

EPS

17 ROUTE DE MALAGNOU
GENEVA SWITZERLAND
TELEPHONE 36 71 30
CABLES "OIKOUMENE"

Ecumenical Press Service

U. S. ENQUIRIES:
WCC, 475 RIVERSIDE DRIVE, NEW YORK 27
TEL. RIVERSIDE 9-4887

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ECUMENICAL PATRIARCH PROPOSES "SUMMIT CONFERENCE"

(Istanbul) - A proposal by the Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagoras I that a meeting of the heads of the major Christian churches be held in Jerusalem next month during Pope Paul's visit there has met with widespread interest by church leaders around the world.

However, none of the reactions thus far have taken the form of an official response to the proposal. Especially to date there has been no official comment from the Vatican.

(The Rome correspondent of the New York Herald Tribune reports that a Vatican specialist in Orthodox church affairs met Patriarch Athenagoras in Istanbul this week to discuss the possibility of a meeting between the Patriarch and the Pope.

The Herald Tribune said the specialist was Father Pierre Duprey of the Secretariat for the Promotion of Christian Unity. It reported that he delivered a letter "from a high Vatican personality" which reportedly indicated that the Pope would be receptive to some form of meeting with the Patriarch.

It noted that the Pope has said he would go to Jerusalem in humility, like a pilgrim, and is not in a position to proffer public invitations to other religious leaders while he is the guest of a foreign country. The Pope also, the Tribune said, wants to avoid giving the impression that the pilgrimage will be an occasion for formal religious talks. But the possibility for an informal meeting is being explored.

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If the Pope were to meet with the Ecumenical Patriarch, it would be the first time the heads of the two churches have conversed since the great schism of the 11th century. At a pan-Orthodox assembly on the Island of Rhodes in September, it was proposed that a dialogue "on equal terms" be initiated between the Orthodox churches and the Roman Catholic Church.)

The Patriarch's proposal for the "summit conference" came against the background of the Pope's dramatic announcement of his pilgrimage at the conclusion of the second session of the Vatican Council. The plan reportedly took the Vatican by surprise. The visit, scheduled January 4-6, will be the first papal voyage outside Italy in 150 years, a first papal plane ride, and the first papal visit to the Holy Land.

Making his summit proposal, the Ecumenical Patriarch said such a conference of Protestant, Roman Catholic and Orthodox leaders would open a new road for Christianity and would be "a great event, a wonderful thing".

Addressing a large crowd of the faithful gathered in the historic church of St. Nicholas in Cibali on the Feast Day of St. Nicholas (December 6), the Patriarch, an official communiqué said, "commented warmly" about the news of the Pope's proposed pilgrimage.

He then continued: "It would truly be a work of Providence if during this holy pilgrimage all the heads of the churches of East and West could meet in the Holy City of Zion to ask in common fervent prayer and in pious meditation ... that to the glory of Christ and the benefit of all mankind the way be opened to a complete reconstitution of Christian unity according to the holy will of the Lord."

In Rome, Melkite Rite Patriarch Maximos IV said that even if such a summit meeting did not occur, Pope Paul would meet Orthodox leaders during his trip.

Archbishop Iakovos, head of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of North and South America, and a president of the World Council of Churches, hailed the possibility, and expressed the hope that all top Christian leaders would go to Israel.

"I don't think the time is ripe yet to unite the churches by declaration or proclamation of church leaders", he said, "but if, as I hope and pray, they go (to the Holy Land) with a common calling to unite along certain lines it would be a great day".

The response of the Greek Orthodox Church, according to Athens sources, has been one of "reserve". The London Times correspondent reported concern by "more conservative Greek bishops" over "the dangerous haste of Constantinople in seeking an all-Christian conference without first ensuring the conditions of its success".

Archbishop Chrysostomos, the Greek Primate, it was learned, has declined to make any comment until the suggestion has been studied and debated by the Holy Synod.

A spokesman for the Moscow Patriarchate of the Russian Orthodox Church said that it was impossible for the Patriarchate to make any decision about the proposal until it had been officially communicated to the churches concerned. However, his statement made it clear that the church regards the proposal as extremely important.