News
Explainer



A Christian Orthodox clergy stands in one of the corridors of the Christian Orthodox Halki Theological school, at the Holy Trinity monastery, in Heybeliada island, Istanbul, Turkey, Friday, Nov. 14, 2025. (AP/Francisco Seco)

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HEYBELIADA, Turkey — November 24, 2025
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As Pope Leo XIV prepares to embark on his first trip abroad with a visit to Turkey to mark a key event that shaped the foundations of Catholic and Orthodox Christianity, there has been a surge of renewed optimism over the possible reopening of a Greek Orthodox religious seminary that has been closed since 1971.

The Halki Theological School has become a symbol of Orthodox heritage and a focal point in the push for religious freedoms in Turkey.

Located on Heybeliada Island, off the coast of Istanbul, the seminary once trained generations of Greek Orthodox patriarchs and clergy. They include Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I, the spiritual leader of some 300 million Orthodox Christians worldwide.

Turkey closed the school under laws restricting private higher education, and despite repeated appeals from international religious leaders and human rights advocates — as well as subsequent legal changes that allowed private universities to flourish — it has remained shut ever since.

Momentum for reopening it appeared to grow after Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan discussed the issue with U.S. President Donald Trump at the White House in September. Erdogan said Turkey would "do our part" regarding its reopening. Erdogan had previously linked the move to reciprocal measures from Greece to improve the rights of Muslims there.

The school, which was founded in 1844, stands surrounded by scaffolding as renovation work continues. Inside, one floor that serves as the clergy quarters and two classrooms have already been completed, standing ready to welcome students once the seminary reopens.

'Political and diplomatic anachronism'

During his visit to Turkey, starting on Thursday, Leo is scheduled to meet Erdogan and join Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew in commemorating the 1,700th anniversary of the Council of Nicaea, in a pilgrimage honoring Christianity's theological roots. He will then travel to Lebanon for the second leg of his trip.

Turkey is now "ready to make the big step forward for the benefit of Turkey, for the benefit of the minorities and for the benefit of religious and minority rights in this country" by reopening the seminary, Archbishop Elpidophoros, head of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America, told The Associated Press in a video interview from his base in New York.

A committee of representatives from the Istanbul-based Greek Orthodox Patriarchate and the Turkish government has begun discussions on the reopening, Elpidophoros said, expressing optimism that the school could welcome students again by the start of the next academic year.

"Keeping this school closed after more than 50 years is a political and diplomatic anachronism that doesn't help our country," said the Istanbul-born archbishop. "We have so many private universities and private schools in Turkey, so keeping only Halki closed doesn't help Turkey, doesn't help anyone."

A test of religious freedom

The fate of the seminary has long been viewed as a test of predominantly Muslim Turkey's treatment of religious minorities, including the country's Christian population, estimated at 200,000 to 370,000 out of nearly 86 million.

Since coming to power in 2002, Erdogan's government has enacted reforms to improve the rights of religious groups, including opening places of worship and returning some property that was confiscated — but problems linger.

Although the Constitution guarantees freedom of religion, only Armenians, Greeks and Jews — non-Muslim minorities who were recognized under a 1923 peace treaty that established modern Turkey's borders — are allowed to operate places of worship and schools. Other Christian groups lack formal recognition and often face obstacles in registering churches or religious associations.

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There have been isolated incidents of violence, including a 2024 attack on a Catholic church in Istanbul, where a worshipper was killed during Mass. The Islamic State group claimed responsibility for the attack.

Turkey denied recent reports that claimed it had deported foreign nationals belonging to Protestant groups as national security threats. Turkey blamed what it said was "a deliberate disinformation campaign" against the country for the claims.

In July 2020, Turkey converted Istanbul's Hagia Sophia — once one of the most important historic cathedrals in Christianity and a United Nations-designated world heritage site — from a museum back into a mosque, a move that drew widespread international criticism. Although popes have visited Hagia Sophia in the past, the important landmark was left out of Leo's itinerary.

The Greek Orthodox Patriarchate, based in Istanbul, is internationally recognized as the "first among equals" in the Orthodox Christian world. Turkey however, does not recognize its ecumenical status, insisting that under the 1923 treaty, the patriarch is only head of the country's ever-dwindling Greek Orthodox minority. The Patriarchate dates from the Orthodox Greek Byzantine Empire, which collapsed when the Muslim Ottoman Turks conquered the Byzantine Empire of Constantinople, today's Istanbul, in 1453.

'A school with this spirit'

At the shuttered seminary, Agnes Kaltsogianni, a visitor from Greece, said the seminary was important for both Greece and Turkey and its reopening could be a basis for improved ties between the two longtime rival countries.

"There should be a gradual improvement between the two countries on all levels, and this (place) can be a starting point for major cultural development and affinity," said the 48-year-old English teacher.

Elpidophoros, 57, was too young to make it to Halki and was forced to study to join the clergy in a Greek seminary. However, he served as abbot of the Halki monastery for eight years before his appointment as archbishop of America.

"The Theological School of Halki is in my heart," he said.

Asked about the significance of the school for the Greek Orthodox community, Elpidophoros said Halki represents a "spirit" that is open to new ideas, dialogue and coexistence, while rejecting nationalist and religious prejudice, and hate speech.

"The entire world needs a school with this spirit," he said.