

Builder of Bridges: Academic Oration in Honour of His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I

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“Who will be a leader, let him be a bridge!” Such was the exclamation of Bran the Blessed, the mighty king of Welsh mythology, when he discovered that his enemy had destroyed bridges to the place where his sister was held hostage. Putting words into action, king Bran, “a being of gigantic size,” turned himself into a bridge by laying across the raging river, allowing his troops to cross over on his back.²

The words of Bran the Blessed, which eventually became a proverb, are most fitting to introduce the person we are honouring today. His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I, like the Welsh giant, might be larger than life. Bearing a title that dates back to the sixth century, he is the primary spiritual

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¹ The Oration was delivered on the occasion of the conferment of the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy (*Honoris Causa*) by the University of Malta on His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I, in the presence of His Excellency the President of Malta, His Grace the Archbishop of Malta, the Honourable Minister of Education, the University Rector, the University Academic Body and other distinguished guests.

² See Thomas Wentworth Higginson, *Tales of the Enchanted Islands of the Atlantic* (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1898), 32-34.

leader of three hundred million Orthodox Christians worldwide and the “first amongst equals” in a confederation of independent Orthodox Churches. Yet, resembling the legendary king, he uses his influential transnational position, not to show off, but to show the way, not to divide and conquer, but to humbly build bridges for and between others. As a bishop of his Church lately observed, “for Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, there is no gulf too wide or a bridge too far that he is not willing to traverse in order to pursue the love of Christ for each and every human being.”³

Being a builder of bridges: this is how Bartholomew has interpreted and lived his role of Ecumenical Patriarch since his election to the See of Constantinople in October 1991. The strategic locus of his Church and his City, along with his warm personality, academic formation and personal experiences, provides him with a unique perspective on such a mission. Born Demetrios Archondonis on the island of Imvros (today, Gokceada, Turkey), in 1940, he was educated in Turkey and pursued doctoral and postdoctoral studies in Italy (Rome), Switzerland (Bossey) and Germany (Munich). He speaks modern Greek, Turkish, Italian, German, French and English, and is fluent in classical Greek and Latin. Prior to his election, he served as professor of canon law and assistant dean at the Theological Academy of Halki (1968-1972), as personal secretary to Patriarch Demetrios I (1972-1990), as metropolitan bishop of Philadelphia (1973) and of Chalcedon (1990), and as chancellor of the Holy Synod. He sat on the central and executive committees of the World Council of Churches (WCC), and for eight years served as vice moderator of its Faith and Order Commission (1975-1983). He was also a founding member and vice-president of the academic Society for the Law of the Eastern Churches.⁴

All of these moulded Patriarch Bartholomew into a true *pontifex* between East and West, between people of different traditions, and between religion and today’s global issues. Addressing an academic community in Jerusalem, five years ago today, the Ecumenical Patriarch strongly emphasised that faith cannot

³ Elpidophoros of America, “Homily for the Feast day of the Apostle Bartholomew, in honour of the Ecumenical Patriarch,” 11 June 2021, <https://www.archons.org/-/elpidophoros-homily-bartholomew> (Accessed 25 October 2022).

⁴ For an extensive biography of Patriarch Bartholomew, see John Chryssavgis, *Bartholomew. Apostle and Visionary* (Nashville: Harper Collins, 2016). The Ecumenical Patriarch’s most important publications in English are: *Encountering the Mystery: Understanding Orthodox Christianity Today* (New York: Image-Doubleday, 2008); *In the World, Yet Not of the World: Social and Global Initiatives* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2009); *Speaking the Truth in Love: Theological and Spiritual Exhortations* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010); and *On Earth as in Heaven: Ecological Vision and Initiatives* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012).

be separated from social commitment, especially when it comes to today's major challenges that he identifies in immigration, climate change, economic inequality and social injustice.⁵ Accordingly, he has relentlessly promoted world peace, human solidarity, religious freedom, and respect for the dignity of every human person, particularly migrants and the marginalised. With these objectives in mind, he travelled extensively and exchanged numerous invitations with state dignitaries. He addressed international bodies like the United Nations and UNESCO, the World Economic Forum, the European Parliament, the US Congress and the World Islamic Call Society, and prestigious think tanks such as Washington's Brookings and Prague's Forum 2000.

