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THE FUTURE OF ORTHODOX-CATHOLIC RELATIONS IN THE USA

ELPIDOPHOROS LAMBRINIADIS, ARCHBISHOP OF AMERICA

When I think of Orthodox-Catholic relations, I see the word: “Solidarity.” Let me tell you why: Two months ago, in the middle of this sweltering summer, I picked up my phone and called His Eminence, Cardinal Dolan. I told him: “Your Eminence, I need your help. As you know, Hagia Sophia in Constantinople has been re-converted into a Mosque by the Turkish authorities. Would you be willing to sign a joint statement with me to denounce it?” It took the Cardinal less than a second to agree, and by the end of the day we had issued a common statement on Hagia Sophia that ended with these powerful words: “We stand together as brothers in faith, and in solidarity with all people of good will and good faith, so that Hagia Sophia may remain what She is—a symbol of encounter, history, spiritual aspiration, and human achievement of the highest order, glorifying the One God Who has made us all to be sisters and brothers of one human family.”¹

The ecumenical solidarity of the last few months has been incredible. We have heard words of support from our brothers and sisters in Christ from many denominations. The ecumenical movement is not dead, but we have to recognize that its role and reality is evolving. As you all know, at the time of its inception, the ecumenical movement emerged during one of the bloodiest periods in the history of humanity, but also at a time that has seen the greatest deployment of means of communication, connecting people, circulating ideas, and building relationships across the planet. The twentieth century was the century of two world wars and the century of globalization. At the center of this tension between fragmentation and unification is an

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1. <https://www.goarch.org/-/common-statement-hagia-sophia-2020?inheritRedirect=true>

intersection, where dialogue stands as the most significant marker of today's culture and civilization. Dialogue is now social, interreligious, and inter-Christian, or ecumenical. Dialogue is both negotiation and mediation. It is the overcoming of controversy, and it transcends arguments. However, it must also be critical and rigorous, at least when it is a tool in the service of truth and unity.

We should recognize, with His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, that "true dialogue is a gift from God."² Dialogue is above all examining the relationship which, in Christianity, finds its pinnacle in communion, in a union where the dissimilar resonates harmoniously, where differences complement each other, and where what is experienced as a division is transformed into a possibility of reconciliation.

Although dialogue has established itself as a hallmark of our contemporary society, its ecumenical dimension goes beyond other initiatives. Ecumenical dialogue, particularly dialogue between the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches, goes beyond historical and theological antagonisms to become a gift: a gift of relationship, a gift of freedom, a gift of charity, and a gift of solidarity. In his teaching, Christ not only enjoins his disciples to be united, but He makes the words exchanged with His Father, His High-Priestly prayer, the very presupposition of the mystery of Trinitarian unity: "I do not pray for these only, but also for those who are to believe in me through their word, that they may all be one; even as you, Father, are in me and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me" (John 17:20–21).

Thus, I would like to take the opportunity of today's lecture to thank the Orthodox Christian Studies Center of Fordham University for its invitation to speak. I am honored. Allow me to commend its co-directors Professor George Demacopoulos and Professor Aristotle Papanikolaou, both Archons of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, for their inspiring work, not only by placing Orthodoxy on the top tier of academic research, but also by challenging all of us to engage in a conversation that invites us to consider the place and role of the Orthodox Church in the broader society. I hear that your blog, *Public Orthodoxy*, attracts a great deal of attention. I am pleased that these conversations are taking place, that opinions are heard, and that knowledge is shared.

Today, I was asked to speak about the future of Orthodox-Catholic relations in the USA. I would remind you of these words attributed to Winston Churchill: "The farther back you can look, the farther forward you are likely to see." Allow me to reflect on the history of the relationship between our two Churches in order to be able to build a vision for our future together in this country in our quest for visible unity, "unity as communion," to paraphrase His Eminence Metropolitan John of Pergamon.³

2. His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, *Encountering the Mystery: Understanding Orthodox Christianity Today* (New York: Doubleday, 2008), xv

3. See John D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1997).

ORTHODOXY AND THE QUEST FOR UNITY

The search for unity stretches back through the long history of Christianity. From the first hours of its existence, the Church had to face a fundamental question: how to preserve her diversity without prejudice to her unity? From the opposition between Gentile convert and the Christians from Judaism in the book of Acts, through the Christological controversies of the first millennium (not forgetting the schism of the Eastern and Western Churches in 1054), the council, the synod, has always been the place of unity and a space of reconciliation. The assembly in Jerusalem, in the days of the Apostles, is a clear sign of this. Unity will only come at the cost of a decision made collectively, according to the consecrated expression: “For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us . . .” (Acts 15:28 NRSV).

