

Pope and Orthodox Patriarch embrace at Vatican

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By Paul Holmes

VATICAN CITY, June 27 (Reuter) - Pope John Paul welcomed the spiritual leader of more than 150 million Orthodox Christians to the Vatican on Tuesday for talks both hope will help reduce obstacles to unity after nearly 1,000 years of division.

The meeting between the Pontiff and Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew is only the seventh between spiritual leaders of the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches since the Great Schism that split Christendom in 1054.

The Pope, dressed in white and meeting Bartholomew for the first time, embraced the black-robed Patriarch and walked with him hand-in-hand into the Tower of St John, where Bartholomew will reside during his three-day stay at the Vatican.

The two men are scheduled to meet privately three times and together will bless pilgrims in St Peter's Square after mass at the Vatican on Thursday, the feast of Saints Peter and Paul.

"The aim of this visit, or at least the hope, is that it will relaunch dialogue...in an even more positive way," a senior official of the Vatican's Pontifical Council for the Promotion of Christian Unity, Monsignor Eleuterio Fortino, said.

Bartholomew, whose seat is in Istanbul, the former Constantinople, heads the Greek Orthodox Church and has "primacy of honour" in the broader Orthodox Christian faith, whose self-governing national Churches choose their own patriarchs.

Like the Pope, he has set greater unity as one of his goals for the year 2000, which will usher in the third millennium of Christianity.

The split between the Catholic and Orthodox churches was sealed by mutual excommunications in 1054 after a host of theological disputes, including over the bodily nature of Christ.

The Pope, in an apostolic letter addressed to Orthodox Christians last month, put the blame for the division on both sides and called for a spirit of forgiveness.

"The sin of our separation is very serious...How can we be fully credible if we stand divided?," the Pope wrote.

"These divisions must give way to rapprochement and harmony. The wounds on the path of Christian unity must be healed."

In a subsequent encyclical on Christian unity, he also indicated that he was willing to seek an accommodation with non-Catholic denominations on the future role of the papacy.

The gesture has potentially historic consequences since Orthodox Christians, like Protestants in the West, reject any single, supreme leader of Christianity and do not recognise papal jurisdiction or infallibility.

Relations between the Roman and Orthodox churches have improved greatly over the past three decades since Pope Paul VI and Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagoras met and embraced on the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem in 1964.

They nullified the excommunications of the Great Schism in 1971 and John Paul met Bartholomew's predecessor, Dimitrios, at the Vatican in 1987.

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Relations were strained in the early 1990s by Orthodox allegations that Roman Catholics were trying to poach converts following the collapse of communism in eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union.

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