

Meeting of the Ecumenical Patriarch with the religious leaders of Finland



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On Monday, 11 September 2023, His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew met with representatives of the religious communities of Finland. During the meeting, at the request of His All-Holiness, a minute's silence was observed in memory of the victims of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001.

In fact, during his important speech, the Ecumenical Patriarch emphasised the value of dialogue between religions and the promotion of peaceful coexistence. "As religious leaders, we must be bridge-builders, seek the truth and support dialogue", he underlined, among other things, while assuring that the Ecumenical Patriarchate remains committed to the promotion of ecumenical and interreligious dialogue. Finally, the Patriarch wished "that our collective efforts may lead us to a brighter and better future".

The following is the entire speech of His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew in English:

Your Eminence, Archbishop Leo of Helsinki and All Finland,

Your Eminences, Excellencies and Graces,

Distinguished Guests,

Honored Participants,

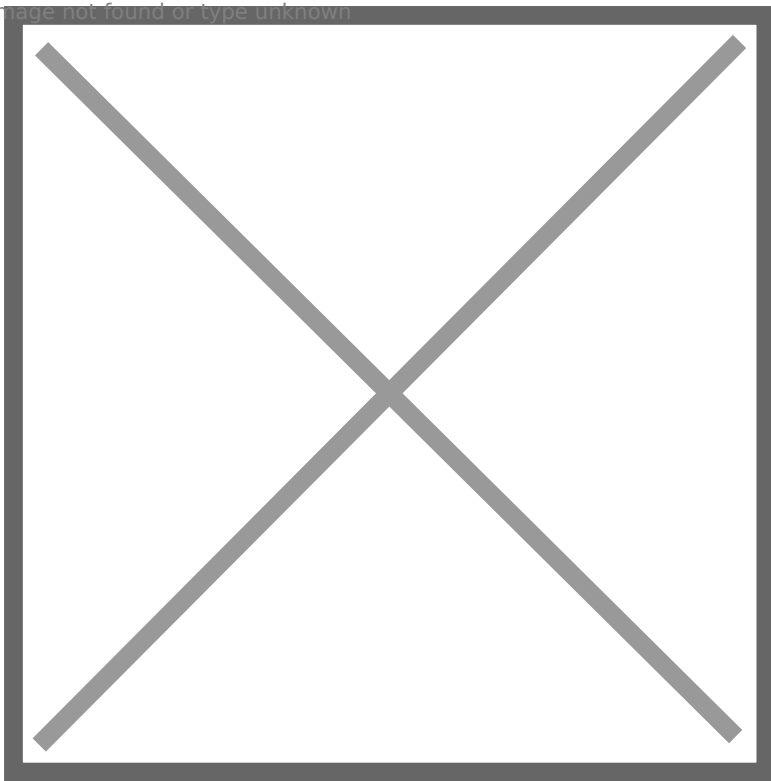
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Dear Friends,

It is an honor to stand before you today, surrounded by so many representatives of the interfaith community in Finland, on this significant day, September 11, a day that carries both the weight of history and the hope for a harmonious future. We invite you to keep a moment of silence as we continue to mourn those who died during the terrorist attacks on this terrible day, twenty-two years ago.

(Moment of Silence)

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In November 2021, we traveled to New York City, walking the sacred ground where so many lost their lives, to bless the opening of the doors of Saint Nicholas Greek Orthodox Church and National Shrine, the only place of worship at Ground Zero, a house of Christian worship, but also a place that promotes inclusion, tolerance, and mutual understanding among all peoples of faith and good will. While Orthodoxy has a long experience of cohabitation with other religions and various Christian denominations, this experience has not always been peaceful. The rise of nationalism during the second half of the 19th century prepared the stage for the global geopolitical forces that endangered the 20th century, and gave way to the upsurge of deadly fundamentalism in the first quarter of the 21st century. A series of historical events have shaped the Orthodox relationship to religious pluralism, redefining our worldwide religious landscape, as well as our understanding of the dialogical role of faith-based organizations on the global scene. As the Encyclical of the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church, in June 2016, said:

“Honest interfaith dialogue contributes to the development of mutual trust and to the promotion of peace and reconciliation. The Church strives to make “the peace from on high” more tangibly felt on earth. True peace is not achieved by force of arms, but only through love that “does not seek its own” (1 Cor 13.5). The oil of faith must be used to soothe and heal the wounds of others, not to rekindle new

fires of hatred.” (Par.17).

