

UNDER GOD’S BLESSING—SHAPING THE FUTURE

Celebrating Unity Amid Differences

Keynote Address by His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew

At the 16th General Assembly of the Conference of European Churches

(Tallinn, June 18, 2023)

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Distinguished members of the governing board of the Conference of

European Churches,

Esteemed Member Churches, Partner Organizations and Councils of

Churches,

Beloved representatives of the Member Churches in Estonia, as well as the

Evangelical Lutheran Church and the Orthodox Church of Estonia,

Beloved guests and friends,

It is a special privilege to address you at this auspicious 16th General Assembly of the Conference of European Churches (CEC) that is being accommodated in the hospitable city of Tallinn under the title “Under God’s Blessing—Shaping the Future.” For the Ecumenical Patriarchate and the other Orthodox member-Churches of CEC, the selection of this beautiful city as venue for such a prominent inter-Christian gathering is the cause for an additional joy, because CEC’s General Assembly this year coincides with the centennial anniversary since the granting of autonomous status to the Orthodox Church of Estonia by the Mother Church of Constantinople, back in 1923. We will properly honor this significant inter-Orthodox event in September, during our official visit to Estonia. Today, the purpose of our presence here is to celebrate and affirm the ecumenical spirit among our diverse churches, communions and confessions, looking back respectfully to the long history of ecumenical relations in Europe and throughout the world, while at the same time looking forward to the immense challenges that lie ahead of us on the continent and across the globe.

The ecumenical movement, as we know it, has been alive and active for more than a century, and we feel a sense of pride that the Ecumenical Patriarchate played such a decisive and formative role in calling all Christians out of their silos of isolation and toward the fellowship of unity to which Christ invited all Christians as His disciples. Since the encyclical and synodal letter issued in 1920, the Church of Constantinople has sought to employ its humble resources toward facilitating fraternal dialogue and communion in the hope of restoring Christian unity.

As we know, the ecumenical movement gained momentum in the wake of the devastation of the two world wars in the last century. People wanted and sought new ways of relating to one another. They discerned an alternative path of peaceful coexistence through face-to-face conversation and respect of the other, no matter what their beliefs. We must admit, however, that

the ecumenical movement thrived in a very different Europe than that which we know and live in today. In spite of the rhetoric that Europe was secularized and that “God was dead,” throughout the twentieth century Europe remained a vitally Christian continent. Most Europeans were baptized and identified as Christians; they were married and buried in accordance with Christian rites and customs; and attendance in worship was strong. Throughout the last century, we experienced a Europe in which Christianity—and religion in general—played a significant public role. And it is within this context that the ecumenical movement worked diligently and passionately toward transcending the violence, triumphalism, nationalism, and sectarianism that plagued Christian churches for centuries, affecting relations not only between Christian churches, but also within Christian churches.

Despite substantial and profound differences, the Christian churches contributed toward a renewed sense of a common humanity and a common good, toward a humanity beyond national and confessional boundaries, recognizing—as we recently chanted in Orthodox Churches on the Feast of Pentecost—that the Holy Spirit, “the Comforter, the Spirit of truth, is everywhere present and fills all things.” We are, therefore, all called to remember the message delivered by St. Paul in Athens, when he professed that that “Lord of heaven and earth . . . from one ancestor made all nations to inhabit the whole earth; and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the place where they will live . . . though indeed he is not far from each one of us. ‘In him we live and move and have our being . . . For we too are his offspring’” (Acts 17.24–28).

Needless to say, today, we are living in a very different Europe, one in which the landscape of religious affiliation has changed. As Christian churches, we can no longer take for granted that Europeans will identify with national churches or, indeed, with any particular form of belief. This also extends to other religious minority communities in Europe. In the early part of the twentieth century, the ecumenical movement could take for granted a Europe where the majority of citizens belonged to Christian churches; there was even an acceptance of the overall role of religion in the public sphere. However, we now live in a Europe where the religious landscape has changed dramatically, where religion may not be dead, but where most declare that they are broadly spiritual but not actually religious. Today attendance in liturgical services of cathedral churches in major cities may be sufficient, but attendance in suburban churches of smaller towns is weak. There, religiosity is perceived as being in the minority. So what is the purpose or goal of the ecumenical movement in this kind of Europe? What role or responsibility does religion play in such a Europe?

There are some who call for a “new ecumenism”—namely, a unity of Christian churches around what are labelled as “traditionalistic values.” This form of ecumenism inevitably creates strange alliances among Christian churches. Those churches who were once opposed to any type of ecumenical conversation are now willing to participate in this so-called “new ecumenism” that champions traditionalistic values. For example, some American evangelical Christians, who had previously considered Catholic and Orthodox Christians as pagans worshipping idols, now appear willing to work with certain Catholic and Orthodox Christians in order to support these values. This “new ecumenism” has even gone so far as to anoint President Vladimir Putin of the Russian Federation as its political champion, and Patriarch Kirill of the Orthodox Church of Russia as its spiritual leader.

