

Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew: “I don’t have the right to take even one step back.”



Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew’s Interview in “Vima” (Greek Newspaper): Full Interview

Ecumenical Patriarch opened his heart and spoke about the autocephaly of the Church of Ukraine, the pandemic and its deniers. He declared that he will be vaccinated, doing it as an act of responsibility to his fellow human beings, and urged young people to be in solidarity.

The pandemic, young people, the situation within the Orthodox Churches, the “thorn” of Ukraine, the relations with the Moscow Patriarchate and the completion of 30 years since he ascended to the throne of the Archbishop of Constantinople, New Rome and Ecumenical Patriarch, were the main topics of the landmark interview with historic elaboration given to “Vima tis Kyriakis” by Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew.

In a rare soul-searching interview, foregoing formal archaisms, the First Primate of Orthodoxy characterized the denial of COVID-19 as unacceptable to the victims and their pain. He rejected the provocative attitude of some clergy against the pandemic, emphasizing that according to the New Testament “he who does not love his fellow human being, cannot love God.” He stated that he is deeply impressed by the self-sacrifice of doctors and nurses, and declared his decision to be vaccinated, calling on young people not to be afraid.

Sending clear messages within the Orthodox world, he emphasized categorically that “there is no schism in Orthodoxy.” His message to the Patriarchs and Archbishops of the Churches and especially to Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia is: “I cannot allow Orthodox Ecclesiology to be distorted on the altar of base motives. I don’t have the right to take even one step back. The word of Truth is ‘sharper than any knife.’ There is the witness of history, the sources, the records,

the facts. It is distorted by money, intimidation, propaganda and midsummer night's dreams....”

Characterizing the accusations of papal pretensions that are attributed to him as unfounded, he asked: “Is it papism to shoulder the responsibilities of my ministry?” Making clear that the real purpose behind the attacks on how autocephaly was granted to Ukraine is “to remove these unique responsibilities from the Throne of Constantinople so that they fall into other hands.... I cannot abdicate the responsibilities bequeathed to me by my predecessors,” he stated. He also spoke of those who “flirt with the federalization of Orthodoxy according to Protestant models.”

A snapshot of the Primate of the Church of Moscow raises a clear question: “Who, then, behaves like the ‘Pope of Orthodoxy?’ The one who remains faithful to her tradition or the one who claims for himself a status that he never had and is never going to acquire?”

VIMA: Your All Holiness, the whole world is plagued by the pandemic. And yet there are people, among them Church members – clergy and laity – who deny the disease, while thousands of doctors and nurses are fighting for their lives to help the sick. What is your opinion?

Patriarch Bartholomew: “The pandemic changed our social life, our daily life, our participation in the life of the Church. All this time we are shocked by the sufferings of countless of our fellow human beings and are impressed by the self-sacrifice of doctors and nurses. That is why it is unacceptable, in the face of so many victims and so much pain, to have people who deny the reality of the pandemic, who consider it a fabrication of “various circles.” It is even more provocative when such views are expressed by Christians, often by clergy, who self-proclaim to be defenders of a God of their own. New Testament affirms that whoever does not love man, cannot love God.

They are indifferent to the protection of fellow human beings. The rejection of the mask and all precautionary measures does not arise simply from ignorance but from the necrosis of love within them. Science, when it opens auspicious prospects for the future of mankind, is a gift from heaven. Our faith certainly is not affected when we follow the instructions of experts. Nor do the restrictions on participation in the Services diminish the importance of the Church and what is conducted in it

for the life of the faithful. Protective measures are not directed against the Church. They protect the faithful, who, like everyone else, are just as vulnerable to the virus.”

VIMA: Will you get the coronavirus vaccine?

Patriarch Bartholomew: “Of course I will get the vaccine. Besides, I think this is required based on my age. I am close to 81, so I belong to the age group that needs to be vaccinated. But it is not only a matter of necessity or choice, but also a responsibility to fellow human beings. That is why I hope that a large part of the world’s population will soon be vaccinated for the spread of the deadly virus to stop. Of course, until then, we must all strictly observe the protective measures so as not to mourn more victims.”

VIMA: In the Orthodox Church there have been various tendencies and thoughts about the concerns expressed by some about the dangers of transmission of the virus during Divine Liturgy. Do you think that there could be a commonly accepted response that is in line with the findings of science, the sensitivities of all believers and the dynamic tradition of the Church?