We extend our heartfelt gratitude to our hosts in Finland and to all of you who have gathered here in the spirit of peace and dialogue. We wholeheartedly congratulate the organizers and the panelists of this round table discussion for having the courage and vision to develop this essential initiative in the promotion of interfaith dialogue.

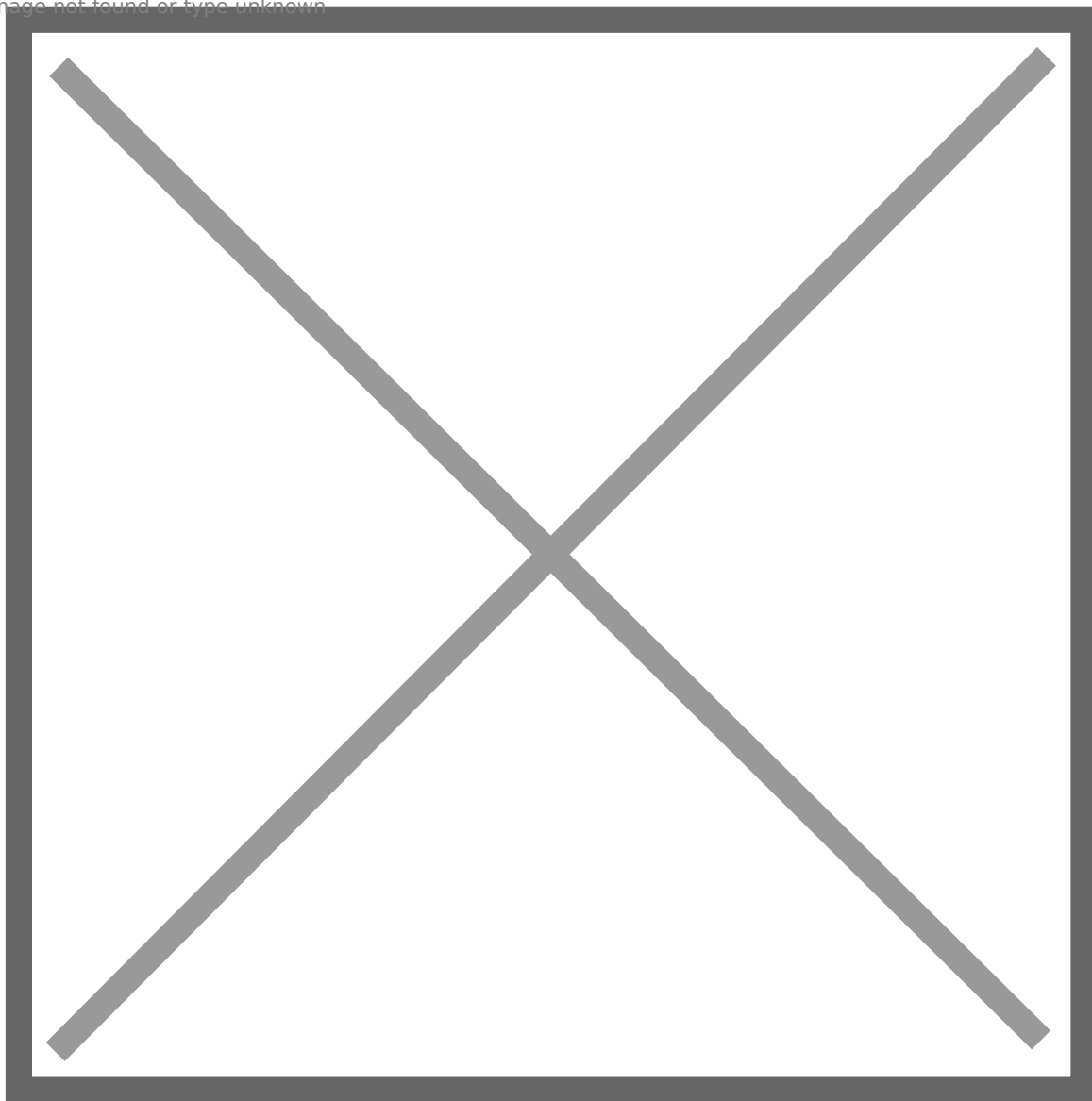
Our world, though diverse and vibrant, is often marred by divisions, misunderstandings, and conflicts. The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, have reshaped the perception and role of religions on the global scene. They have operated as a powerful return of religions in international affairs. In response to the idea that people kill in the name of God, is the reality that people of faith, coming from various religious traditions, can come together and promote peaceful coexistence. In the face of these challenges, the Ecumenical Patriarchate has long championed the principles of ecumenical and interfaith dialogues as pathways toward healing and reconciliation. Today, we wish to share with you the Mother Church of Constantinople’s journey in the ecumenical movement and its commitment to fostering meaningful dialogues with our brothers and sisters of the Abrahamic faith traditions.

