

Reporter

By Richard Carriero

Patriarch Bartholomew

The Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople is an ancient position. As one of the original five patriarchs of the Christian Church, the Patriarch of Constantinople has been a key figure in all of Christendom and the head of the 300 million-strong Eastern Orthodox Church. Despite his busy schedule His All Holiness was gracious enough to answer a few questions for Rich Carriero about his position, world politics, interfaith dialogue and the future of Turkey.

TOIST: Your position is often referred to as First Among Equals. What does this term mean?

Patriarch Bartholomew: In this "one body of Christ" comprising "many parts," the Ecumenical Patriarch serves as the "first among equals," while the Ecumenical Patriarchate serves as Mother Church to the family of local Orthodox Churches throughout the world. In this role, the Ecumenical Patriarch presides in historical honor among all Orthodox Primates, convoking and presiding over pan-Orthodox gatherings and in general coordinating the common affairs of the Orthodox family.

What are some ways the office of Ecumenical Patriarch changed since its inception?

Over the centuries, the office of the Ecumenical Patriarch has developed into a responsibility and role of unity and reconciliation. In this regard, the Ecumenical Patriarch traditionally serves as the focal point and spokesman for Orthodox Church unity, convening inter-Orthodox councils, as we said, as well as inter-Church and inter-faith dialogues.

Do you feel sadness upon visiting Aya Sofia?

When we see the Church of the Holy Wisdom, we are overwhelmed by the feeling of beauty and light, which can overcome all sense of ugliness and darkness in our world. In this respect, one of our favorite sites is the Holy Monastery of Chora, where the spectacular mosaics and frescoes bespeak a beauty that transcends words. It is our conviction that the creativity of art offers new life and renewed hope for our age.

You are known throughout the international community for

encouraging inter-faith dialogue. Why do you feel it is important that people of different faiths participate in this dialogue?

There is no doubt that interfaith dialogue will prove to be one of the most crucial issues of our century, when we must confront the reality of a divided world in a global community. Unless we can look at one another honestly in the eyes, discerning what truly matters in terms of our ethnic and religious differences, then we are destined to repeat the errors of the past, which has been fraught with hatred and hurtfulness. Interfaith dialogue permits us to approach and appreciate one another's history and culture without fear.

If interfaith dialogue is truly the call of our age, then the world has a great deal to learn from the admission of a Muslim nation into the European Union.

I'd like to talk about the Great Schism. Do you believe that the rift between the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church will ever be healed? Do you feel that you were able to make any progress toward this end when Pope Benedict visited Istanbul in 2006?

We have to believe that adherents of the religion of love—which is centered on the God who created the world out of love and became incarnate out of love for the world—must work toward reconciliation. Nevertheless, even if this is our prayer and dream, we are realistic in our historical appreciation that the divisions arose over many centuries and for diverse reasons, not all of them religious. Therefore, it will take much time and toil to heal these rifts, as you call them. And along the road toward reconciliation and healing, every effort is sacred. It is in this perspective, then, that we believe that



the visit of Pope Benedict XVI to the Ecumenical Patriarchate in November 2006 was a critical step toward union. For, if we are divided in theology, we are still able to work together in responding to critical issues related to social justice.

Do you believe that global warming is caused by human activity?

The question of whether global warming is caused by human activity is a fair scientific question. Nevertheless, but it should never be used as an excuse not to treat the natural environment or its resources in a respectful manner. Whether or not the predictions by scientists are correct—and it is our conviction that they indeed are—we must still regard them as preventative measures, much like our physician might predict a fateful end based on diagnosis of symptoms and bad habits.

What, in your opinion, is the biggest challenge we face in the 21st Century?

The greatest challenge of the 21st century will be to learn to treat our brother and sister as ourselves (if we are to live as a global community) and to treat the natural environment as our own body (if we are to preserve the planet for our children).

Will Turkey ever join the EU? As a Turkish citizen, what do you see in Turkey's future?

It is our fervent hope and desire that Turkey will indeed be admitted to the European Union. It is our conviction that this will be beneficial not only to Turkey itself but also to the rest of the European community. If interfaith dialogue is truly the call of our age, then the world has a great deal to learn from the admission of a Muslim nation into the European Union. At the same time, Turkey will have much to gain by embracing principles respected by nations of Western civilization, such as the equal rights of all people and the equal tolerance of all faiths.