Speaking of bridge-building and reconciliation, the University of Malta today honours Patriarch Bartholomew for his leadership in Eastern Europe, the Balkans and the Middle East. Harmony and stability in these regions are fundamental for peace and stability in the Mediterranean region. His first years as Ecumenical Patriarch coincided with the Gulf War, the Fall of the Iron Curtain and the breakup of Yugoslavia. Bartholomew soon became a point of reference for Orthodox people in the delicate transition from the Cold War to the age of globalisation marked by rising nationalism. He personally intervened in complex situations to minimise the possibility of further conflicts and wars, and, to this day, he remains patient yet firm in his pastoral and diplomatic work in Istanbul and Turkey.

Besides leading his Church and in spite of frequent challenges he faces, the Ecumenical Patriarch is a protagonist of inter-Orthodox cooperation. After the Fall of the Soviet Union, he visited the Orthodox Churches of the former Eastern Bloc several times and supported their restoration. As the occupant of the first see of the Orthodox Church, he instituted the synaxis of the heads of the different Orthodox Churches and convened them six times to discuss matters of common concern. He also called and led the Holy and Great Council in Crete in 2016 after the vacuum of almost an entire millennium.

Patriarch Bartholomew also became an active promoter of intra-Christian dialogue as he built on the 1952 encyclical letter of his predecessor Patriarch Athenagoras I to the autocephalous Orthodox Churches on the WCC and on the historical embrace of 1964 between the said patriarch and Pope Paul VI. Bartholomew's ecumenical interactions with other Christian leaders and his

⁵ See Bartholomew, "Address at the Hebrew University, Jerusalem, 6 December 2017," in *Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew Doctor Honoris Causa of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem*. <https://www.ecupatria.org/2017/12/11/ecumenical-patriarch-bartholomew-doctor-honoris-causa-of-the-hebrew-university-in-jerusalem/> (Accessed 25 October 2022).

initiatives with Pope Francis—such as their joint declarations in Jerusalem and at the Phanar urging world leaders for fraternal cooperation, their journey together to the refugee camp on the island of Lesbos, and their prayer for peace at the Vatican with Israeli and Palestinian presidents Shimon Peres and Mahmoud Abbas respectively—reveal the Patriarch’s conviction that bridge-building and collaboration among Christians are a moral duty in face of the world’s crucial challenges. Just a month ago, we saw him and Pope Francis, side by side in Bahrain, participating at the Forum for Dialogue and Human Coexistence. On that occasion, the Patriarch exhorted the participants gathered at this high-level event with these words: “As ministers of faith, we need at all times to build bridges.”⁶ Pope Francis confesses that he finds “a profound sensitivity in Patriarch Bartholomew toward the painful condition of humanity today.”⁷ It is no wonder and no secret that the two religious leaders share a deep fraternal bond and a common social and pastoral consciousness.

Facilitating inter-cultural coexistence and inter-religious dialogue is high on the Patriarch’s agenda. Speaking in Ukraine last year, he insisted that “we need one another” because “nobody—no nation, no state, no religion, no culture, and scientific progress—can solve the current problems alone.”⁸ His co-sponsorship of the 1994 Peace and Tolerance Conference in Istanbul is one of his several endeavours in this direction. Followed by similar ventures in Brussels, Bahrain, Jordan, Greece and Austria, the event brought together Christians, Muslims and Jews, and led to the Bosphorus Declaration that reiterated the position of the 1992 Berne Declaration that “a crime committed in the name of religion is a crime against religion.”⁹

Today, we also honour Patriarch Bartholomew for distinguishing himself internationally as an advocate for the care of the Earth’s natural environment. He has sponsored numerous ecological programmes and summits, including

⁶ Bartholomew, “Address at the Forum for Dialogue: East and West for Human Coexistence, Bahrain, 4 November 2022,” in *Ecumenical Patriarch: Orthodox Christianity has a Long Experience of Cohabitation with Other Religions and Denominations*. <https://orthodoxtimes.com/ecumenical-patriarch-orthodox-christianity-has-a-long-experience-of-cohabitation-with-other-religions-and-denominations/> (Accessed 6 November 2022).