Faith in Dialogue

We must have faith in dialogue itself. Any encounter and every dialogue require risk at both the individual and the community level. All dialogue is personal, since it involves the interaction of unique, irreplaceable persons, Christian or not, whose personhood is intricately connected to their individual, social, cultural and religious specificities. Opposition to ecumenical or interreligious dialogue usually comes from fear and ignorance, lack of knowledge or exposure to religious diversity. Interreligious dialogue, for example, recognizes the differences among religious traditions and promotes peaceful coexistence and cooperation between people and cultures. Interreligious dialogue does not mean denying one's own faith, but rather adjusting one's perspective towards the other. It can thus also heal prejudices and contribute to a mutual comprehension and peaceful conflict resolution. Bias and prejudice are rooted in misrepresentation of the Other – that is why dialogue is essential, as it can chase away fear and suspicion; it is essential for peace but is only effective if it is undertaken in a spirit of inclusion, mutual trust, and respect. Dialogue defines our relationship to the world through its difference from ourselves. This relationship is perfectly captured by a recent document blessed by the Ecumenical Patriarchate titled *For the Life of the World: Toward a Social Ethos of the Orthodox Church* that reads:

“Knowing that God reveals himself in countless ways and with boundless inventiveness, the Church enters into dialogue with other faiths prepared to be amazed and delighted by the variety and beauty of God's generous manifestations of divine goodness, grace, and wisdom among all peoples.” (par.55).

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The Ecumenical Movement: A Quest for Christian Unity through Dialogue

Inter-Christian dialogue is a journey towards reconciliation. The ecumenical movement, that symbolized this effort, is a beacon of hope, a call to transcend our confessional differences in the pursuit of Christian unity in the communion of Churches. The Ecumenical Patriarchate, as one of the oldest and most respected centers of Orthodoxy, has been a steadfast advocate for unity among Christians from the very beginning of the ecumenical movement. Since the encyclical and synodal letter issued in 1920, the Church of Constantinople has sought to employ its humble resources toward facilitating fraternal dialogue and communion in the hope of restoring Christian unity. The ecumenical movement gained momentum in the wake of the devastation of the two World Wars in the last century. In the aftermath of these horrific conflicts, and through initiatives such as the creation of the World Council of Churches ("WCC") in 1948, we have endeavored to promote

cooperation, understanding, and common action among various Christian churches. Our commitment to dialogue doesn't dilute our unique traditions but enriches our collective spiritual heritage. The 75th anniversary of global ecumenical engagement of the WCC, that we celebrate this year, should also serve as a milestone on our journey towards unity. A couple of months back, we were in Estonia, at the 16th General Assembly of the Conference of European Churches, and we were reflecting on the ever-changing ecumenical reality of the Christian landscape on the continent. Despite possible alliances of circumstances motivated by what we called "new ecumenism", a rapprochement of Christian churches around more traditional values is not enough. Indeed, the polarization of today's society, which is represented by the expression of "culture wars", constitutes a real challenge to our ecumenical vision and mission.