In the twentieth century, the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople constantly linked the process of ecumenical dialogue to the conciliar fermentations of the entire Orthodox Church. This is how the encyclicals produced by the Ecumenical Patriarchate between 1902 and 1920, which call, through the common commitment of the Orthodox Churches, to invest in what would become the ecumenical movement, should be interpreted.

The denominational alterity that Orthodoxy gradually faced at the end of the Great War determined the interdependence of the ecumenical and pan-Orthodox processes. The movements of Orthodox populations, particularly following the Russian Revolution (1917) and the “great catastrophe” (η Μεγάλη Καταστροφή) in Asia Minor (1923), have profoundly influenced its ecumenical work. The presence of a large Orthodox population in Western Europe and in North America conditions the rapprochement of Christians. The diaspora became a meeting place. Among the many great Orthodox theologians from these regions who have shaped today’s Orthodox Church, I think it is worth mentioning here the brilliant personality of Fr. John Meyendorff, who was, as you all know, a full professor at Fordham University, in addition to being the Dean of St. Vladimir’s Orthodox Theological Seminary, and also one of the pioneers of Catholic-Orthodox dialogue in the USA. Fr. Meyendorff exemplified how scholarship and theology can serve the mission and vocation of the Church in its quest for unity.

Finally, the Orthodox Church, faithful to her ecumenical commitment, also participated in the creation of the World Council of Churches in 1948. A recent document entitled *For the Life of the World: Toward a Social Ethos of the Orthodox Church* and approved by the Ecumenical Patriarchate very accurately captured the vision of the Orthodox Church’s role in the Ecumenical movement:

Our commitment to ecumenical relations with other Christian confessions reflects this openness to all who sincerely seek the truth as the incarnate Logos, Jesus Christ, and who remain true to their conscience, even while we continue to bear witness to the fulness of the Christian faith in the Orthodox Church.⁴

4. David Bentley Hart and John Chryssavgis, eds., *For the Life of the World: Toward a Social Ethos of the Orthodox Church* (Brookline: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2020), paragraph 54, 72.

CATHOLIC-ORTHODOX RELATIONS AND THE SPIRIT OF JERUSALEM

The Orthodox Church's involvement in ecumenical dialogue also depended on the willingness of other Churches to build bridges with her. A radical turn was taken during the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965), when the Catholic Church decided on the fundamental necessity of a rapprochement between Christians and especially with the Orthodox Church. *De Unitatis Redintegratio*, the decree on ecumenism issued in 1964, is the manifestation of the extraordinary openness brought by Pope John XXIII (1881–1963) and his successor Paul VI (1897–1978). One of the most important events emerging from that decision was, without a doubt, the meeting of Pope Paul VI and Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagoras in Jerusalem in January 1964.

The genuinely ecumenical hearts of Patriarch Athenagoras (1886–1972) and of Pope Paul VI beat in unison. On January 5, Paul VI, after crossing the sea of Galilee and having celebrated the Mass in Nazareth, entered the Apostolic Delegation in Jerusalem. The Patriarch joined him there, accompanied by ten metropolitans and archbishops. On the threshold of the house, the two men embraced. Their conversation was overwhelming in truth, trust, faith, and prophecy.⁵ One must seek in the words and the embraces exchanged the foundations of a renewed fraternity. Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagoras would later tell the Orthodox theologian Olivier Clément, “We kissed once, twice, and then again, again. Like two brothers who meet again after a very long separation.”⁶ The exchange was spontaneous, warm. Speeches were given at the end of the meeting before Pope Paul VI offered Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagoras a chalice, as a sign of the communion to which both aspired. The joint communiqué, issued on January 6, 1964, testifies to the change in relations after so many centuries of opposition between the Christian Churches of the East and the West:

The two pilgrims, their eyes fixed on Christ, the exemplar and author, with the Father, of unity and peace, pray God that this meeting may be the sign and prelude of things to come for the glory of God and the enlightenment of his faithful people.⁷