⁷ Francis, “Foreword,” in John Chryssavgis, *Bartholomew*, xi.

⁸ Bartholomew, “Address at Kyiv-Mohyla National University, Kyiv, 22 August 2021,” in *Ecumenical Patriarch: There is No Freedom in the Division*. <https://orthodoxtimes.com/ecumenical-patriarch-there-is-no-freedom-in-the-division/> (Accessed 25 October 2022).

⁹ The text of the Bosphorus Declaration is accessible in *For the Peace from Above: A Resource Book on War, Peace and Nationalism*, eds. Hildo Bos and Jim Forest (Rollinsford: Orthodox Research Institute, 2011), 243-246.

eight international and interdisciplinary symposia on the fate of seas and rivers around the world. He was invited to address key fora like the World Wide Fund for Nature, the World Summit on Religions and Conservation, and the Scenic Hudson Association, and his statements on environmental matters featured prominently in the 2005 UN Climate Change Conference. At the invitation of the French government, he was involved in the preparations for the 2015 COP21 conference that was held in Paris. World-renowned primatologist and UN Messenger of Peace, Dame Jane Goodall, praised him for bridging scientific facts about these issues with the religious ethic.¹⁰ The Patriarch extended to all Orthodox Churches the World Day of Prayer for the Care of Creation, he coined the term “ecological sin,” and he insists that a crime against nature is an offence against ourselves and against God.¹¹ His steadfast ecological commitment has earned him the title of “Green Patriarch,”¹² and Pope Francis does not hesitate to admit that he learnt a lot from Bartholomew’s leadership in this field.¹³

These endeavours have earned the Ecumenical Patriarch numerous recognitions around the world, including more than thirty honorary degrees, the UN Champions of the Earth Award, the US Congressional Gold Medal, the Sophie Prize, the Galileo 2000 Prize, and the Global Thinkers Forum Award for Excellence. Time magazine listed him among the 100 most influential people on the planet, and the current President of the United States of America describes him as “one of the world’s most respected leaders” and “a clarion voice in the struggle to protect basic human rights and bridge divides between people of faith.”¹⁴

Lastly, we pay tribute today to Patriarch Bartholomew because of our country’s ties with Eastern Christianity. The Church in Malta was under the ecclesial jurisdiction of Constantinople from the sixth to the ninth century. The Byzantine presence in Malta was renewed in 1530 when Rhodiote Christians accompanied the Knights of Saint John to the Island, and today it is estimated that there are around fifty thousand Eastern Orthodox Christians from several nations residing in Malta. This evening, these brothers and sisters are symbolically present in this place, as we honour the Ecumenical Patriarch.

¹⁰ See Jane Goodall, “Reflection,” in John Chryssavgis, *Bartholomew*, 209.

¹¹ See Bartholomew, *On Earth as in Heaven*, 138, 340, 346.

¹² The title “Green Patriarch” was coined by former Vice President of the United States of America, Albert Gore, during a visit by the Ecumenical Patriarch to the White House in 1997.

¹³ See Francis, “Foreword,” xi.

¹⁴ Joseph R. Biden Jr., “Reflection,” in John Chryssavgis, *Bartholomew*, 1.

By way of conclusion, it is worth being reminded of a message the Patriarch delivered to an academic community while visiting the United States in 2009. On that occasion, he proposed the threefold way of opening up to the heart, to the other, and to creation. This way, he said, stands in opposition to everything that violates peace or promotes fear and fundamentalism. “Dialogue draws people of diverse religious beliefs and cultural traditions out of their isolation, instituting a process of mutual respect and meaningful communication.”¹⁵

Thirteen years on, our world still needs this bold message to be heard, just as we all yearn for more leaders who are also bridges, emulating the example of His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I.

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¹⁵ Bartholomew, “Address at Fordham University, New York, 27 October 2009,” in *Ecumenical Patriarch Receives Honorary Doctorate in Visit to Fordham*. <https://news.fordham.edu/inside-fordham/ecumenical-patriarch-receives-honorary-doctorate-in-visit-to-fordham/> (Accessed 25 October 2022).