The future of the ecumenical movement resides in "the dialogue of love" through the creation of new signs and common actions. We need to open our hearts to the language of dialogue. This is the ultimate condition for the restoration of unity among Christians which has been particularly true during our ecumenical journey reinitiated over fifty years ago with our Sister Church of Rome in the solemn context of the Vatican II Council. The dialogue of love initiated by Pope Paul VI and Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagoras during their historic encounter in 1964 in Jerusalem and the joint lifting the year after of the 1054 anathemas allowed the dialogue to evolve into a "dialogue of truth." In 1979, the official theological and international dialogue between our two churches started. We should mention the recent and important document issued in Alexandria, Egypt, on June 7, 2023, by the Joint International Commission for Theological Dialogue between the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church on "Synodality and Primacy in the Second Millennium and Today." This document offers us an important lesson which is encapsulated in the very last sentence of the document: "Observing the mandate of our Lord to love one another as he has loved us (Jn 13:34), it is our Christian duty to strive for unity in faith and life." (par.5.6)

A Journey of Dialogue: Embracing Our Jewish Brothers and Sisters

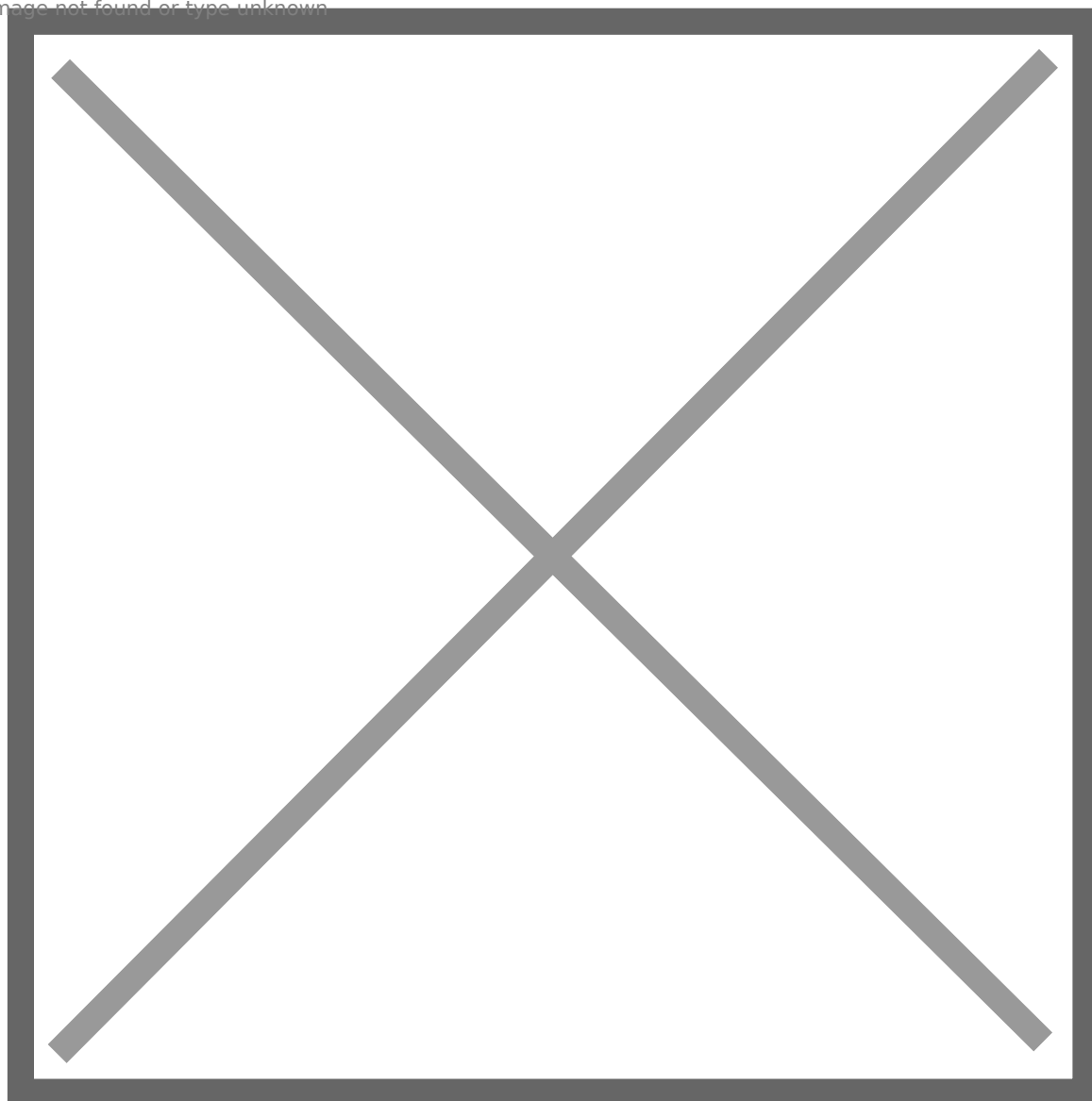
The dialogue between Judaism and Orthodox Christianity is a testament to our shared Abrahamic roots. It is a dialogue that seeks to transcend historical conflicts and foster mutual respect. The Ecumenical Patriarchate has engaged in meaningful conversations with Jewish leaders, recognizing the importance of understanding each other's traditions and histories. Together, we strive to combat prejudice, and especially antisemitism, promote tolerance, and work towards a world where harmony prevails over discord.