We should acknowledge that, behind the scenes, the bridge on which Catholics and Orthodox are walking on their ecumenical journey was first established by my predecessor, Archbishop Iakovos of blessed memory. At the direction of Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagoras, Archbishop Iakovos, newly elected as Archbishop of North and South America in 1959, traveled the same year to Rome and was able to meet

5. See Frère Patrice Mahieu, O.S.B., *Paul VI et les orthodoxes* (Paris: CERF, 2012), 74.

6. Olivier Clément, *Dialogue avec le patriarche Athénagoras* (Paris: Fayard, 1969), 362.

7. E. J. Stormon, *Towards the Healing of Schism: The Sees of Rome and Constantinople* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1987), 64.

with Pope John XXIII. When Archbishop Iakovos visited the pope on March 17, 1959, it was the first encounter between a representative of the Ecumenical Patriarch and the Pope of Rome since the mid-sixteenth century; only one month later, a representative from the Vatican would visit the Phanar to meet with Patriarch Athenagoras.

Fifty years later, in 2014, Pope Francis and Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew recommitted themselves to continue the prophetic mission of their predecessors by meeting in Jerusalem. They declared together:

Our meeting, another encounter of the Bishops of the Churches of Rome and Constantinople founded respectively by the two Brothers the Apostles Peter and Andrew, is a source of profound spiritual joy for us. It presents a providential occasion to reflect on the depth and the authenticity of our existing bonds, themselves the fruit of a grace-filled journey on which the Lord has guided us since that blessed day of fifty years ago.⁸

Putting an end to centuries of silence, I think we all have in mind the picture of the embrace of the two primates, emulating the embrace of the two brothers and apostles, Peter and Andrew, based on the iconographic tradition.⁹ In 1965, in a deeply prophetic gesture, the same Pope Paul VI and Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagoras decided in common, as a visible sign of their desire to restore the bond of Eucharistic communion that had been lost for centuries, to simultaneously lift the excommunications of 1054.

Through the years, what has been characterized as a “Dialogue of Charity” became more and more visible, with, for instance, the presence of a delegation from the Catholic Church at the Phanar, the center of the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Constantinople, for the feast of St. Andrew the First-Called, and the reciprocal presence of a delegation from the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Rome for the feast of St. Peter. The dialogue also became a “Dialogue of Truth” after Pope John Paul II and Ecumenical Patriarch Dimitrios announced the opening of the theological dialogue between the two sister Churches in 1979.

The Dialogue of Charity was built in successive stages, which culminated in the creation of the Joint International Commission for theological dialogue between the Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church. The transformation of the Dialogue of Charity into a Dialogue of Truth, that is to say the shift from gestures manifesting a rediscovered fraternity to an exchange on theological problems, marks the fruitful maturation and the growing confidence which makes it possible to tackle the heart of our divisions.

8. “Common Declaration of Pope Francis and Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I,” Vatican website, May 25, 2014, http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2014/may/documents/papa-francesco_20140525_terra-santa-dichiarazione-congiunta.html

9. See John Chrysavgis, *Dialogue of Love: Breaking the Silence of Centuries* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014).

THE NORTH AMERICAN ORTHODOX-CATHOLIC THEOLOGICAL CONSULTATION

The North American Orthodox-Catholic Theological Consultation should not be shy about its accomplishments. Since 1965—you might notice the connection to the timing of the reestablishment of Catholic-Orthodox relations in the context of the Second Vatican Council—this Consultation has produced thirty-two documents, reports, and statements. Some of them became real references for theologians and for our Churches to walk together towards unity.¹⁰ Over fifty years, the Consultation discussed some crucial issues. In the most recent document, “The Vocations and Mission of the People of God” (2019), we agreed that “[e]very member of the Church has a dignity and value rooted in baptism. The Spirit also endows each baptized Christian with spiritual gifts, which are meant to contribute to the well-being of the Body and to the salvation of the world.” In 2017, responding to the Joint International Commission on the question of “Synodality and Primacy during the First Millennium,” the Consultation members encouraged their colleagues to complete their study by examining the “diversity of ecclesial models of the first millennium” and to take into consideration “the other Churches of the East.” Five years before, they reflected on “The Importance of Sunday.” The document says,

For Christians, Sunday, the Lord’s Day, is a special day consecrated to the service and worship of God. It is a unique Christian festival. It is “the day the LORD has made” (Ps. 118:24 NRSV). Its nature is holy and joyful. Sunday is the day on which we believe God acted decisively to liberate the world from the tyranny of sin, death, and corruption through the Holy Resurrection of Jesus.

