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Pope, Patriarch Embrace To Demonstrate 'Unity'

ISTANBUL, Turkey (AP) — With an embrace and "a kiss of unity," Pope John Paul II and Patriarch Demetrius I opened talks Thursday aimed at reuniting the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Churches after nine centuries of discord.

"I dare to hope that this day (of unity) is near. Personally I would wish it to be very near," the pope said in the Roman Catholic Cathedral of the Holy Spirit where he sang his first Mass on his three-day visit to Turkey.

More than 1,000 people packed the cathedral, including Patriarch Demetrius and the 12 members of his Holy Synod, the Orthodox Church's ruling body. The pope said he hoped the leaders of the two largest branches of Christianity could one day celebrate Mass at the same altar.

The Mass climaxed a long day of traveling and papal diplomacy in Turkey, which is 99 percent Moslem.

Demetrius, spiritual leader of 200 million Orthodox, greeted the Polish-born pontiff earlier in the day at Istanbul's Yesilkoy airport on his arrival from the Turkish capital of Ankara. Istanbul's chief rabbi and Moslem religious leaders were also on hand.

In Ankara, the spiritual leader of 700 million Roman Catholics called for Christians and the world's 800 Moslems to compete "for the emulation of good."

"I wonder whether it is not urgent, precisely today when Christians and Moslems have entered a new period of history, to recognize and develop the spiritual links which unite us to promote and defend together ... moral values, peace and liberty," John Paul II said.

In Istanbul, Demetrius gave the pontiff an emotional

welcome to the Orthodox Cathedral of St. George, a ramshackle Byzantine-style church.

As the pope entered the church ground, the patriarch rose from his throne, crossed the tiny courtyard and met the visitor midway on a red carpet. "Welcome holy brother," said Demetrius.

The pope, clad in a white robe and a gold-embroidered red cloak and a white skull cap, put his hands gently on the patriarch's shoulders. Their eyes brimming with tears, they embraced as the church bells pealed.

The two leaders pledged to strive to reunite the churches, separated since 1054 by Orthodox rejection of papal primacy. The black-robed patriarch then led the pope into the church for joint prayer and a thanksgiving service.

John Paul II then conducted a joint service with Armenian Patriarch Shnorkh Kalustian at the St. John Chrysostom church, which was lit by candlelight because of a power failure.

The pontiff also visited the Hagia Sophia, once the largest church in Christendom, turned into a mosque in the 15th century and now a museum. The pope marveled at the magnificent dome and told the curator, "It's impressive, impressive."

The pope's overture to Islam was welcomed by Abu Firas, the Ankara representative of the Palestine Liberation Organization. Firas told reporters the papal trip to Turkey was "positive and a constructive step."

"In order to realize world peace it is imperative that the Islamic and Christian worlds unite," said Firas, who met the pontiff at a reception Wednesday.