As Orthodox Christians, we stand together with our Jewish brothers and sisters and condemn antisemitism and all acts of bigotry and hatred, whenever and wherever they occur. As such, we follow the witness of countless Orthodox Christians, who risked their lives during the Second World War to save the lives of their Jewish neighbors. It is our belief that every life is precious. The Jewish community has recognized many of these Orthodox Christians who aided Jews in their time of need as "Righteous among the Nations," and has had them commemorated at the Yad Vashem World Holocaust Remembrance Center in Jerusalem, which we had the honor of visiting.

As a Church, the memory of these great men and women of our faith motivates us to be worthy successors to their examples. You all know their names: Metropolitan Chrysostomos of Zakynthos, Saint Mary Skobtsova, Saint Dimitri Klepinin, and the Reverend Cyrille Argenti.

The Ecumenical Patriarchate and the International Jewish Committee on Interreligious Consultations have enjoyed more than forty years of fruitful collaboration, understanding, and dialogue between Judaism and Orthodox Christianity. Their last meeting, in December 2022 in Vienna has shown our continued commitment to this historic academic consultation and our desire to strengthen our relationship and knowledge of the Other.

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Bridges of Understanding: The Ecumenical Patriarchate and Islam

In a world often marked by tensions between different religious communities, the Ecumenical Patriarchate has taken steps to build bridges of understanding with our Muslim partners. We firmly believe that at the heart of Islam and Orthodox Christianity lies the shared call to compassion, justice, and peace. Through dialogues and joint initiatives, we aim to emphasize our common values and address the misunderstandings that have sowed seeds of discord.

Because of our local context in Turkey, Islam is not a foreign religion. This long-standing tradition of dialogue with which many Church Fathers have been engaged, from Saint John Damascus to Saint Gregory Palamas, to Saint Gennadiow Scholarios, doesn't shy away from theological disagreement on the mystery of the incarnation or the theology of the Holy Trinity. However, the Orthodox Church has

engaged the profound teachings of Islam in its multiple traditions, acknowledging points of contact and commonalities around the question of the community or Ummah, sharing a common birth place in the Middle East, supporting the importance of prayer and asceticism and struggling to discern the will of God in all things. These premises invite Islam and Orthodoxy into an intimate conversation of the advancement of peace and justice. This is why we were shocked and profoundly opposed to what happened in Sweden and Denmark, earlier this year, with the burning of the Quran. These acts are not only unacceptable, but they demonstrate a lack of respect and tolerance which are a shame to our European civilization as it magnifies hatred and prejudices. The duty of all religious leaders is to preach respect for the sacredness of the members of different religions.

On the contrary, we tried to convey the very idea of peace during an important Conference in Cairo, in 2017, upon the invitation of the Grand Imam of Al Azhar Mosque, Sheikh Ahmed Mohamed el-Tayyib. While addressing the crucial functions of religion: to connect humanity, to relate to the identity of peoples, to create greater cultural achievements and to be a factor of peace, we also found important to address the issue of violence accomplished in the name of religion. We reminded participants that the ongoing outburst of religious fundamentalism and terrible acts of violence in the name of religion, contributes to the modern critiques of religion and faith, thus rendering the identification of religion with its negative aspects. Fundamentalism turns faith into an ideology. The truth is that violence is the negation of fundamental religious beliefs and doctrine. True faith does not release humans from being responsible for the world, for respecting human dignity and for struggling to achieve justice and peace. On the contrary, it strengthens the commitment of human action, it enlarges our witness for freedom and human core values.