These words resonate in both of our Churches in today’s context of a post-Christian era where the sacredness of the world, its time and places, is forgotten in the abyss of secularism. Some statements deserve to be rediscovered because of their boldness and courage. In 2010, for example, the Consultation published a stimulating study entitled “Steps Towards a Reunited Church: A Sketch of an Orthodox-Catholic Vision for the Future.” Today more than ever, we need to think not only of our differences but about how we can anticipate our Churches being united through a rediscovered experience of communion based on mutual recognition, a common confession of faith, the acceptance of diversity, liturgical sharing, synodality and conciliarity, mission and evangelization, subsidiarity, renewal and reforms, and finally the role of the Papacy. To the latter, the way we define Church governance would have some direct impact on our ability to live and exist as one Church.

10. All the documents are accessible: <http://www.assemblyofbishops.org/ministries/orthodox-catholic/>.

His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew uses a beautiful expression, speaking of “a primacy of love, honor and service.”¹¹ The 2010 document concludes:

Conscience holds us back from celebrating our unity as complete in sacramental terms, until it is complete in faith, Church structure, and common action; but conscience also calls us to move beyond complacency in our divisions, in the power of the Spirit and in a longing for the fulness of Christ’s life-giving presence in our midst.

There are signs that would tangibly bear witness to our thirst for unity. Celebrating Easter or Pascha together on a common date shouldn’t be so difficult, but we are not there yet, even among the Orthodox. In rare years, our dates for Easter do coincide, and this is a great joy for Christianity as a whole. We now have to wait until 2025 before our next unified Pascha. The document “Celebrating Easter/Pascha Together” issued in 2010 raised some excellent questions: “Can the members of our interchurch families celebrate Easter together? Can we prevent the undesirable possibility of a fixed date recurring every year, which would contravene Nicaea, our biblical theology, and our sacred tradition? For the mission of the Church, a common celebration would support the unity we already share and help to build it further in the future.”

Unfortunately, I don’t have time to detail the many encouraging—and yet unknown—themes and documents prepared by the Consultation. One crucial and courageous document is unquestionably the study of the *Filioque*. From 1999 through 2003, the North American Orthodox-Catholic Consultation has focused its discussions on an issue that has been identified, for more than twelve centuries, as one of the root causes of division between our Churches: our divergent ways of conceiving and speaking about the origin of the Holy Spirit within the inner life of the triune God. When Orthodox and Catholics come together, we need to be able to have the same and identical confession of faith. For us Orthodox, this is a very important step.

These are the fruits of the collaboration between the Committee for Ecumenical Relations of the Assembly of Canonical Orthodox Bishops of the United States of America, and prior to 2010 with the Standing Conference of the Canonical Orthodox Bishops in the Americas, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops’ Committee for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs, and the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops. Allow me here to commend the two co-chairs of the Consultation, His Eminence Cardinal Joseph W. Tobin of Newark and His Eminence Metropolitan Methodios of Boston for their inspiring leadership.

11. Address by His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew to His Holiness Pope Francis during the Divine Liturgy for the Feast of St. Andrew in the Venerable Patriarchal Church, November 30, 2014.

It is also worth noting that the Consultation works hand in hand with the Joint Committee of Orthodox and Catholic Bishops, which has been meeting annually since 1981.

ECUMENICAL CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Ladies and Gentlemen, Dear Friends,

Along the historical journey of Orthodox and Catholics towards unity and communion, we have identified spaces where our relations globally, but especially in this blessed country, should encourage and strengthen: a dialogue of charity and truth, an ecumenism of solidarity. Moving forward, we need to acknowledge some of the challenges that our relations are facing. I have identified several challenges that will need to be addressed.

The ecumenical dialogue and the ecumenical movement are going through a crisis—I would say an identity crisis. Some prefer talking about an “ecumenical winter.” The quest for unity has gradually become marginalized. Our religious landscape has profoundly evolved. Our confessional geography has gained in complexity. The Christian landscape is a real mosaic to the point that the articulation between unity and diversity is particularly in danger, and with it our ability to reestablish the link of communion that we desire. Changes and reforms in some Churches and communities have created a new sense of estrangement. Other Churches have embraced a more nationalistic and/or fundamentalist approach.

