizatos, the very founding of our Society is owed. It is precisely because of this life-long bond that we follow with such paternal affection and genuine interest the flourishing work of the Society.

We rejoice that your scholarly deliberations conclude with our meeting, on this day, which Divine Providence has appointed also for the inauguration here in this same city, of the Ecumenical Patriarchate's new Orthodox Christian Dialogue Centre, fruit of more than a decade hard labor of His Eminence Metropolitan Arsenios of Austria and Exarch of Hungary and of his worthy collaborators, whom we wholeheartedly congratulate for the completion of this marvelous edifice, to which we have given the name "Fanarion." Though it rises here in Budapest, this new Centre bears in its very name the living memory of the Phanar, the historic seat of the Church of Constantinople. The "Fanarion," just like the Phanar, is conceived by us as a permanent home for inter-Orthodox, inter-Christian and inter-faith encounter — a hearth where theologians, canonists, scholars, men and women of good will from every Christian confession, and indeed from other religious traditions, may gather in the spirit of dialogue, mutual respect, and the patient search for truth in love.

Among the foremost purposes we have envisioned for this Centre is precisely the

one which constitutes, according to Article 4 of our Society's Bylaws, one of its core missions: namely, to place the scholarly and canonical expertise of its members at the service of the Official Theological Dialogue between the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church. As we had occasion to remark at the Pontifical Oriental Institute in 2019, the ecclesial regulatory instruments of our two sister Churches are not mere "juridical walls" separating those within from those out of the Church, but essential components for the advancement of the ecumenical movement itself. It is our fervent hope that "Fanarion" will become, alongside our venerable Society, a true workshop of "juridical ecumenism," contributing the fruits of canonical scholarship to the deliberations of the Joint International Commission, and thereby serving, in its own modest but sincere way, the sacred cause of the restoration of full communion between our Churches.

We are especially gladdened by the choice of this Congress' theme, "The Bishop of Rome: Future Horizons from Ancient Traditions for Catholics and Orthodox," which touches upon matters that lie at the very heart of the Ecumenical Patriarchate's own theological concerns and canonical heritage. Allow us, thus, dear friends, to share with you certain thoughts occasioned by this theme of the utmost timeliness for the continuing theological dialogue between our two Churches.

It was the then Professor Joseph Ratzinger of the University of Regensburg, many years before he would himself be called to sit upon the Throne of Rome as Pope Benedict XVI, who formulated the now-celebrated principle: "Rome cannot demand from the East more of a doctrine of primacy than what was formulated and lived in the first millennium." With these words, the future Pope Benedict pointed the way back to the common patristic heritage of the undivided Church as the proper measure and criterion for any contemporary understanding of primacy. And he specified, moreover, that the essence of this primatial teaching of the first millennium had already been most eloquently expressed by our predecessor of blessed memory, Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagoras, when, on the occasion of the visit of Pope Paul VI to the Phanar, on July 25th, 1967, he addressed the Bishop of Rome as "successor to Peter, the first in honour among us, the one presiding in love."

This felicitous phrase of Patriarch Athenagoras — "the one presiding in love," an expression drawn from the ancient salutation of Saint Ignatius of Antioch to the Church of Rome — encapsulates, in a few words, the entire Orthodox understanding of the Roman primacy: a primacy of loving service, exercised within, and never above, the communion of sister Churches. Patriarch Athenagoras' understanding of this primacy was, in fact, inseparably linked to the ancient

institution of the Pentarchy of the Patriarchs, within which the Pope of Rome was recognized as “first among equals” — *primus inter pares* — precisely as the “Patriarch of the West.”

The institution of the Pentarchy — the five great ancient Sees of Rome, Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch, and Jerusalem — constituted, during the first Christian millennium, the very framework within which the unity of the universal Church found its most visible ecclesial expression. It was Anastasius the Librarian, the ninth-century scholar of Rome, who justified this sacred order by a most striking analogy: as the human body is governed harmoniously by its five senses, so also is the one Body of Christ, the Church, held together and rightly ordered through the concord of her five Patriarchal Sees. In the first millennium, this *communio patriarcharum* — this communion and concelebration of the Patriarchs, each presiding in his own place yet all bound together in the one faith and the one Eucharistic chalice — was, in truth, the most visible sign of the unity of the universal Church.

We are moved, on this occasion, to recall the teaching of our doctoral supervisor Father Žužek, who insisted, already half a century ago, that the Pope’s ancient title, “Patriarch of the West,” was by no means a mere honorific among others, but a title possessed of real substance, corresponding to concrete patriarchal rights, yet, as we would humbly add, not the expression of a universal and unmediated jurisdiction.

