

INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM SUMMIT
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BRIDGE BUILDING VICTORIES IN THE MIDST OF CONFLICT:
THE HOLY LAND

Remarks Anthony J. Limberakis, MD
Archon Megas Aktouarios
National Commander, Archons of the Ecumenical Patriarchate

Madame Moderator, fellow panelists, friends all,

Although the Christian Faith came into being in **The Holy Land** where Jesus Christ was born, crucified, and raised from the dead; it was in **The Sacred Land** of Constantinople where Christianity developed and thrived from a persecuted faith to the official religion of the Roman Empire. It is in Constantinople, present-day Istanbul where the Spiritual Center of 300 million Orthodox Christians resides in the person of His All-Holiness, Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew the 270th Archbishop of Constantinople and direct successor of St. Andrew, the very first Apostle of Christ.

I have had the great honor of my life to serve as the National Commander of the Archons of the Ecumenical Patriarchate in America for the past 25 years, an organization comprised of the leading Orthodox Christians in America whose sole purpose is to promote and defend the Ecumenical Patriarchate and Protect the Future of Faith, for all. In this regard, the Archons of the Ecumenical Patriarchate have relentlessly been bridge-builders, peacemakers; seeking peace and inclusivity at multiple levels, globally and locally. We have organized three International Religious Freedom Conferences in the past few years including our first, at the European Parliament in Brussels entitled Religious Freedom, Turkey's Bridge to the European Union, then in Berlin entitled

Tearing Down Walls, followed by our Washington, DC Conference focusing on Christian Religious Persecution and now we are in the final stages of planning our Fourth International Religious Freedom Conference in Athens, Greece on the protection of Religious Freedom, Democracy and Human Rights. At this time, I am honored to announce that former Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo will be one of our featured keynote speakers at our Fourth International Archon Religious Freedom Conference this coming May in Athens. As many of you may know, Secretary Pompeo working together with Ambassador Sam Brownback established the very first Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom in 2017, upon which this 24th IRF Summit builds upon.

For nearly four decades now, within the fragile confines of an overwhelming Muslim population, His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew has humbly served as the spiritual and symbolical leader of an Orthodox Christian minority, maintaining stability, and advocating for religious freedom despite sobering and turbulent developments both inside and around Turkey. As he likes to say: “We are a small drop in a vast ocean. Yet God’s grace has condescended for us to survive.”

When he was interviewed by Bob Simon for “60 Minutes” in 2009, the Patriarch likened the situation of religious minorities in Turkey to their own Holy Land. It is from this position of solidarity with those who struggle for religious freedom that Bartholomew is uniquely positioned and prepared to build bridges of tolerance and dialogue. His reconciliatory disposition and charitable nature have already brought about transformations that would have been inconceivable only a few years ago.

In this way, Bartholomew has proved to be a successful bridge-builder in a volatile world and time. Indeed, in the face of conflict between Jewish and Muslim communities, he has repeatedly and boldly declared that “violence in the name of

religion is a crime against religion.” He has worked for the release of Bulgarian Orthodox nurses from Gaddafi’s Libya, for a young American citizen unjustly imprisoned in Iran, and for a Jewish American wrongfully jailed in Cuba.

What is unique about our Holy Father’s bridge-building is the strategic location of Istanbul historically and geographically. The modern city of Istanbul remains a critical crossroads between civilizations: it is there that Europe and Asia meet and that Mediterranean and Middle Eastern cultures mingle. In fact, for centuries, the world’s monotheistic religious traditions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—have rubbed shoulders in that region. And so Bartholomew perceives his patriarchal mission and ministry as singularly responsible in raising awareness for religious tolerance and peaceful coexistence. He believes that religion should not divide along fault lines, but instead unite on the fundamental issues of human rights, social justice, and religious freedom. “On this planet created by God for us all, there is room for all of us,” were his words when he visited the ruins of the World Trade Center just months after 9/11.

To this end, Bartholomew has maintained a regular program of international and interreligious dialogues. Moreover, his vision for bridge-building has seen him travel to Israel and Egypt, Libya and Syria, the United Arab Emirates, Jordan, Bahrain, Qatar, Kazakhstan, Iran, and Azerbaijan, but also to venues of global cooperation such as the United Nations, the European Union, and the European Commission.

Beyond his numerous statements for peace in times of war—most recently in the Holy Land and in Ukraine—the Ecumenical Patriarch has joined forces with Pope Francis to bring dialogue and emphasize reconciliation between Israel and Gaza. Thus, in a historical meeting between Patriarch Bartholomew and Pope Francis in Jerusalem a few years ago, the two leaders held a joint thanksgiving service in the Church of the Resurrection and then venerated the Holy Sepulcher, the

tomb of Jesus Christ. They also met on the Mount of Olives, adjacent to the walls of the old city, where Jesus Christ prayed on the night of his betrayal. Most critically, the Patriarch and the Pope decided to make a proposal to then Israeli President Shimon Peres and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas that they should visit the Vatican in 2016 for a prayer for peace—which both rival presidents accepted and which in fact took place in 2016.

In brief, the Ecumenical Patriarch knows that where there is a will, there is always a way. Where people sit down at the same table, resistance and dissension begin to melt away. To quote his own words about the vital importance of dialogue in resolving conflict: “We have to look each other in the eyes!”

Thank you