Furthermore, the legitimacy of institutions is being called into question across societies and nations. Interfaith dialogue has taken on a more important role, especially in a world viewed through the lens of the “clash of civilizations.”¹² We live together but in silos. I would call this crisis “the secular age” of ecumenism, to borrow Charles Taylor’s expression. The relations between our Churches seem to be shaped by today’s culture war. This same culture war coupled with recent geopolitical developments also prevents the Orthodox Church from speaking with one voice. The future of Orthodox-Catholic relations depends on the condition of inter-Orthodox relations. Fr. John Meyendorff, in one of his articles, gives us a wonderful view of today’s situation:

As the culture of the contemporary world has become universally secular, it is not the medieval model of symbiosis between culture and religion which is applicable, in practical terms, to our situation, but rather the model of early Christianity, when the Church was conscious of its “otherness” and its eschatological mission.

12. See Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996).

Let us remember that it is this consciousness which made the Christian mission truly universal.¹³

Finally, allow me to speak of a more difficult and painful situation in the life of many of our faithful: the question of mixed or inter-Christian marriages. Allow me to clarify my views on this question, as I remember that my statement back in February of this year at the Leadership 100 Conference generated much controversy. Today, 63 percent of the marriages that take place in the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese are marriages between an Orthodox and a non-Orthodox Christian. These numbers may even be higher because our data does not take into account Greek Orthodox Christians who marry outside of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese. Inter-Christian or ecumenical couples and families represent a joint pastoral responsibility for our Churches. The issue has been discussed by the Consultation since 1971, and I have been told that its members are currently working on it again. We look forward to reading their new opinion. In the meantime, we have to acknowledge that the conversion of the non-Orthodox Christian member of the couple might never happen for various reasons, and he or she can be more or less involved in the life of their local Orthodox community. However, the non-Orthodox Christian spouse cannot partake in the Holy Eucharist by receiving the body and blood of Christ. Ecumenical families pay a particularly high price for our divisions. We live our lives without noticing it, while they experience the schism between the Churches every single Sunday. The Eucharist, which is the sacrament of unity *par excellence*, exemplifies our divisions in their eyes. This is an oxymoron. How can we overcome it? Do we do it by practicing *oikonomia*, pastoral compassion, and accepting a measure allowing the non-Orthodox Christian spouse to receive Holy Communion? Today, in this unique context of Orthodoxy in the diaspora, we are able to examine the issue of Communion that is contingent on the fact that we allow ecumenical couples to marry. This was not always the case.

It is known that while the early Church discouraged exogamy for religious reasons, she nevertheless tolerated marriages between a Christian and a pagan. Early Christian literature gives evidence that marriages between a Christian and a non-Christian were not rare, although they were problematic. Only when Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire was the celebration of such marriages forbidden by the Church. For example, the Council of Laodicea in 343, with its tenth and thirty-first canons, forbade members of the Church to marry their children to heretics. And here we see that during that time, conversion to Christianity was a precondition for the marriage.

The most explicit canon regarding this issue is the seventy-second Canon of the Quinisext Ecumenical Council in Trullo (692). This particular canon not only spoke

13. John Meyendorff, "Ethnic Particularities and the Universality of Orthodoxy Today," in *Rightly Teaching the Word of Your Truth: Studies in Honor of His Eminence Archbishop Iakovos*, ed. Nomikos Michael Vaporis (Brookline: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1995), 98.

about impediments to mixed marriages, but it also prescribed the sanctions to be applied against those who transgress the rules of the Church.

Today, ecumenical marriages between Orthodox and non-Orthodox are allowed, with the following explicit and sometimes implicit prescriptions, namely that (1) the wedding should be blessed by an Orthodox priest, (2) the couple's children should be baptized and nurtured in the Orthodox Church, and (3) in cases of conflict, the spouses should address themselves to Orthodox ecclesiastical courts.¹⁴

It is also interesting to note that the two historic Patriarchates of Alexandria and Antioch, living as close neighbors with Copts and Syro-Jacobites, because of the social conditions prevailing in this part of the world, and for purely pastoral reasons, signed bilateral agreements with their oriental sister Churches regulating ecumenical marriages.¹⁵ In the USA, we are currently working on a similar agreement between the Assembly of Canonical Orthodox Bishops and the Standing Conference of the Oriental Orthodox Churches. The challenges are very similar across denominations.