It was, therefore, with great sorrow that the Ecumenical Patriarchate received the decision of Pope Benedict XVI — whom our Modesty had, more recently, the singular honor of succeeding as a foreign associate member of the Académie des Sciences Morales et Politiques of the Institut de France in Paris — to remove from among his titles listed in the Pontifical Yearbook, the *Annuario Pontificio*, of the year 2006, the ancient and venerable title “Patriarch of the West,” while retaining such other titles as “Vicar of Christ” and “Supreme Pontiff of the Universal Church.” As the Ecumenical Patriarchate had occasion to formally state at the time, it is precisely the title “Patriarch of the West” alone, among the several papal titles, that finds its origin in, and its acceptance by, the undivided Church of the first millennium, and that remains organically bound to the ecclesiology of the Pentarchy; whereas titles implying a universal and unmediated jurisdiction sit uneasily beside the very notion of “sister Churches,” a notion so dear to both Patriarch Athenagoras and Pope Paul VI, and risk obscuring, rather than clarifying, the path toward the restoration of full ecclesial communion.

It was for this reason that our Modesty did not fail, in the years that followed, to

raise this matter directly with Pope Benedict's successor, the late Pope Francis, of blessed and eternal memory, who received our concerns with characteristic openness and graciousness, and who assured us of his intention to restore the title at the proper and opportune time. That time came, in God's providence, after the repose in the Lord of the Pope Emeritus Benedict, at the close of the year 2022; and in the *Annuario Pontificio* for the year 2024, the title "Patriarch of the West" was discreetly restored to its rightful place among the titles of the Bishop of Rome. We take this occasion to reiterate before you, esteemed friends and fellow laborers in the vineyard of Christian unity, the heartfelt satisfaction with which the Ecumenical Patriarchate received this development — a small but far from insignificant step, eloquent in its symbolism, and encouraging for the continuation of our theological dialogue.

We consider the restoration of this title to be a positive and hopeful sign, particularly in light of the enduring significance which the institution of the Pentarchy retains for the contemporary world and for the future of the Christian *oikoumene*. Precisely because we attach such importance to this ancient institution and to the pastoral responsibility which it entails, our Modesty, in the continuing absence of full communion with the Elder Rome, recently addressed a Letter to our beloved brothers, the Patriarchs of the other three ancient Thrones of the East — Alexandria, Antioch, and Jerusalem — inviting them to a brotherly Synaxis on the occasion of the Patronal feast of the Church of Constantinople, on November 30th, so that together, as the four remaining ancient Apostolic Thrones bound by the historical and theological debt bequeathed to us by the Holy Fathers and the Ecumenical Councils, we might conciliarly discern great and pressing challenges confronting the Christ-named people of God in our rapidly changing world.

In that Letter, we had occasion to observe that our Holy Orthodox Church, like a spiritual vessel navigating under divine protection the waves of history through the centuries, is borne up by these time-honored and elder Patriarchates of the East, which stand as unshaken pillars and unbroken foundations of the Apostolic Tradition, and which, together with the Church of Elder Rome, constituted in the first millennium the five-stringed lyre of the universal Church, actively participating in the Seven Holy Ecumenical Councils and “rightly dividing the word of truth.” It is with no small sorrow that we acknowledge how, deprived for now a full millennium of the fellow-journeying of the Church of Rome — on account of the rupture of communion, which, would that it had never occurred, tore asunder the seamless tunic of the Lord — we, the remaining ancient Thrones of the East, bear a correspondingly intensified pastoral responsibility: to affirm the historical continuity of the Apostolic Faith, and to bear unwavering witness to Orthodoxy.

Yet we wish equally to affirm, before this distinguished assembly of canonists and theologians, that this sorrow is inseparable from hope. We await, by grace and help from on high, the restoration of full communion with the Church of Rome within the one Body of the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church, so that the Pentarchy may once again be whole, and the “five-stringed lyre” of the universal Church may again resound in the fullness of its ancient harmony.

Dear friends, participants in this fruitful Congress, as your scholarly labors here in Budapest draw to a close and as we inaugurate this new house of dialogue, we wish to express, once again, our Patriarchal gratitude for your unwavering dedication to the service of Canon Law as a genuine instrument of Christian unity. May the Society for the Law of the Eastern Churches continue, for many years to come, to be a faithful and creative promoter of juridical ecumenism, and may the newly-inaugurated “Fanarion” become, in the years ahead, a true crossroads of encounter between Christians of every confession and, indeed, between all who seek God in sincerity.

We invoke upon all of you, upon your families, upon your academic institutions, and upon the continuing work of our Society, the rich grace and infinite mercy of our Lord and God and Savior Jesus Christ, through the intercessions of the two brother Apostles, St Peter the Coryphaeus and St Andrew the Protoklete.

Thank you for your kind attention! May God bless you all! Welcome to the Fanarion!

photo: Nikos Papachristou