Patriarch Bartholomew: “This is not the first time in her history that our Church faces a pandemic and insecurities caused by it. At the beginning of the health crisis, we addressed a letter to our brother Orthodox Primates asking them to communicate their own thoughts on the issue. Their positions coincided with those of the Ecumenical Patriarchate. Thus, in June, the Holy Synod reminded everyone that the Church remains steadfast and immovable in her teaching regarding the essence of the Sacrament of Holy Communion, which is non-negotiable.”

VIMA: Your All-Holiness, it has been two years since you officially handed over the Tomos of Autocephaly to the Church of Ukraine. How do you assess the course of the newly founded Church? It is argued in some quarters that the decision of the Ecumenical Throne to grant the request of the Ukrainian Orthodox put the unity of Orthodoxy to the test. Are you worried about the pan-Orthodox unity?

Patriarch Bartholomew: “The unity of Orthodoxy is not being tested because of the

Ecumenical Patriarchate's response to the request of the Ukrainian Orthodox. Ukrainian Autocephaly was an act of responsibility on the part of the Mother Church towards millions of our Orthodox brothers and sisters who were outside the Church through no fault of their own. And, of course, it was not, as Russian propaganda accuses her, the serving of political expediencies and/or even geopolitical interests. Two years later, we are glad to see the new Church grow and His Beatitude Metropolitan Epiphaniy of Kyiv contribute to the normalization of the ecclesiastical life there, with his gentle character and fraternal initiatives.

We read a number of allegations of violence by extremist groups against Orthodox in Ukraine. If, of course, such actions are true, no matter where they come from and to the detriment of whoever they are, we have condemned them from the outset, as we have condemned all kinds of provocations aimed at creating a climate of tension among the people of Ukraine, but also at defaming the Ecumenical Patriarchate.

In the Ukrainian case we did the same as in the other cases of concession of autocephaly. We followed the centuries-old tradition of Orthodoxy established by ecclesiastical practice. Let me remind you that Constantinople had already granted - before Ukraine - autonomy to nine other local Churches. Today, some, for selfish purposes of course, deny this self-evident fact. What recklessness indeed! Those who question the rights and responsibilities of the Ecumenical Patriarchate are, in essence, questioning their very existence and identity, the very structure of Orthodoxy."

VIMA: What are your feelings about the stance of the Moscow Patriarchate? And what are your intentions and initiatives belonging to the First of Orthodoxy, as is commonly accepted, for the healing of the condition?

Patriarch Bartholomew: "Mrs. Antoniadou, initially and because there has been rife speculation about it, which is mainly spread by individuals and circles of the Russian Church, we must make it clear that there is no schism in Orthodoxy. There is a different view on the part of the Church of Russia on the occasion of the Ukrainian issue, which was manifested by the cessation of communion with the Mother Church of Constantinople, and then with other Churches that recognized the autocephaly of the new Church. In our estimation, this was a wrong action of the sister Church of Russia. Therefore, I repeat, there is no schism in Orthodoxy. There was a problem. For three decades, Moscow has been willfully blind to the

tragic situation in Ukraine. Essentially, it prevented a solution from being found so that Kyiv, detached from the Church of Constantinople, could not escape its control, taking advantage of circumstances and situations.

The granting of Autocephaly to the Church of Ukraine by the Ecumenical Patriarchate was, therefore, not only ecclesiologically and canonically correct, but also the only realistic solution to the problem. Consequently, only the recognition of the Ukrainian Autocephaly by all the Orthodox Churches, and not any other stance, be it waiting or calls for pan-Orthodox meetings or endless and countless interviews in the media, replete with offensive characterizations, contribute to pan-Orthodox unity.

As far as I am concerned, as Ecumenical Patriarch, I cannot allow Orthodox Ecclesiology to be distorted on the altar of base motives. I don't have the right to take even one step back. Courtesy is of no use when Theology, the order, and the sacred tradition of our Church are at stake. "I cannot allow Orthodox Ecclesiology to be distorted on the altar of base motives. I don't have the right to take even one step back. The word of Truth is 'sharper than any knife.' There is the witness of history, the sources, the records, the facts. It is distorted by money, intimidation, propaganda and midsummer night's dreams. Oh no! Let us stand aright! "

VIMA: How do you respond to those who accuse you of behaving like the Pope of the East and Orthodoxy?

