Vatican

Vatican News



The marble head of a young man, a tiny fragment from the 2,500-year-old sculptured decoration of the Parthenon Temple on the ancient Acropolis, is displayed during a presentation to the press at the new Acropolis Museum in Athens, Nov. 5, 2008. The Vatican and Greece were finalizing a deal Tuesday March 7, 2023 to return three fragments of the Parthenon Marbles that have been in the collection of the Vatican Museums for two centuries. (AP Photo/Thanassis Stavrakis, File)

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Rome — March 7, 2023
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The Vatican and Greece finalized a deal March 7 for the return of three sculpture fragments from the Parthenon that have been in the collection of the Vatican Museums for two centuries, the latest case of a Western museum bowing to demands for restitution.

The Vatican has termed the return an ecumenical "donation" to the Orthodox Christian archbishop of Athens and all Greece, not necessarily a state-to-state transfer. But it nevertheless puts pressure on the British Museum to conclude a deal with Greece over the fate of its much bigger collection of Parthenon sculptures.

The head of the Vatican city-state, Cardinal Fernando Vergez, signed an agreement to implement the "donation" during a private Vatican Museums ceremony with Greek Culture Minister Lina Mendoni and a representative of the Orthodox Christian archbishop of Athens and all Greece, His Beatitude Ieronymos II.

The envoy, Fr. Emmanuel Papamikroulis, told The Associated Press that the Greek Orthodox Church and archbishop were grateful to Pope Francis for the deal.

"It has taken place at a difficult time for our country, and it will hopefully provide some sense of pride and happiness. I hope this initiative is followed by others," he said in a telephone interview from the Vatican, where he was touring the gardens after the signing ceremony.

"This initiative does help heal wounds of the past and it demonstrates that when Christian leaders work together, they can resolve issues in a practical way," Papamikroulis added.

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The fragments are expected to arrive in Athens later this month, with a March 24 ceremony planned to receive them.

The British Museum has refused decades of appeals from Greece to return its much larger collection of Parthenon sculptures, which have been a centerpiece of the museum since 1816.

Earlier this month, however, the chair of the British Museum said the U.K. and Greece were working on a deal that would see his institution’s Parthenon Marbles displayed in both London and Athens.

The 5th century B.C. sculptures are mostly remnants of a 160-meter-long (520-foot) frieze that ran around the outer walls of the Parthenon Temple on the Acropolis, dedicated to Athena, goddess of wisdom.

Much of the frieze and the temple’s other sculptural decoration were lost in a 17th-century bombardment, and about half the remaining works were removed in the early 19th century by a British diplomat, Lord Elgin.