This experience is intimately connected to the events we commemorate today since it presented religion as a threat to humanity and a threat to truth itself. For centuries, people of the three Abrahamic traditions have lived shoulder to shoulder and shared the same region finding on the shared experience of coexistence the horizon of their peace and unity. This experience, which is not always an easy one, shows that various religious traditions can serve as bridge-builders between people and promote peace and mutual understanding, tolerance and knowledge through their commitment to dialogue.

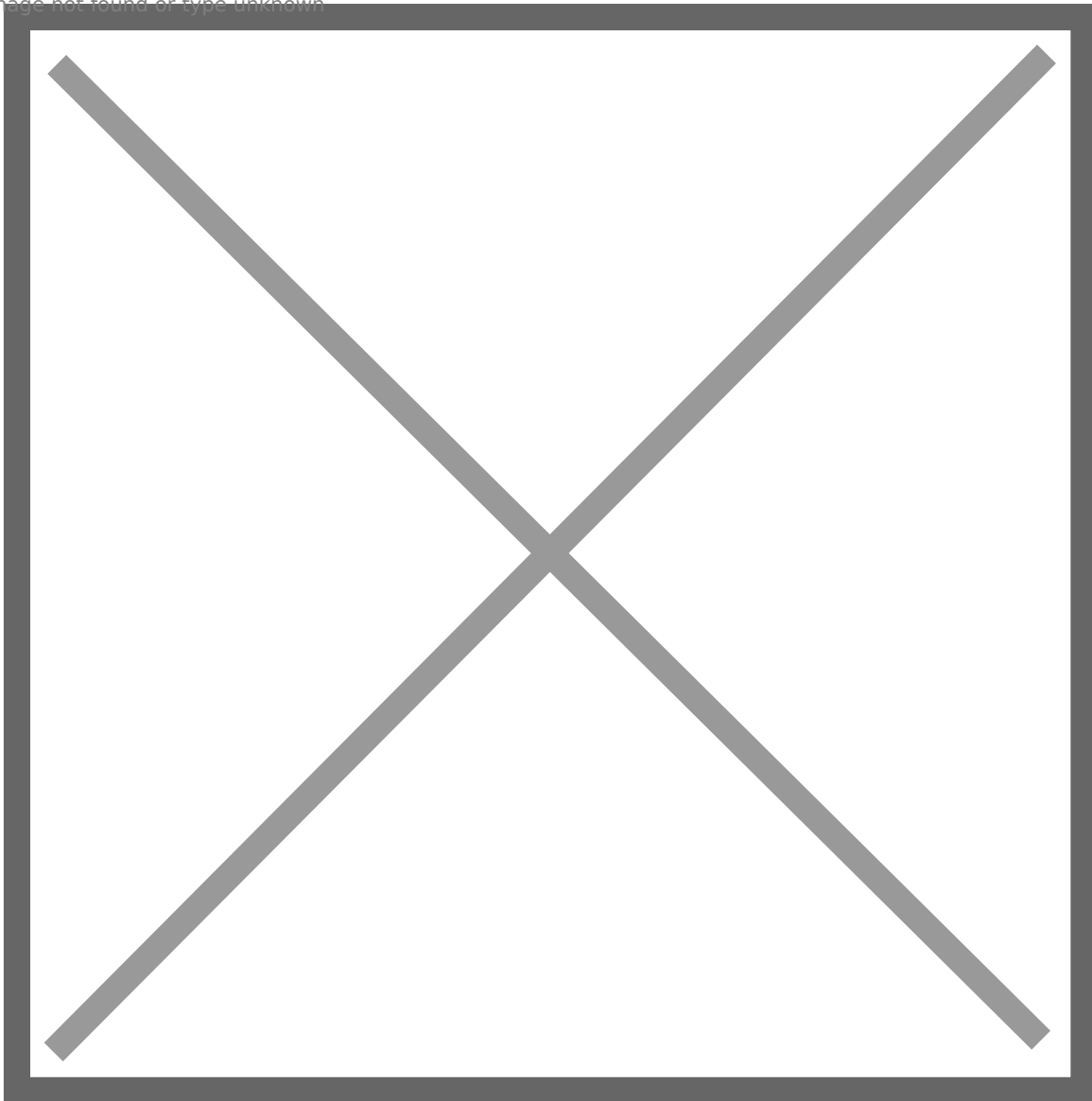
Environmental Stewardship: A Common Cause

