

Documentary "Patriarch Bartholomew: A Life, A Faith"

Thank you for granting us this interview, which will allow us to learn more about you as a patriarch and as a man of the Church.

Thank you for allowing me to give this interview, to address the French-speaking public and to speak about myself.

I was born in Imbros. It is an island that belongs to Turkey, in the northeast of the Aegean Sea. I was born on a leap day, February 29, 1940. Perhaps that's why I age slowly.

In 1954, I entered the high school of the theological faculty of Halki. I completed my 3 years of high school there, then my 4 years of theology. These were beautiful and fruitful years. After obtaining my diploma, I was ordained deacon on August 13, 1961. And immediately after, I left to do my military service for 2 years. Here, it is mandatory for all those who have Turkish nationality.

How did you experience being an Orthodox deacon and a soldier?

I had no difficulty. My fellow soldiers loved me and I loved them. Their behavior toward me was civilized, including that of the officers. After completing 6 months of basic training in Tuzla, near Istanbul, I was assigned to the city of Gallipoli. That's where I spent the rest of my military service. I was entrusted with the regiment's finances. I withdrew money from the bank. I prepared the accounts. I distributed the salaries. Perhaps they loved me because I distributed money to everyone.

I finished my service in 1963 and Patriarch Athenagoras sent me to Rome to specialize in canon law. After Rome, I studied at the Ecumenical Institute of Bossey, in Switzerland. Then I continued my studies in Munich, Germany.

In 1968, I returned to Istanbul, where I was appointed assistant to the director of the Theological School of Halki. It was there, at Halki, that I became a priest in 1969. And 6 months later, Athenagoras himself elevated me to the rank of archimandrite in the patriarchal chapel of Saint Andrew.

Thanks to all these studies in the West, you acquired experience in dialogue with the Western world.

Indeed. My studies in Rome, Switzerland and Germany helped me to make contact and become acquainted with the West, particularly with the Catholic world. I discovered the life of the Catholic Church from within. I attended the proceedings of Vatican II twice with special authorization.

I see very concretely, in my daily life, the usefulness of these studies and these encounters. I receive visitors from Rome and from everywhere else. I can speak to them in their language. It's not just about Italian, French or English but also about their spirit, their mentality that I know closely. They too, through our exchanges, have learned to know me.

God wanted me to begin working here, at the center of Orthodoxy, at the seat of the Ecumenical Patriarchate. I was invited here by Patriarch Dimitrios shortly after his election, in the summer of 1972. I was his secretary, then director of the patriarchal office throughout the duration of his patriarchate. This helped me greatly. I learned a lot from Patriarch Dimitrios and from the venerable hierarchs, the elders, as they are called here.

This allowed you to acquire experience in inter-Orthodox, inter-Christian and interreligious dialogue.

Yes. For years, I was a member of the commission for inter-Orthodox questions and the synodal commission for inter-Christian questions. I gained great experience with Metropolitan Meliton, the Metropolitan of Myra and with Chrysostom of Ephesus and Maximos of Sardis. These men dealt for years with relations between Orthodox and between Christians.

All this allowed me to acquire personal experience of the importance and necessity of these relations. We cannot solve our problems through war but only through dialogue, through love and through good fraternal relations.

I became the new Metropolitan of Philadelphia, in Asia Minor, in December 1973. Out of the 12 votes of the hierarchs of the synod, I obtained 10. I received episcopal ordination at Christmas 1973 by Patriarch Dimitrios and the hierarchs of the synod. I held this title for 16 years. In January 1990, I was unanimously elected Metropolitan of Chalcedon. It was a great honor for me to be on this historic see. I remained there only about a year and eight months.

After the death of Patriarch Dimitrios in 1991, you were elected by the Holy Synod of the Patriarchate of Constantinople unanimously. What do you remember from that moment?

It was an immense honor for me and a great responsibility. Even though I had acquired experience with Dimitrios, the fact of assuming this great responsibility was a burden. I was fully aware of this weight and this honorable responsibility. During my enthronement, on November 2, 1991, in my first speech as patriarch, I tried to describe all my thoughts, my vision, my intentions for my ministry. I give thanks to God because almost everything I promised that day has been accomplished.

What is the role of the Ecumenical Patriarch? Is he first among equals or first without equals?

