

Walking Side by Side in Christ:

Pope Benedict XVI Extends an Historic Invitation to

“Brother” Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I

A New Era of Hope

“We know we have passed from death to life when we love our brothers”

(1 John 3.14)

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At the dawn of human history, God walked in the garden with Adam and Eve, humanity. When sin entered the world through our disobedience, the act of walking together with God became more complicated. And so did walking this earthly journey with each other as people of differing confessions. However on October 18, 2008, something monumental happened. Pope Benedict XVI, the Bishop of Rome and the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I, the Bishop of Constantinople, entered the Sistine Chapel, St. Peter's home, walking side by side. (1) Tiny steps of ecumenical outreach have led to the triumphant strides taken by these men on this day. Are centuries of separation coming to a close?

On July 15, 1054, the scenario was quite different. Catholic leaders walked down the aisle of the Hagia Sophia in Constantinople, St. Andrew's home, to deliver notices of excommunication for all those in attendance at the Eastern Church service that day. They left, shaking the dust from their shoes as a testimony against them. The Eastern Church responded by pronouncing an anathema over the Papal legates and the Pope no longer was commemorated in their services. (2) Now that some of the dust has settled through the work of the Holy Spirit, two men representing these two pieces of the broken church walked side by side.

It has taken much effort, understanding, sharing, love, and commitment to get to the place where the Pope of the Catholic Church invited the Patriarch of the Orthodox Church to speak to an esteemed body of the 12th General Ordinary Assembly of the Synod of Bishops of the Roman Catholic Church at the Vatican. With this generous invitation and subsequent acceptance, the Pope and the Patriarch demonstrated total commitment to the Lord Jesus Christ and mutual respect for each other's traditions.

The Ecumenical Patriarch's twenty-five minute speech (3) was decades, if not centuries, in the making. Built upon many years of discussion dating back to the turn of the twentieth century, the contemporary ecumenical message began with Patriarch Joachim III in 1902. He revealed in his

encyclical that is our “duty to walk in wisdom, and to conduct ourselves in meekness towards our separated brothers, for they also believe in the all-Holy Trinity and take pride in being called with the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, hoping also to be saved by the grace of God.” (4) Out of this early admonition regarding our Christian responsibility toward each other grew a simple letter from the Ecumenical Patriarchate urging the Christian churches of the world to come together on eleven points. Written in 1920, and often overlooked, this letter, *Unto the Churches of Christ Everywhere*, served as the seed that fell into the ground and produced the healing fruit of ecumenical ideology in the world’s Christian churches. (5)

From these humble beginnings, many things have been achieved. The two most important landmark steps toward ecumenical change came as a result of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) and the Pan-Orthodox Conferences (1961 ff.). During the Vatican II Council in 1964, His Holiness Pope Paul VI and His All Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagoras came together and began the process of lifting the anathemas that had divided the Christian church. (6) On the tenth anniversary of this initial outreach, Metropolitan Meliton of Chalcedonia, representing Ecumenical Patriarch Demetrios I arrived to share the news that the Orthodox church was ready to begin further dialogue. Pope Paul VI received him with intense emotion that led to an outward demonstration of extraordinary love and His Holiness literally kissed the Metropolitan’s feet. (7) Perhaps, Pope Paul VI was reacting to Isaiah 52.7 “How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, . . .” (8) What a remarkable example of commitment to the cause of unity!

Succeeding administrations have picked up the banner of love and continued important restorations. His All Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Demetrios and His Holiness Pope John Paul II followed the Holy Spirit’s leading in love, and worked toward making lasting peace in the church when they established the official theological dialogue between the Orthodox and the Roman Catholic

churches. (9) The establishment of communication through the Catholic-Orthodox International Dialogue Commission led to multiple joint studies of scripture and statements of doctrine. In 1987, Ecumenical Patriarch Demetrios traveled to Rome and participated in a ceremony with Pope John Paul II, reciting “together, in Greek, the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed of the Church as originally expressed without the filioque.” (10)

The Pan-Orthodox conferences enabled “the numerous autonomous national Orthodox churches to deepen in a practical way their own sense of being the Church universal and to explore their relationship as Church with other Christian groups.” (11) The outcome resulting from these discussions was an expressed “desire to seek restoration of full communion between them by means of a dialogue conducted on the basis of equality, love, and truth.” (12) Where there is true desire, there is hope for progress.