In our pursuit of peace, we must also recognize the urgent need to address global challenges that affect us all. The environment, a gift entrusted to humanity by the

Creator, is under threat due to our unsustainable practices. The Ecumenical Patriarchate has consistently raised its voice in defense of the environment, urging religious leaders and communities to become good stewards of creation. Our shared commitment to safeguarding the planet can serve as a powerful unifying force.

A couple of weeks ago, we convened an international conference in Constantinople-Istanbul, of Christian and Muslim leaders for this exact purpose of focusing on the environmental crisis as a shared concern for all religions. It is our urgent duty to unite our voices, at this pivotal crossroads for humanity, and to serve as moral leaders by using our faith traditions as a compass for the restoration and protection of the natural environment. As we have repeated tirelessly for decades: “To commit a crime against the natural world is a sin.”

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The role of religious leaders is to inspire and to lead in words and deeds. As such,

we are not only equipped to respond to this call, but we have the fantastic opportunity to create the necessary echo chamber for these global concerns. After all, the ecological crisis is a global challenge that can only be addressed through international as well as interfaith collaboration and commitment. Looking back at our scriptures, our traditions, our spiritual teachings, we cannot avoid our duty toward the environment as the authentic expression of our love and care for our neighbor. What interfaith dialogue helps us to do is to create this unique space where the commonalities of our religious wisdom leads a collective environmental awakening.

In our recent Patriarchal Message for the beginning of the Ecclesiastical year and solemn day of prayers for the natural environment, on September 1, 2023, we underlined the necessity of treating the environmental crisis as a struggle for human rights. The Patriarchal Message reads:

“The consequences of the ecological crisis must be confronted above all on the level of human rights. It is self-evident that these rights, in all their aspects and dimensions, comprise an undivided unity and that their protection is inseparable.”

The dialogue and connection created by various religious traditions in response to the environmental crisis, from the escalation of climate change to the destruction of biodiversity, is a crucial moment in our history as humanity. Our ability of being agents of change and transformation on both individual and collective levels bears witness to our faith and the commonalities that bring us together in a spirit of responsibility and tolerance. Our planet is the sacred space where we fulfill our religious mission: to serve our neighbors as ourselves conscious of the immediate connection between ecological and social issue, especially since the destruction of the environment directly affects the most vulnerable among us.