If in the twentieth century ecumenism was conceived as a way of contributing toward a vision of common humanity and common good, then the “new ecumenism” of the twenty-first century is instead a force for division and destruction. We see the consequences of this divisive and destructive mentality on full display in Russia’s current brutal attack against Ukraine as well as in its church’s justification for this war as the salvation of Ukraine from the alleged seduction of a godless, secular, and liberal West. Unfortunately, this “new ecumenism” is essentially un-ecumenical, if not anti-

ecumenical, insofar as it positions itself against other Christians who do not support its exclusive focus on such a set of values. In the end, this “new ecumenism” promotes an ethos of polarization that is based on a dualistic, rather than an incarnational understanding of God’s relationship to the world.

After centuries of division and suspicion, the ecumenical movement of the last century agreed that a common faith in Jesus Christ was sufficient to recognize a commitment to encounter and dialogue, to common roots in the Christian faith that was previously concealed by prejudice and hostility. However, we cannot assume that traditionalistic values provide the same rallying cry for Christian unity, because today these are challenged and contested in the public realm as well as within the churches themselves. Today, the rhetoric of the so-called “culture wars” has grievously compromised any potential for dialogue, damaging the very core of ecumenism, as Orthodox are pitted against Orthodox, Catholics against Catholics, Protestants against Protestants—sometimes united only in their disagreement and denunciation. The globalization and consecration of these “culture wars” are arguably the new challenge of ecumenism, the new issue that divides us as Christians, the new barrier that prevents us from listening to and learning from one another. How will we respond to this new mandate?

As Christian communities, we must first adopt a sense of humility and accept that we are also to blame for this reduction of ecumenism. Instead of imitating Christ’s example, we have too often expected to be served, rather than to serve; we have too often demanded privileges, rather than ministered to the underprivileged; we have too often associated with the elite and powerful, with nationalism and nation-states, rather than identifying with and ministering to the vulnerable and discriminated—to Christ Himself in the least of His and our brothers and sisters.

Of course, Christian churches have in the past suffered much under oppressive rulers and communist regimes; and there are Christian populations to this day that still fear discrimination and persecution. But where churches have established too close a relationship with states, enjoying unique privileges within the nation-state, history has demonstrated that such benefits come at a cost. And the most distinctive among these costs is the prophetic voice of the churches—individually and collectively, that is to say ecumenically. One of the most glaring instances of this has been the mute voice of the ecumenical actors to the unjust invasion of Ukraine’s sovereignty by the Russian Federation.

There has been much talk over the past few decades and especially since the formation of the European Union of the Christian roots of Europe, of a Christian Europe. Of course, the recent migration patterns have intensified these proclamations, even by those who do so more for nationalistic than for Christian reasons. The idea of a Christian Europe provokes images of an idealized past and even an idealized Christian culture. Christianity has dominated Europe for centuries and it has brought much good to the European people—its laws, culture, and customs. But the idea of a Christian Europe has also led to violence among Christian churches, as they fought over which Christianity would dominate Europe.

In our ecumenical movement—where differences are recognized and respected, where distinct voices are articulated and heard—one question we must consistently discuss is: what do we mean by a Christian Europe within a democratic European Union? At the same time, how do we realize a Christian Europe within the current political landscape, where many Western nations have separated religious and national identities, some Eastern countries have reconnected religious and national identities, while others even see a rise in authoritarianism? Is the only option for us as Christian churches to assert our convictions by force over and against other beliefs and principles? Is

it not possible for a Christian Europe to mirror the openness and respect that we expect of one another in ecumenical circles—one that accepts diversity in its midst?

Can a Christian Europe now allow for all voices to be heard, including those that express disagreement and disbelief? Should a Christian Europe not be more open to living alongside and bearing witness among non-Christian faiths and communities—embracing and coexisting with all human beings in all their irreducible uniqueness, as the late Metropolitan John of Pergamon would argue? In late fourth-century Constantinople, our venerable predecessor Gregory the Theologian claimed that “we are not made for ourselves alone, we are made for the good of all our fellow creatures.”

As Christian churches in Europe—at a time when Christianity seems to be in decline and Christian communities sometimes feel threatened—it may be tempting to align our churches with the rise of political authoritarianism for the sake of status or power. Nonetheless, as we gather for this General Assembly of the Council of European Churches, we should bear witness to the kind of communion that Christ mandates. Here, we can appreciate how our differences cannot undermine our unity. Here, too, we can believe in what is possible through mutual respect and social justice.

Dear friends,

The ecumenical vision that began in the aftermath of a world of division and conflict is as important today as ever. Therefore, we should “take heart;” for our Lord has “overcome the world” (Jn 16.33). We should hope and work for a civil society in Europe, where the common good transcends boundaries and borders. We should aim toward a Europe where Christians—and all people of good will—strive toward justice and embrace the stranger. We should recall and reflect the Christian vocation “to preach the gospel to the poor, to heal the brokenhearted, to recover the sight of the blind, to proclaim freedom to the captives, and to deliver the oppressed” (Lk 4.18). That would truly be the way of reviving a Christian Europe!

Thank you for your kind attention and may God bless you all!