The return of the relics of St. Gregory the Theologian and St. John Chrysostom in 2004 was an outpouring of love and understanding which served to bring about some healing of the bitter past. (13) The two churches have exceeded the recommendation of the 1920 encyclical and now not only exchange greetings with each other on the days of the great feasts of St. Peter, St. Paul and St. Andrew, but are actually sending delegates to attend sister church festivities. (14) These accomplishments are but pebbles that have paved the path to the Sistine Chapel this year. The greatest work still lies ahead.

The symbolism found in the entrance of the leaders of the two great churches cannot be overlooked because of the ecumenical example they have set. “This was history in the making: the first time an Orthodox Patriarch was taking part in a world Synod of Bishops, or co-presiding, if you will, in this historic and magnificent place.” (15) Given their long history of disagreement, suspicion, mutual ignorance, and a fair degree of open hostility between them, it is remarkable that Basilian Father Thomas Rosica, the Vatican’s English-language press attaché for the 2008 World Synod of Bishops,

witnessed the leaders come into the meeting side by side, as if '*co-presiding*' [emphasis mine]. The Pope and the Patriarch sat in chairs of equal size. (16) These visual cues send us a strong message of metanoia or conversion, unity, generosity, consideration, and brotherly love.

His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI not only manifested visual signs of brotherly love, he also spoke lovingly about His All Holiness Patriarch Bartholomew I when he said the address was a "joyous experience of unity, perhaps not perfect, but true and deep." Pope Benedict XVI went on to comment "Your fathers are also our fathers, and ours are yours: if we have the same fathers, how can we not be brothers?" "At this moment, we have truly experienced the synod", the Pope said, adding that "Hearing the word of God, also opens one's eyes to the realities of today," and the fathers of the Synod "will continue their work illuminated by the words" (17) of Patriarch Bartholomew. And they have. In the thirty-seventh proposition, the synod fathers stated: "May this encounter become a stimulus for a further witness of communion in hearing the Word of God, and for a fervent prayer to the One Lord so that the prayer of Jesus may soon be realized: *Ut omnes unum sint.*" (18)

Since the time of St. John Chrysostom, Orthodox Christians petitioned at every religious service for "the stability of the holy churches of God and for the unity of all." (19) In fact, unity is part of the second petition, surpassed in importance only by the petition for salvation of souls. Perhaps, across the millennia, the prayers of the faithful were answered. With 400 cardinals, bishops, priests, and key lay people in the audience, the Ecumenical Patriarch delivered an address that was divided into three parts: Hearing and Speaking the Word of God; Seeing the Word of God – The Beauty of Icons and Nature; and Touching and Sharing the Word of God.

1. Hearing and Speaking the Word of God

The most compelling concept of the speech occurs when His All Holiness credits the work of the Holy Spirit. This historic occasion did not come about because of the will of man, but the will of God.

Nearly two thousand years have passed since Christ prayed in John chapter 17, “May they be brought to complete unity . . .” (20) This seminal call to ecumenism originates in the passage and is repeated again in Ephesians 4.3 “Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.” (21) The work of the great comforter is evident in the giving and receiving of this message from the Patriarch.

In remarks that were later echoed by Pope Benedict XVI, His All Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I calls the Catholic Church “a sister Church.” (22) Both men reason that since both churches were founded by two brothers, Peter and Andrew who were both disciples of Christ, therefore there is a familial relationship. Peter was the rock upon which the church of Rome was built, and the church at Constantinople was founded by his brother, Andrew, the Protokletos the first Apostle to be called by Jesus.