The primacy of Constantinople is not just a prestigious title. The Ecumenical Patriarchate has certain prerogatives, certain powers, so to speak. And it has exercised these prerogatives as the first throne of the Church over the centuries by helping and serving the sister Churches.

There are, in the texts of ecclesiastical history, very numerous examples of this ministry, of this service of the throne of Constantinople. Of course, neither I nor my successors will renounce these rights that were granted to us by the ecumenical council and by the practice of Church life through the centuries. These rights, through the ages, will always be a precious treasure for serving our Orthodox brothers in the four corners of the Earth, in all Orthodox churches.

We will do this with much love, as we have done until now. It is a fact that the Patriarch of Constantinople enjoys certain privileges that other primates do not have. From this point of view, he is first without equals. These privileges belong only to the Ecumenical Patriarch and neither my predecessors nor I have ever used them to impose our will and our opinion on other Churches. But we have used these privileges to help other Churches in their daily life, especially when they encountered difficulties. It was a primacy of service and not of authority.

Thanks to your personal commitment, you intensified the process of preparing the great ecumenical council, which finally took place in Crete in 2016. Explain this process to us.

I can say with humility that during the years of my patriarchate, I have always tried to give impetus to Orthodox cooperation. Six months after my election and enthronement, I

convoked the first synaxis of Orthodox primates in March 1992. We discussed and signed a text that expressed the unanimous voice of Orthodoxy. This was a first, just as I had established the institution of synaxes of Orthodox primates.

In 1992, we all celebrated together the Sunday of Orthodoxy in the patriarchal cathedral. We showed in a concrete and mystical way the unity of the autocephalous Orthodox Churches. Since then, we have held numerous meetings of primates, the last one in Geneva in January 2016, a few months before the holy and great council of Crete. We had decided there on all the questions that would be discussed during the holy and great council. And we all signed the internal regulations of the holy and great council. Unfortunately, at the last moment, four sister Churches renounced participating in the council, which was finally held successfully with ten Churches. I want to believe that by the grace of God and with the help of the Holy Spirit, we drafted beautiful texts. I would like to see them disseminated as much as possible so that the world can benefit from the unified voice of Orthodoxy as it was expressed during the council of Crete.

One of the questions on the agenda of this council in Crete was that of autocephaly and the manner of proclaiming it. But at the last moment, the primates decided not to discuss it. Why?

The Ecumenical Patriarchate made many sacrifices and concessions during all its years of work with the Orthodox Churches in order to promote pan-Orthodox cooperation. Although the Ecumenical Patriarchate was the only one to have the right to grant autocephaly, beginning with the Church of Russia, then all the Churches of the Balkans. I repeat that it was the only one to grant autocephaly and despite this, it accepted that this question be inscribed on the agenda of the pan-Orthodox synods of Rhodes, then of Geneva. And we arrived at the point where we decided how a "tomos" on the autocephaly of a new Church would be signed.

Our patriarchate had proposed that the Ecumenical Patriarch decide and sign alone and that the primates of other Churches would co-decide and co-sign with him. This proposal aroused the opposition of Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk, of the Russian Orthodox Church. Others followed him and it was not approved. As there was no agreement on the question of autocephaly, during the preparation of the holy and great council, it was decided to remove it from the list of questions to be examined by the holy and great council.

In 2019, you granted the "tomos" of autocephaly to the new Orthodox Church of Ukraine. Now, in Ukraine, there are two Orthodox Churches. The Orthodox Church of Ukraine led by Metropolitan Epiphanius and the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, presided over by Metropolitan Onuphrius. Why this decision?

At the time, our patriarchate had made this decision, considering that the Church of Ukraine had the right to obtain its independence and this after its numerous requests addressed to the Ecumenical Patriarchate. Not only in recent years, but also well before, in the 1920s or even earlier.

And during the first years after the fall of the Soviet Union, when Ukraine became a sovereign and independent state, the bishops of Ukraine had requested autocephaly from Russia. They were wrong. They should have requested it from the Ecumenical Patriarchate. This request for autocephaly sent to Moscow had also been signed by Metropolitan Onuphrius. He was not yet the Metropolitan of Kiev. He had another title that he bore at the time.

