Vatican

Pope Francis talks with Orthodox Archbishop Ieronymos II of Athens and all Greece during a m

Pope Francis talks with Orthodox Archbishop Ieronymos II of Athens and all Greece during a meeting with their delegations in the Throne Room of the archbishopric in Athens, Greece, Dec. 4, 2021. (CNS photo/Paul Haring)



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ATHENS, GREECE — Pope Francis asked forgiveness for the historical "mistakes committed by many Catholics" against Orthodox Christians during a Dec. 4 meeting with the head of the Greek Church, as he urged Catholics and Orthodox believers to pursue greater unity.

"Shamefully, I acknowledge this for the Catholic Church, actions and decisions that had little or nothing to do with Jesus and the Gospel, but were instead marked by a thirst for advantage and power, gravely weakened our communion," the pope said during the first day of his three-day visit to Greece.

Francis is the first pope to visit the Greek capital since Pope John Paul II in 2001. During that visit, mass protests filled Athens with signs labeling the pope as the "anti-Christ."

Despite some lingering tensions between the two traditions and the grey skies over the city, Francis' reception was much warmer, with His Beatitude Ieronymos II, the Orthodox Archbishop of Athens and All Greece, describing Francis as the "ground-breaking primate of the Roman Catholic Church."

"I have absolute trust in your power of judgment, your spiritual greatness and long ecclesiastical experience," Ieronymos said to Francis as the two met at the archbishop's residence.

The Roman Catholic Church has been separated from the Orthodox Church since 1054. Following his election in 2013, Francis prioritized ecumenical relations with the Eastern churches, repeatedly acknowledging the sometimes bitter rivalry between the two traditions and regularly meeting with his Orthodox counterparts to deepen their relationships.

In Athens, Francis sought to recall their "common roots that have endured over the centuries" as faiths in the apostolic tradition.

Despite the "twists and turns of time" and roots that have been "poisoned" by "weeds of suspicion," Francis said that "what God planted continues to grow and bear fruit in the same spirit."

While warning against proselytization, Francis said that for the two churches to "testify before the world to the harmony of the Gospel," Christians should not be separated.

"How can we proclaim the love of Christ who gathers the nations, if we ourselves are not united?" Francis asked.

"The openness of Pope Francis and his constructive and positive approach to sensitive issues concerning the Orthodox tradition are promising signs in the common path of Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches toward full communion," Pantelis Kalaitzidis, director of the Volos Academy for Theological Studies, told NCR.

Kalaitzidis, a member of the executive committee of the European Academy of Religion, pointed specifically to the work Francis and Orthodox leaders have done together on the issues of the environment and on migration as practical ways in which they have put ecumenism in action, which he said has increased the pope's popularity among the Orthodox.

In 2016, Francis and Ieronymos met on the Greek isle of Lesbos, a prominent entry point for refugees seeking asylum in Europe, and both leaders highlighted their joint work on behalf of migrants.

The pope recalled "the plight of so many of our migrant brothers and sisters, who cannot be regarded with indifference, seen only as a burdensome problem to be managed or, worse yet, passed on to someone else." He will return to Lesbos Sunday for a half-day visit.

"Now we meet again, to share the joy of fraternity and to view the Mediterranean that surrounds us not simply as a site of difficulties and divisions, but also as a sea that brings peoples together," he said.

As the two leaders reunited in Athens, Ieronymos made clear that they had much more work to do together, especially on environmental concerns.

Ieronymos labeled last month's United Nations meeting in Glasgow, Scotland, on climate change as a "disappointment" for its lack of bold international commitments to curbing carbon emissions.

"When it comes to the environment, however, there is no place for compromises," he said. "This great gift of God is under threat and unless we take bold initiatives, the future ahead of us is very bleak indeed."

Following his meeting with His Beatitude, Francis will address Greece's Catholic leaders in the minority-Catholic country, and on Sunday, he will celebrate the first papal Mass in the capital in two decades.

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