The Patriarch continued, building on the brotherly theme, and spoke of developing a “closer and deeper relationship.” (23) This statement is very intimate and its fullest meaning may not be perfectly understood until some time has passed. His All Holiness acknowledged that restoration is needed, and the strongest imagery he used was the process of restoration. Restoration is reserved for those things that are of importance to us; something that we value and want to keep. The Patriarch also addressed the body regarding the very difficult issue of full communion. Pope John Paul II spoke of the “search for perfect and total communion which is neither absorption nor fusion but a meeting in truth and love.” (24) Given the complexity of agreement on this sacrament, His All Holiness was wise to point out again, it is the work of the Holy Spirit which has the greatest role in deepening the fellowship between the Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches so that “full communion may be restored.” (25) He also stated that “our hopes are raised that the day will come when our two Churches will fully converge on the role of primacy and synodality in the Church’s life.” (26) These comments leave the faithful with a great deal of expectation this major issue of the two different administrative structures with ecclesiastical

importance will fully converge. We can only hope the Patriarch was prophetic when he alluded to peace in this area. With the major issue being the Pope's supremacy, it will take the work of the Holy Spirit in cooperation with the will of mankind to accomplish. This divisive issue must be worked out and people have been appointed to make it happen. Pope John Paul II made an unprecedented advancement addressing this pivotal question through the following statement in his 1995 encyclical:

"I am convinced I have a particular responsibility . . . to find a way of exercising the primacy which, while in no way renouncing what is essential to its mission, is nonetheless open to a new situation. I insistently pray the Holy Spirit to shine his light upon . . . all the Pastors and theologians of our Churches, that we may seek together, of course, the forms in which this ministry may accomplish a service of love recognized by all concerned." (27)

Imagine the long term unifying potential of this shift in dialogue!

His All Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I went on to remind attendees:

"At each celebration of the Divine Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom, the presiding celebrant at the Eucharist entreats 'that we may be made worthy to hear the Holy Gospel.' For 'hearing, beholding and handling the Word of life' (1 Jn. 1.1) are not first and foremost our entitlement or birthright as human beings; they are our privilege and gift as children of the living God. The Christian Church is, above all, a scriptural Church. Although methods of interpretation may have varied from Church Father to Church Father, from "school" to "school," and from East to West, nevertheless, Scripture was always received as a living reality and not a dead book." (28)

Future ecumenical advancement will require an effort to focus on the common ground between the churches as a foundation. Both churches accept scripture as divine, and the Holy Spirit speaking to both bodies through scripture prepares hearts for true healing. But how does the Holy Spirit speak to us through scripture? How do we deal with varying interpretations of scripture? One of the great gifts that the church fathers gave us is their interpretation of scripture, and since we have common fathers we can find common interpretations and areas of agreement.

2. Seeing the Word of God – The Beauty of Icons and Nature.

His All Holiness spoke of being able to see the work of God through beauty, transitioning from merely hearing and speaking the scripture to the next level. He addresses icons by saying that they “remind us of another way of seeing things, another way of experiencing realities, another way of resolving conflict.” (29)

As the Patriarch enables the audience to visualize the true power of an icon with the example of God spreading out the heavens and laying the immense seas, yet taking notice of one of the tiniest creatures, the bee, and providing a hollow shaft for the bee sting, we can only begin to grasp God’s attention to the minutest details. Christ has the power to bring unity to the church because God cares about the whole of creation. And everything created by God was good and beautiful, and so we must be ‘called’ to become good and beautiful.

3. Touching and Sharing the Word of God

The Ecumenical Patriarch generates another powerful image when he shares his conviction that “The Word of God persistently ‘moves outside of Himself in ecstasy’ (Dionysius the Aeropagite), passionately seeking to ‘dwell in us’ (Jn. 1.14), that the world may have life in abundance. (Jn. 10.10). God’s compassionate mercy is poured and shared “so as to multiply the objects of His beneficence.” (30) How magnificent is the power of the Holy Spirit in that it cannot be contained, and ‘*persistently*’ [emphasis mine] seeks to ‘move outside’ and ‘dwell in us?’ Who are we to deny our God this “ecstasy?” Christ has the power and the desire to elevate us from the level of hearing and seeing the Word of God, to being able to touch and share the Word with humanity. Reaching out to us in everything we see, God propels us to see anew from the point of view of our creator. We are brothers and friends of Christ, caretakers of the world, and vessels for the Holy Spirit to indwell.

