

Peripatetic patriarch visits Washington, White House: Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew of the Eastern Orthodox Church

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With his flowing black robe and long white beard, Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew is a living portrait of the 2,000-year-old Eastern Orthodox Christian faith.

And yet, he says, he's somewhat of a revolutionary.

"By calling Christianity revolutionary, and saying it is dedicated to change, we are not siding with progressives—just as, by conserving it, we are not siding with conservatives," he said in a lecture at Georgetown University on November 3. "The only side that we take is that of our faith, which today may seem to land us in one political camp, tomorrow another, but in truth we are always only in one camp, that of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ."

The speech by the Istanbul-based patriarch was one of numerous appearances by the man known for his advocacy of interfaith relations and religious freedom, and often dubbed the "green patriarch" for working to combat environmental degradation. At many stops, Bartholomew signaled his priority of caring for the environment, saying those who "tyrannize the earth" are committing sins.

Early in his two-and-a-half-week U.S. visit, he spoke from the banks of the Mississippi River in New Orleans, where he led a conference on problems affecting the world's major bodies of water. He later traveled to New York, where he received an honorary degree from Catholic leaders at Fordham University, visited a Manhattan synagogue and conducted a prayer service at the United Nations.

The 69-year-old patriarch, by his very active part in interreligious affairs, has become a messenger to people unfamiliar with Orthodox traditions or theology.

“He’s someone who can speak a language that everyone understands,” said Elizabeth Prodromou, a Greek Orthodox Christian and director of a program on international relations and religion at Boston University.

Bartholomew also has the ear of the powerful in Washington. Besides meeting with President Obama, the patriarch’s schedule included dinner at Vice President Joe Biden’s residence, meetings with congressional leaders and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, and sessions with ambassadors to Turkey and Greece.

The patriarch planned to have a private breakfast with schoolmates from the Theological School of Halki, which was shut down by Turkey in the 1970s. In his April meeting with Obama in Turkey, he discussed the closed seminary, which Obama has urged Turkish lawmakers to reopen. A congressional resolution welcoming Bartholomew to Washington also called for the school to be reopened.

A White House statement coinciding with Obama’s November 3 meeting with Bartholomew noted that the president reaffirmed his support for the seminary.

“He also took the opportunity to reiterate the U.S. commitment to confronting global climate change and to applaud the ecumenical patriarch for his work on global interfaith dialogue,” the Obama administration said. *-Religion News Service*