On one hand, Ukraine, according to the Ecumenical Patriarchate, had the right to obtain autocephaly and to have an independent local church within the state. And on the other hand, the Ecumenical Patriarchate alone had the right to grant autocephaly to Ukraine, as it granted to the Churches I mentioned, beginning with the Church of Russia in the 16th century then to all the Churches of the Balkans in the 19th and 20th centuries. We therefore did what was natural. As the Ukrainians have their own indigenous Church, we exercised the canonical right that belonged to us to grant them autocephaly.

After 6 years of this autocephaly, the Orthodox in Ukraine are still divided. Do you believe that we will finally achieve this unity and what is the way to access it for you?

Our goal is to gather all the Orthodox Churches of Ukraine, those of Metropolitan Onuphrius and those of Metropolitan Epiphanius, that they unite on the theoretical level and in daily life, that they become a single local Church and be recognized by the other sister Orthodox Churches.

I think this will happen sooner or later. We should not expect this to happen overnight. Let us remember that the autocephaly of other Churches was not recognized immediately. The other Orthodox Churches took time to become aware of the autocephaly of a new Church. I believe that with the grace of God and the good will of the sister Orthodox Churches, this will happen in the coming years or decades. The Ecumenical Patriarchate has no intention of canceling its decision to grant autocephaly to Ukraine. I want to be clear on this point.

Since the beginning of your patriarchate, you have been engaged in ecumenical and interreligious dialogue. Can you tell us more about this commitment?

I am convinced that these dialogues between the faithful of different Churches, religions and confessions are indispensable. These dialogues will lead, with the grace of God, one day, to unity. Until then, men, peoples and cultures must cooperate for the good of humanity.

With the Catholic Church, we advance fraternally by having an official theological dialogue with it. This dialogue was inaugurated on the holy island of Patmos. We discuss there the question of primacy and synodality. And we have a dialogue with the Lutheran World Federation, with the Anglican Communion and other Protestant Churches, always at the initiative of the Ecumenical Patriarchate.

For about 40 years, an academic dialogue has been engaged with the Jewish religion and Islam, the two other monotheistic religions. These religions represent millions of people. And the Orthodox Church could not ignore them and not dialogue or communicate with them.

We do not discuss theological questions but especially social questions, war, peace, education, diseases that afflict all humanity. We are open to dialogue with any person of good will for the good of humanity.

You are nicknamed "the green patriarch." What does ecology represent for you?

My predecessor, the late Patriarch Dimitrios, instituted September 1st as a day of prayer for the protection of Creation, the work of God. I continued this initiative during the 34 years of my patriarchate with enthusiasm, love and with the conviction that the ecological problem concerns the Orthodox, Christians and all humanity.

The Church cannot remain indifferent, especially since it has inherited the tradition of the Church Fathers, who were interested in the question of the environment, of God's Creation, which came out all beautiful from the hands of God.

We are convinced that we must sensitize young people to this question so that those who will constitute the next generation can live themselves in a house which is the planet, the Earth. Some countries avoid participating in this common effort. But I believe that with the passage of time, seeing the great catastrophes that occur in the world, all will participate in this common struggle. Indeed, destroying the house that God gave us is a sin. It is a sin against history and against future generations.

Is it difficult to be patriarch? Do you regret having accepted this responsibility?

The task of the patriarch is difficult. It is heavy with responsibilities for someone who wants to fully assume the responsibility of the first patriarchal throne in Orthodoxy. The patriarch must be vigilant, not sleep peacefully, because he has much to think about. There are enormous problems he must deal with. Fortunately, I have good collaborators. Fortunately, I love my work.

You asked me if I regretted accepting to bear this cross. I do not regret it. If God wanted it to be me, it is a question of obedience to the will of God. The throne of Constantinople, with its history, its ministry and its witness for so many centuries cannot remain empty. In Constantinople, we have a small community of faithful. This is much more important in the diaspora. All await from the mother Church, from our holy center, here, a way of support, strengthening, witness. And that is what we have been doing all these years with God's help.

What message would you like to transmit to the Orthodox?

The message that I would like to transmit to the Orthodox throughout the world and to all Christians is the central message of the Gospel, since the Gospel is the very essence of our faith. Everything it contains is the very essence of love.

If we apply this principle of love in our daily life, in our relations with one another, problems will be resolved much more easily, in good humor and in respect for each other's differences. We will not need to resort to anathemas, dismissals, weapons, wars and the destruction that we live today in many places on our planet.

Love, love, love.