When we are open to sharing ourselves with the Holy Spirit, we transform our relationship with Christ, who becomes an organic part of our very existence. If each Christian embraces this organic level

of communication with God, wonderful things can happen. The Patriarch is an example of this illustration. In the synodal address, he is sharing his vision through the power of an organic relationship with God and the fruit of this conviction is his willingness to exude love toward those in the audience. Ultimately, it is this organic connection to God and fellow human beings that will eradicate the evil of past separation. Unconditional love is irresistible and if the churches reach the point they exist to carry this message to others, the wounds of the past can be completely healed.

It is interesting to note that in 2008, the Patriarch finds himself in a similar world situation as many of his predecessors. In 1902, Ecumenical Patriarch Joachim III also felt the sting of wars (in S. Africa and China), while anarchists assassinated top leaders in Italy and the United States. He penned the following in his encyclical that year:

“. . . our primary task is to watch over our own doctrines, we must nevertheless be also concerned for our Christian brothers and never cease our prayers for the union of all into ONE. Difficulties should not discourage us, nor should the thought of the apparent impossibility of it (church unity) stop us from engaging ourselves in the work of church unity which is dear to God or from examining existing possibilities for it; we should always remember that it is our duty to walk in wisdom, and to conduct ourselves in meekness towards our separated brothers, for they also believe in the all-Holy Trinity and take pride in being called with the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, hoping also to be saved by the grace of God.” (31)

Eighteen years later, the Ecumenical Patriarchate of 1920 was also dealing with the aftermath of World War I, the influenza pan-epidemic that killed hundreds of thousands of people, and the martyrdom of Christians in Russia. The encyclical that year took an even stronger stance for ecumenism in the form of the letter, *Unto the Churches of Christ Everywhere*. This plea contained eleven points for Christians to consider for bringing unity to the body of Christ. Again, in 1952, Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagoras encouraged widespread participation in Pan-Christian meetings in the midst of war in Korea, the cold war, and growing distrust among nations. He wrote “The task of rapprochement and cooperation between all Christian confessions and organizations is a sacred obligation and a holy duty.”

(32) Now, as then, Patriarch Bartholomew reminded Christians that “Social injustice and inequality, global poverty and war prevailed.” (33) Along with neglect of the “vocation and obligation to share”, the church must unite and address our “inability or unwillingness to share.” (34) His All Holiness also told the Synod of Bishops “If we claim to retain the sacrament of the altar, we cannot forego or forget the sacrament of the neighbor – a fundamental condition for realizing God’s Word in the world within the life and mission of the Church.” (35) Clearly, communion is inevitable if we are true believers. He further recognized “we know that we have passed from death to life when we love our brother.” (36) Embracing each other is a matter of life and death; the only hope for ending war, poverty, and division. We must learn from these heartfelt words for the issues the Patriarch raised are almost universally predispositions for war.

The Patriarch shared another reminder from the ‘Golden Mouth’ :

“Moreover, as St. John Chrysostom explains, the divine Word demonstrates profound considerateness for the personal diversity and cultural contexts of those hearing and receiving. Adaptation of the divine Word to the specific personal readiness and the particular cultural context defines the missionary dimension of the Church, which is called to transform the world through the Word. In silence as in declaration, in prayer as in action, the divine Word addresses the whole world, ‘preaching to all nations’ (Mt. 29.19) without either privilege or prejudice to race, culture, gender and class.” (37)

These words contain the power to transform persons and situations, particularly when used in ecumenical dialogues. The focus of the church must be our mission and a great hindrance to this work is the existing division. But what steps do we take from here?

