

Orthodox patriarch argues for church dialogues over self-imposed isolation: Bartholomeos I's Lenten encyclical

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The Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomeos I, a key leader for the world's 300 million Orthodox Christians, has written a Lenten encyclical that stresses the need for greater unity for churches and counters accusations from a trio of Greek archbishops that ecumenism is heresy.

The patriarch urged fellow Orthodox believers to avoid self-imposed religious isolation from other Christian denominations.

At the same time, Bartholomeos received support from a top American ecumenist on another issue—the isolation imposed by Turkey on the patriarch and his office.

Michael Kinnamon, general secretary of the National Council of Churches, wrote Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in a February 17 letter asking that the U.S. use its moral authority to insure the physical safety of the patriarch and the rights of a minority of Orthodox Christians in Turkey.

“The Ecumenical Patriarch now experiences threats to his safety that require police protection and barbed-wire barriers,” said the letter to Clinton.

In his Lenten letter read in countless Orthodox churches worldwide on February 21, Bartholomeos, who also bears the title of archbishop of Constantinople, addressed the fears of Orthodox believers who favor isolation from other Christians. “The Orthodox Church does not fear dialogue because truth is not afraid of dialogue,” he wrote.

“If Orthodoxy is enclosed within itself and not in dialogue with those outside, it will both fail in its mission and no longer be the ‘catholic’ and ‘ecumenical’ Church,” the

patriarch wrote. "Instead, it will become an introverted and self-contained group, a 'ghetto' on the margins of history."

A senior Orthodox official said in an interview that the patriarch's letter is significant because it unequivocally states a commitment to the ecumenical movement and does so in the face of many pressures from church circles bitterly opposed to global church unity.

In 2009, a group of Orthodox clergy in Greece, led by three senior archbishops, published a manifesto pledging to resist all ecumenical ties with Roman Catholics and Protestants. The group said, "The only way our communion with heretics can be restored is if they renounce their fallacy and repent."

The senior clergy behind the manifesto, who fall under the jurisdiction of the Constantinople patriarchate, said in their document that they wished to preserve, "irremovably and without alteration," the Orthodox faith that the Early Church had "demarcated and entrenched" and to shun communication "with those who innovate on matters of the faith."

By contrast, in his Lenten letter, Bartholomeos said, "Today, Orthodoxy is called to continue this dialogue with the outside world in order to provide a witness and the life-giving breath of its faith."

He continued: "However, this dialogue cannot reach the outside world unless it first passes through all those that bear the Christian name. Thus, we must first converse as Christians among ourselves in order to resolve our differences, in order that our witness to the outside world may be credible."

Many Orthodox churches belong to the World Council of Churches, a grouping of some 560 million Anglican, Orthodox and Protestant Christians, although some Orthodox participants periodically voice strong differences.

The general secretary of the WCC, Lutheran minister Olav Fykse Tveit, said February 19 that he was, "very grateful to the Ecumenical Patriarch for his strong commitment to dialogue and the unity of the Church." Tveit added: "This encyclical reminds me of another famous text: the 1920 encyclical letter in which the [then] Ecumenical Patriarch proposed the foundation of a fellowship of churches, providing a major impulse for the formation of the WCC." -*Ecumenical News International*