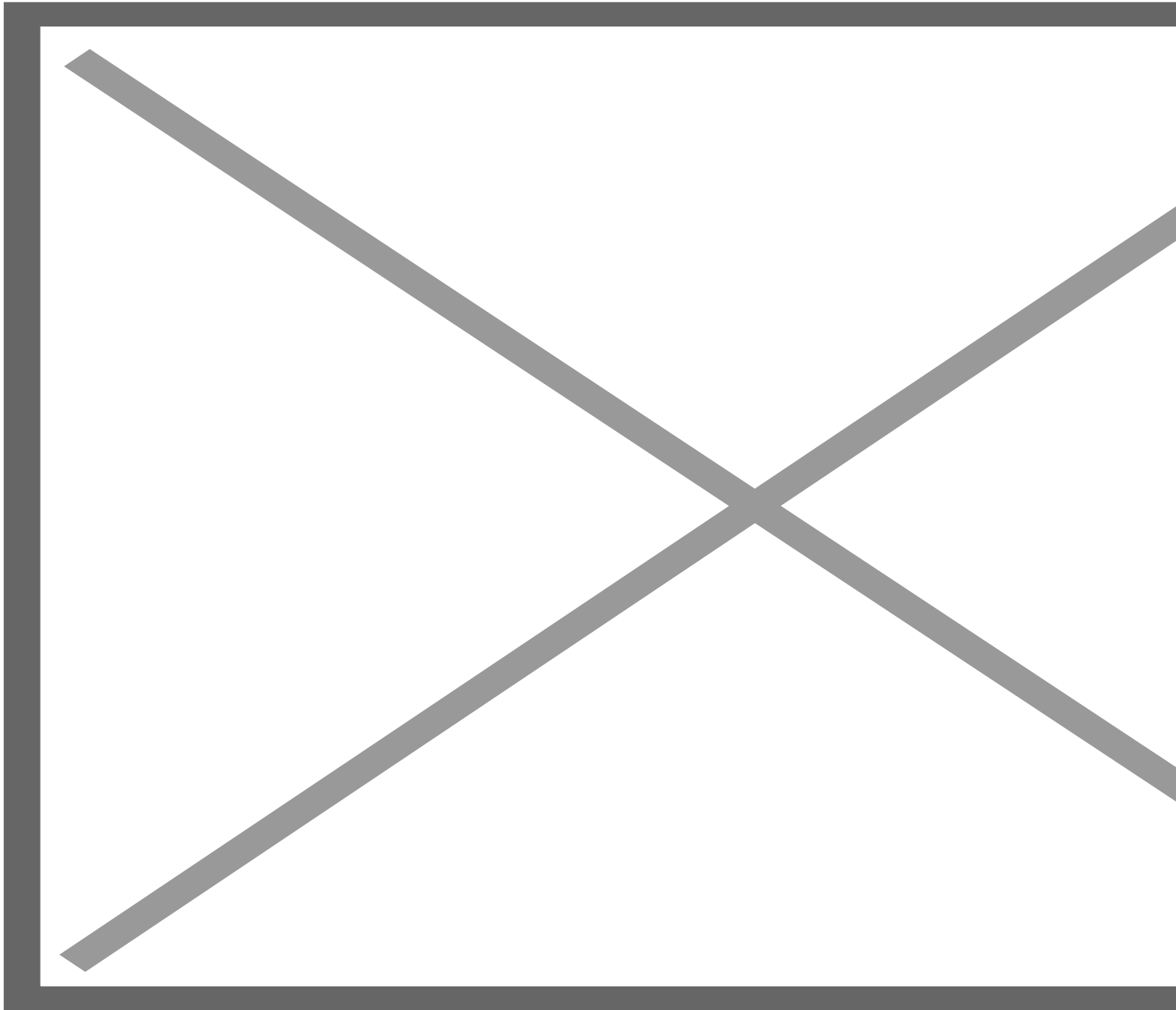


Pope Leo XIV and Patriarch Bartholomew sign document urging progress on Christian unity

by [Claire Giangravé](#)

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Pope Leo XIV and Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I attend the doxology at the Patriarchal Church of Saint George in Istanbul, Turkey, November 29. (AP Photo/Emrah Gurel)

Pope Leo XIV and Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople met at the patriarchal seat in the ancient Phanar quarter on Saturday to sign a joint declaration affirming their commitment to achieving communion between the two churches.

“We continue to walk with firm determination on the path of dialogue, in love and truth, towards the hoped-for restoration of full communion between our sister Churches,” the declaration read.

While seeking theological rapprochement, the two Christian leaders charted a parallel path to unity through practical peacemaking and environmental work. The statement also recognized personal relationships, prayer, and “joint work in all those areas where cooperation is already possible” as ways to advance mutual understanding.

The joint declaration made an impassioned appeal for peace, urging world leaders “to do everything possible to ensure that the tragedy of war ceases immediately,” and encouraged faithful to “reject any use of religion and the name of God to justify violence.” Interreligious dialogue, the two church leaders agreed, is an essential path toward unity and tolerance.

“While we are deeply alarmed by the current international situation, we do not lose hope,” the document read, recalling the 1,700th anniversary of the Council of Nicaea, when early Christian bishops laid down the foundations of the Christian faith in the Nicene Creed.

On Friday, Leo and Bartholomew had joined other Christian leaders to commemorate the important Christian anniversary at the site where the early church fathers likely gathered. “We are convinced that the commemoration of this significant anniversary can inspire new and courageous steps on the path towards unity,” the declaration stated.

A first concrete step, they agreed, could be establishing a common date for the celebration of Easter.

This year, the two church calendars of Eastern Orthodox Christianity and Western Christianity happened to align on a common date for Easter: April 20, 2025. It also happened to be the 60th anniversary of the first Joint Declaration signed between the Orthodox and Catholic churches in 1965 by Pope Paul VI and Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagoras I.

The Ecumenical Patriarch is considered first among equals among the nine Orthodox Patriarchs. Appointed in 1991, Bartholomew has been a consistent voice for peace, ecumenical dialogue, and care for the environment. The Orthodox Church counts 225 million faithful among its members, mostly located in Eastern Europe.

But Bartholomew’s position as a patriarch ruling from a Muslim majority country is isolated and often precarious. He is required to obtain approval for any local activities from both the Turkish political leadership and the Diyanet, the powerful department for religious affairs. He has also caused controversy in the Orthodox realm when he recognized the independence, or autocephaly, of the Orthodox Churches in Ukraine seeking independence from the Russian Orthodox Patriarch of Moscow, Kirill.

Before signing the document, Leo and Bartholomew gathered at the Patriarchal Church of St. George, where they recited a doxology for the unity and stability of Christian churches. After the hymn, Bartholomew expressed his gratitude that he and Leo were able to honor Pope Francis’s desire to commemorate the anniversary of the Council of Nicaea.

Leo acknowledged his predecessors’ outreach to the eastern church in his brief remarks after the ceremony.

“I am also aware that Your All Holiness had the opportunity to meet my venerable predecessors personally, and to develop a sincere and fraternal friendship with them based on shared faith and a common vision of many of the main challenges facing the church and the world,” he said.

Bartholomew attended Francis's inauguration in 2013, an unprecedented event in the history of the two churches, and later attended Leo's inauguration as pope as well.

After the two Christian leaders' prayer at Nicaea on Friday, Leo said he is "encouraged in our commitment to seek the restoration of full communion among all Christians, a task that we undertake with God's help."

—Religion News Service