Patriarch Bartholomew: "One more unfounded accusation. Is it papism to shoulder the responsibilities of my ministry? Did they just hear about these responsibilities? Didn't they read about them in Ecclesiastical History? It is said that ecclesiastically the role of Constantinople ended with the Fall of Constantinople. There is no greater inaccuracy! All of today's autocephalies were granted in the post-Fall period. When the Ecumenical Patriarchate was giving autocephaly to one or the other Church, why did they not accuse it of 'papal pretensions?'

At some point, the lies and the propaganda must stop before the truth of the Church! In Orthodoxy there is no Pope, no papacy. Those who make this accusation want to project the false view that the Ecumenical Patriarchate allegedly violates the canonical tradition of Orthodoxy, which of course they themselves not only do not respect or recognize, but ignore. They interpret the holy canons as they please, especially the ones that secure the responsibilities of the Ecumenical Throne, while

they introduce new ecclesiology and use the Holy Eucharist like a tool.

So let's be clear. In fact, the problem is not the Ukrainian autocephaly nor are the supposedly non-existent or invalid ordinations of the Ukrainian Hierarchy, which some people deliberately invoke. The goal is to remove these unique responsibilities from the Throne of Constantinople and transfer them to other hands. From my standpoint, then, you understand that I cannot, on the one hand, abdicate the responsibilities that my predecessors bequeathed to me, through the praxis of the Church, and on the other hand, allow, as this is also my responsibility, the spiritual slippage of those who flirt with the federalization of the Orthodox Church, according to Protestant standards.

Who, then, behaves like the 'Pope of Orthodoxy?' The one who remains faithful to her tradition or the one who claims for himself a status that he never had and is not going to acquire?"

VIMA: Year 2021 marks 30 years since your election to the Ecumenical Throne. During this time, the Church and the Ecumenical Patriarchate were tested many times. What do you consider to be the milestones of your patriarchy?

Patriarch Bartholomew: "From the moment I entered the sacred ranks of the clergy in 1961 until today, the content and purpose of my life has been the ministry of the Church. I am convinced that everything I did was not my own work but a gift of God's grace. I am traversing the 30th year of my humble patriarchy. During these thirty years many things happened: The preparation of the Holy and Great Synod of the Orthodox Church, which took place in Crete in 2016, the reconstitution of our Metropolises in Asia Minor and East Thrace and also the creation of new ones in different parts of the world, due to missionary activity and population movements, our regular pilgrimages to Cappadocia, Panagia Soumela and all the sanctified lands of our fathers, the revival of the expatriate education in Imvros and the support of the Greek population of Constantinople, as well as the innumerable initiatives of our Patriarchate all over the world, such as for the protection of the natural environment, inter-Christian and inter-religious dialogue, etc. I hope to God that He will make us worthy to experience the reopening of the Theological School of Halki, which has remained unjustly closed since 1971."

VIMA: Year 2020 was dedicated by the Patriarchate to the youth. The year was marked by isolation, online communication and fear. What is your message to young people experiencing the specter of financial crisis and the uncertainty of live for the future?

Patriarch Bartholomew: “I share in the anxiety of young people. After all, I was once young myself, with little money in my pocket but with many dreams in my heart. The beginning of each person’s path is often difficult. We need confidence in our strengths and a constant effort to improve. Today, the insecurity of young people is growing, due to both the pandemic and the economic consequences this will have.

Beloved children, do not be afraid; never be afraid in your life, no matter how many difficulties arise. Have faith, acquire means and education, be determined, be patient and always be in solidarity with each other, but also with those who are in a more difficult predicament than you. Solidarity is the antidote to any personal and social crisis.”

VIMA: Wishes for the New Year?

Patriarch Bartholomew: “On the occasion of this interview and in the festive holiday spirit, I wish the publishers, the readers of the newspaper” To Vima, “and everyone that the new year of 2021 be peaceful, joyful, and creative; a year of liberation from the deadly pandemic and full of the blessings and gifts of the God of love. Let’s stay united and in solidarity to overcome the effects of the unprecedented health crisis. May Christ give us strength; such strength that only the incarnate God can give to the suffering human being and the whole of creation. From the Great Church and the ever-bright Phanar, many blessed years!”