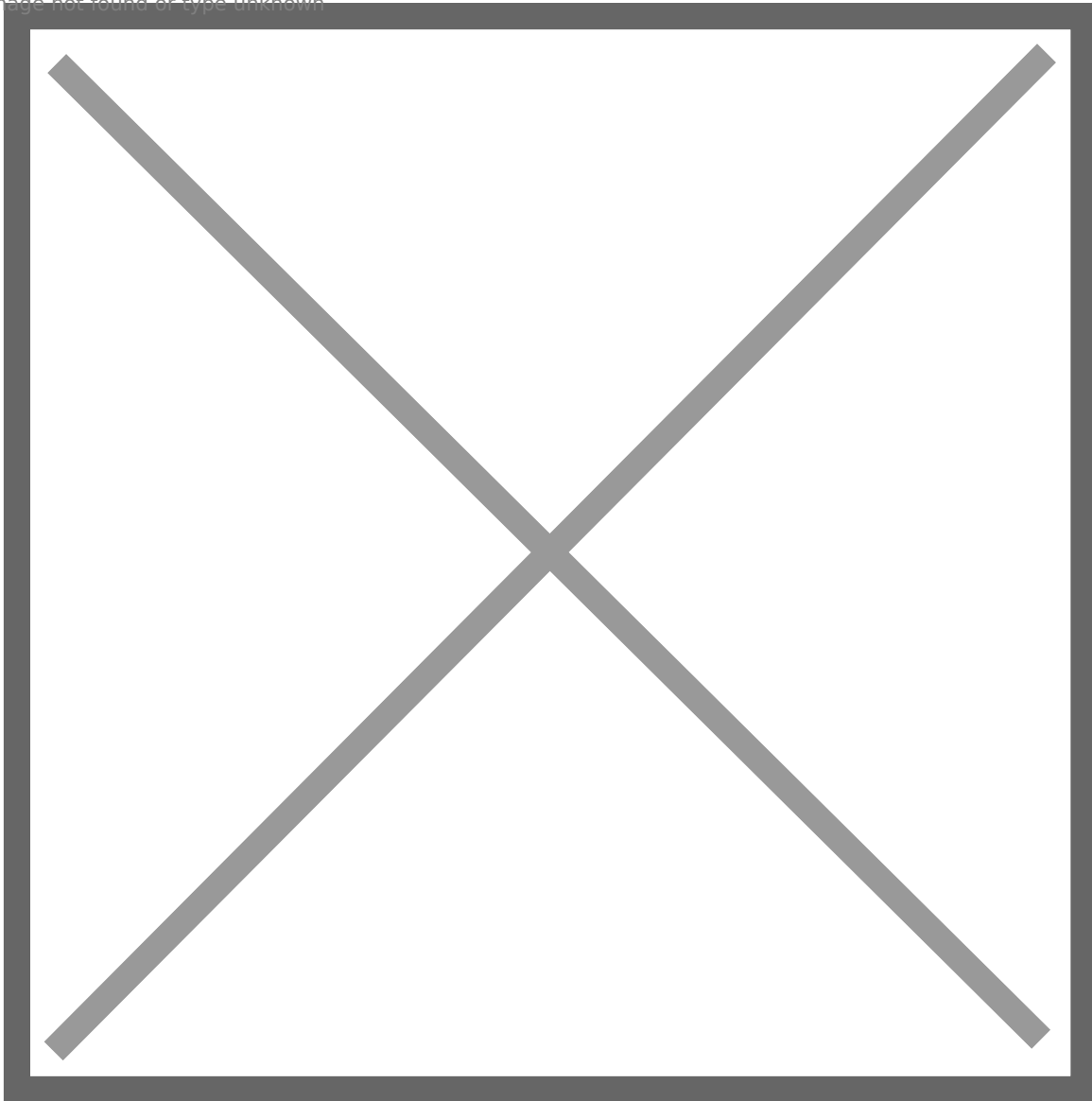
Let's make our dialogue an opportunity to inspire this generation and its children to see God at work through the common recognition of our shared responsibility. By working together at the protection of the natural environment, calling for changes and transformations in all our communities and the broader society, we send a message of peace and celebrate our diversity by safeguarding God's gift to us, this beautiful but wounded planet.

Ladies and Gentlemen, dear Friends,

The Ecumenical Patriarchate intends to lead by example, demonstrating how religious leaders should be part of an advancement that promotes peaceful

coexistence, justice and equity. Orthodoxy has found in dialogue the power of coexistence, overcoming its own struggles by relieving emergency situations, responding to crises and promoting an ethos of solidarity. We have been at the forefront of organizing international interreligious conferences, aware that the tool of a genuine dialogue can help prevent the terrible abuse of religions by fundamentalists and extremists, as well as confront intolerance and prejudices.

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As religious leaders, we need to be bridge-builders, truth-seekers and dialogue-promoters. Throughout our tenure as Ecumenical Patriarch we have valued these principles not only for ourselves, but also for our Church and for the world at large.

In conclusion, the Ecumenical Patriarchate remains dedicated to fostering ecumenical and interfaith dialogue as vital instruments of 21st century world

civilization. As we remember the events of September 11, its many victims and its terrible effect against the environment, let us honor the memory of those who suffered by committing themselves to building a world symbolized by respect, empathy, and cooperation. May our collective efforts guide us toward a brighter and better future.

Thank you for your kind attention.

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