The difficulty here is that the treatment of ecumenical families is a local question. However, when it comes to the distribution of Holy Communion, this can only be discussed at the synodal level of various Mother Churches. Even the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church, convened in Crete in 2016, considered this question as being at the discretion of the autocephalous Churches.¹⁶

What should we do? What is the perimeter of *oikonomia*? Marriage is not a precondition for Holy Communion, but baptism and chrismation are. In the daily life of our communities and parishes, there is much to do to serve our ecumenical families, to be more aware of their needs and particularities. The Eucharist is only one aspect, an important one, but still only one response among many others that we should look into. The inclusion of the non-Orthodox spouse is a vital question for the spiritual well-being of the entire family that has been blessed by the blessing of the Church, welcoming all its members into a divine plan, the economy of salvation. In his famous book, *Marriage: An Orthodox Perspective*, Fr. John Meyendorff reminded us of the perspective and vocation of all marriages towards the Kingdom of God.¹⁷ This idea is also present in the Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*: "This realization helps us, amid the aggravations of this present life, to see each person from a supernatural perspective, in the light of hope, and await the fulness that he or she will receive in the heavenly kingdom, even if it is not yet visible."¹⁸

14. Also see Anthony Roeber, *Mixed Marriage: An Orthodox History*, (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2018).

15. See the 1991 "Statement of the Orthodox Church of Antioch on the Relations between the Eastern and Syrian Orthodox Churches" and the April 2001 "Pastoral Agreement between the Coptic Orthodox and Greek Orthodox Patriarchates of Alexandria."

16. *On Impediments to Marriage*, II.7.37.

17. John Meyendorff, *Marriage: An Orthodox Perspective* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Orthodox Seminary Press, 1975).

18. Francis, *Amoris laetitia: Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation on love in the family*, paragraph 117, Vatican website, March 19, 2016, https://www.vatican.va/content/dam/francesco/pdf/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20160319_amoris-laetitia_en.pdf

Perhaps this should help us refocus our pastoral care and mission. Beyond the question of partaking in the Holy Eucharist, are there any other spaces in which to make a marriage Eucharistic in the sense of thanksgiving, acknowledging the special place of our ecumenical families, as living bridges between Sister Churches?

CONCLUSION

Ladies and Gentlemen, Dear Friends,

The Orthodox Church in general and the Ecumenical Patriarchate in particular have been present in various dialogue initiatives, multilateral as well as bilateral, local as well as international. Ecumenical dialogue is such an important part of the Orthodox mission in the world today that it was also discussed during the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church, convened in Crete in June 2016. The document on inter-Christian dialogue affirms that

The Orthodox Church, which prays unceasingly “for the union of all,” has always cultivated dialogue with those estranged from her, those both far and near. In particular, she has played a leading role in the contemporary search for ways and means to restore the unity of those who believe in Christ, and she has participated in the Ecumenical Movement from its outset, and has contributed to its formation and further development.¹⁹

The apostolic faith represented by our sister church of Rome is embodied by gestures of brotherly love like this one, a little more than a year ago, when His Holiness Pope Francis offered to the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople relics of Saint Peter the Apostle in a sign of Church unity. This unexpected gift on the day of Rome’s patronal feast was a powerful message of hope. As Pope Francis said, “The joining of the relics of the two brother Apostles can also serve as a constant reminder and encouragement that, on this continuing journey, our divergences will no longer stand in the way of our common witness and our evangelizing mission in the service of a human family that today is tempted to build a purely secular future, a future without God.”²⁰

19. *Relations of the Orthodox Church with the Rest of the Christian World*, website of the Holy and Great Council, 2016, <https://www.holycouncil.org/-/rest-of-christian-world#:~:text=Relations%20of%20the%20Orthodox%20Church%20with%20the%20Rest%20of%20the%20Christian%20World,-Ελληνικά%20English%20русский&text=The%20Orthodox%20Church%2C%20as%20the,unity%20in%20the%20world%20today>.

20. Francis, “Letter of the Holy Father Francis to His All-Holiness Bartholomew, Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople, Accompanying the Gift of Some Relics of Saint Peter,” Vatican website,

And I am convinced that the future and mission of Catholic-Orthodox relations in the USA is to continue bearing witness to God's presence in the world, faithful to the Spirit of Jerusalem that we received as a legacy.

GREEK ORTHODOX ARCHDIOCESE OF AMERICA
NEW YORK, UNITED STATES