God knows our limitations in maintaining steadfastness towards Him, knows the devil’s desire and ambition to seduce our attention away from Christ, and is well acquainted with our vulnerability to fall into the devil’s traps. Yet, for our sake, Christ came down from heaven and blessed us with salvation two millennia ago, teaching us in John 10:10 that the thief (the devil) has come to “steal and kill and

destroy.” (38) We have also been taught how to identify these deadly traps and how to destroy them; “Love covers a multitude of sin.” (I Pet. 4:8) (39) God warned of the devil’s ability to set out powerful traps to capture us and one of the most deceitful traps the devil uses is division of the church. Paul writes in I Corinthians 1:10 “I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought.” (40) Throughout time, God has interceded and spoken to us, inspiring us through this admonition from St. Paul, through St. John Chrysostom’s petition of the Divine Liturgy, through the 1920 Patriarchate’s encyclical letter *Unto the Churches of Christ Everywhere*, and today through Patriarch Bartholomew’s address to the 2008 Synod of Catholic Bishops. God has never given up on uniting us! Christ is the answer.

From 1902 throughout the last century, the Orthodox Church has made unity a topic of Patriarchal encyclicals. There have been many calls from various Christian leaders for the removal and abolition of all the mutual mistrust and bitterness and to establish a standard of love that is rekindled and strengthened. On October 18, 2008 this call was answered through an unimaginable, loving outreach from Pope Benedict XVI. The Patriarch returned love and delivered an inspiring address. The Pope received his words warmly. The vesper service came to an end and the two men walked out, brothers once again.

What will become of this extraordinary event in the lives of the two great churches? The Apostle Paul writes “All this is from God who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and gave us the ministry of reconciliation.” (2 Cor. 5:18) (41) This ministry of reconciliation can only be fruitful when we employ the diverse gifts Christ gives us to prepare God’s people for works of service, “so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.” (Eph. 4:12-13) (42). It is up to

us to ask ourselves if we have the ecumenical character of these two Christian leaders and to open our heart to the Holy Spirit that we may not only hear, see, and touch the Word of God, but live it among those with whom we differ.

As encouraging as the events at the Sistine Chapel in October have been, we must not lose sight of the observation made long ago by the great ecumenist and the Patriarch's representative to the World Council of Churches, Iakovos, Bishop of Melita, who later served as the Primate of the Greek Orthodox Church of the Americas, of blessed memory:

"All of us believe that the ecumenical movement must be brought down from the level of the ecumenists to the level of the people. From the complex terminology used by theologians to language understood by the faithful. From the pulpit to the pew of the believer. From the pages of ecumenical literature to the lips of the readers. Before our movement can become truly ecumenical it must not only be presented objectively but understood subjectively. In order to achieve this, however, we must make every effort to bring together the faithful of our member churches so that they may really know each other." (43)

Where does the path lead from the Sistine Chapel today? Until the fruits of ecumenism melt in the mouths of ordinary believers, the path from the Sistine Chapel will be covered by dust waiting to be shaken again from the feet of those who are unable or unwilling, to let Christ rule in their hearts. The path from the Sistine Chapel must extend through time into the parishes, seminaries, and ultimately, into the home of every Christian believer. For then we may experience the reality of being made one as Jesus prayed for us so many years ago.

Notes:

- (1) "Scripture and the Meaning of Holiness: reaction to synod of bishops to Bartholomew I's address", by Thomas Rosica available at <http://www.freerepublic.com/focus/f-religion/2110664/posts>.
- (2) B. Stephanides, Church History. (Athens: Papademetriou, 1959), p. 378 (in Greek).
- (3) "Christians Must Help World Understand Bible Says Orthodox Patriarch", by Cindy Wooden available at <http://www.catholicnews.com/data/stories/cns/0805329.htm>.
- (4) Constantin G. Patelos, *The Orthodox Church in the Ecumenical Movement: Documents and Statements 1902-1975*. (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1978), p. 211.
- (5) Ecumenical Patriarchate. "Unto the Churches of Christ Everywhere." In *The Ecumenical Movement: An Anthology of Key Texts and Voices*, by Michael Kinnamon and Brian E., eds. Cope, 11-14. Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1997.
- (6) "Sts. Peter and Andrew Lectures." In *Rome and Constantinople: Essays in the Dialogue of Love*, by Robert Barringer, 57. Brookline: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1984, p. 57.
- (7) Barton, Raymond. "The Catholic Virginian." *Breathing with Both Lungs: Orthodox-Catholic Dialogue*, February 2007: 12.
- (8) The Holy Bible, New International Version (Colorado Springs: International Bible Society, 1984), p. 790.
- (9) "Demetrius I (Papadopoulos) of Constantinople", by author unknown, available at http://orthodoxwiki.org/Demetrius_I_of_Constantinople.
- (10) Ibid.
- (11) Barringer, Robert, p. 57.
- (12) Ibid.
- (13) "Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew to Receive Relics of St. John Chrysostom and St. Gregory the Theologian from Pope John Paul." Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America. December 6, 2008.
- (14) "Signs of Peace between Rome and Constantinople, by Euleterio F. Fotino, available at <http://www.theromanforum.com/articolo.asp?ID=287>.
- (15) "Scripture and the Meaning of Holiness: reaction to synod of bishops to Bartholomew I's address" by Thomas Rosica, available at <http://www.freerepublic.com/focus/f-religion/2110664/posts>.
- (16) "Patriarch of Constantinople Addresses Synod with the Pope" by Ray Blake, available at <http://marymagdalen.blogspot.com/2008/10/patriarch-of-constantinople-addresses.html>.
- (17) Ibid.
- (18) "Synod: Final Propositions of the Synod of Bishops on the Bible", by John L. Allen, Jr. available at <http://www.ncrcafe.org/node/2228>.
- (19) "The Divine Liturgy", by St. John Chrysostom, available at <http://www.ocf.org/OrthodoxPage/liturgy/liturgy.html>.
- (20) New International Version, p. 1185.
- (21) Ibid., p. 1315.
- (22) "Address of Patriarch Bartholomew to the XIIth General Assembly of Bishops of the Roman Catholic Church", Author Unknown, available at http://www.spc.rs/eng/address_patriarch_bartholomew_xiith_general_assembly_bishops_roman_catholic_church.

- (23) Ibid.
- (24) "The Address of John Paul II to His Beatitude Christodoulos, Archbishop of Athens and Primate of Greece", by John Paul, II, available at http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/speeches/2001/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_20010504_archbishop-athens_en.html (accessed December 11, 2008).
- (25) "Address of Patriarch Bartholomew to the XIIth General Assembly of Bishops of the Roman Catholic Church", Author Unknown, available at http://www.spc.rs/eng/address_patriarch_bartholomew_xiith_general_assembly_bishops_roman_catholic_church.
- (26) Ibid.
- (27) "UT UNUM SINT (That They May Be One)" by John Paul, II, available at <http://www.ewtn.com/library/encyc/jp2utunu.htm>.
- (28) "Address of Patriarch Bartholomew to the XIIth General Assembly of Bishops of the Roman Catholic Church", by Author Unknown available at http://www.spc.rs/eng/address_patriarch_bartholomew_xiith_general_assembly_bishops_roman_catholic_church.
- (29) Ibid.
- (30) Ibid.
- (31) Patelos, Constantin G., p. 211.
- (32) Thomas E. FitzGerald, *The Ecumenical Movement: An Introductory History* (Westport: Greenwood Publishing Groups, 2004), p. 149.
- (33) "Address of Patriarch Bartholomew to the XIIth General Assembly of Bishops of the Roman Catholic Church", by Author Unknown available at http://www.spc.rs/eng/address_patriarch_bartholomew_xiith_general_assembly_bishops_roman_catholic_church.
- (34) Ibid.
- (35) Ibid.
- (36) Ibid.
- (37) Ibid.
- (38) New International Version, p. 1173.
- (39) Ibid, p. 1394.
- (40) Ibid, p. 1266.
- (41) Ibid, p. 1292.
- (42) Ibid, p. 1316.
- (43) Patelos, Constantin G. p. 214.

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