

**Address of His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew to the Participants of
the Franciscan Formation Course for Ecumenical and Interreligious Dialogue**

Phanar, 20 October 2025

Reverend Fathers,

Dear members of the Franciscan family,

Cherished participants in this programme of formation.

We welcome you with heartfelt joy to the Ecumenical Patriarchate, the Venerable Centre of Orthodoxy, which for centuries has served as a beacon of faith, dialogue, and reconciliation among Christians and among all people of goodwill. Your annual visit has become a sign of friendship and fraternity between the Franciscan community and the Orthodox Church a tradition which we treasure deeply.

Your course on Ecumenical and Interreligious Dialogue stands as a living testimony to the Gospel's commandment of love. Dialogue is not a matter of mere diplomacy or academic curiosity; it is, rather, an act of love and obedience to Christ. It is the choice to meet the other with reverence, to listen rather than to argue, to heal rather than to wound. Authentic dialogue is born from humility--from the conviction that truth is not possessed, but encountered in the communion of love.

The Franciscan spirit, marked by simplicity, peace, and joy, embodies precisely this attitude. Saint Francis himself crossed borders of faith and culture, seeking fraternity even in the midst of conflict. In the same way, your presence here affirms that our Christian witness is most authentic when it is offered in a spirit of openness and peace.

This year, the entire Christian world commemorates the 1700th (seventeen-hundredth) anniversary of the First Ecumenical Council of Nicaea, convened in the year 325 by Emperor Constantine the Great. That Council, the first gathering of the undivided Church, proclaimed the central mystery of our faith: that our Lord Jesus Christ is "Light of Light, true God of true God." From Nicaea emerged the Creed that unites all who confess Christ, East and West alike.

To recall Nicaea today is to remember that unity is intrinsic to the very nature of the Church. Division is not the Church's natural state, communion is. The bishops who assembled at Nicaea did not speak for separate denominations they spoke for the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Faith. Their witness reminds us that our efforts for Christian unity are not new innovations, but a return to the source a return to the wholeness that once was.

We therefore celebrate this anniversary not as nostalgia, but as vocation: a summons to rediscover that same spirit of unity, courage, and discernment which guided the Fathers of Nicaea. It calls us to proclaim together, in a fragmented world, that Christ is the light who dispels every darkness.

In this spirit, we express our profound gratitude for the unwavering commitment of the Roman Catholic Church to the cause of Christian unity. The Franciscan Order, in particular, has for centuries served as a bridge between our two traditions. Your presence throughout the world,

your ministry among the poor, and your consistent dedication to peace and dialogue stand as a radiant witness to the Gospel.

Here in Istanbul, your community has cultivated bonds of friendship with the local Christian Churches and with all people of faith. We cherish this collaboration, for it reveals that true theology is not confined to books or classrooms, but is lived out in service and fraternity.

It is often said that theology and spirituality must embrace one another. The Franciscans have constantly reminded the Church that love of God cannot be separated from love of neighbour, and that beauty, simplicity, and compassion open the heart to divine truth. For this, we give thanks to God for you.

We look forward with anticipation to the forthcoming visit of our Brother, His Holiness Pope Leo XIV, to our Venerable See and to the historic city of Nicaea, where that first Ecumenical Council was held. This pilgrimage will be both commemorative and prophetic: a remembrance of what once united us, and a pledge of what, by God's grace, may unite us again.

Each meeting between the Bishop of Senior Rome and the Bishop of New Rome is a sign that the path of dialogue is irreversible. It is a testimony that charity overcomes suspicion, and that prayer accomplishes what politics cannot. We pray that the Spirit of Nicaea will guide our steps, purify our hearts, and inspire both our Churches to move ever closer to that full communion for which our Lord prayed on the night before His Passion: "that they may all be one" (John 17:21).

Beloved friends,

Your presence here strengthens our hope. Formation in dialogue is not an academic exercise; it is a spiritual discipline. It requires patience, humility, and above all, love. When we engage others with love, we become co-workers of the Holy Spirit, Who alone brings unity where there is division, and life where there is death.

May your studies and your encounters during this course deepen your conviction that dialogue is itself a form of mission a proclamation of the Kingdom that knows no boundaries of race, language, or confession. And may you return to your respective ministries renewed in zeal, carrying with you the blessing of this City, where for centuries Christians have prayed, suffered, and hoped together.

As you continue your pilgrimage of learning and of faith, we assure you of our earnest prayers and our sincere affection. May the Lord of peace fill your hearts with the joy of the Resurrection. May He bless the Franciscan Order with renewed strength in its service of peace and creation, and may He guide all Christians to rediscover that unity of mind and heart which shone forth so gloriously at Nicaea seventeen centuries ago.

With paternal love, we embrace you all and invoke upon you the abundant grace and mercy of Almighty God.

Thank you for your attention!