

ADDRESS OF THE DELEGATE GENERAL OF THE ORDER OF FRIARS MINOR
ON THE OCCASION OF THE *THYRANOIXIA* AND DIVINE LITURGY
AT THE CHURCH OF SANTA MARIA IN IZMIR
ON SUNDAY 8TH OF DECEMBER 2024

Your All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I of Constantinople,
Your Eminence the Most Reverend Metropolitan Bartholomew of Smyrna,
Reverend Fathers, Brothers (and Sisters),
and all the Christian faithful of the Church in Smyrna:

In the name of Brother Massimo Fusarelli, Minister General of the Order of Friars Minor,
and in the words of our Founder, St. Francis of Assisi, I offer you the greeting:
May the Lord give you Peace.

As Delegate General for the Franciscan Friars in Türkiye, and as President of our Order's
General Commission for the Service of Dialogue, together with the other members of our
small delegation from Rome, Istanbul and Bornova, we have the special honour of
representing our Minister General and Vicar General at this official rite of the opening of the
doors (*Thyranoixia*) and the Divine Liturgy of this Sacred Church of Santa Maria in Izmir.
This moment is truly an important visible sign of fraternal solidarity, a concrete expression
of ecumenical fraternity, and a powerful witness to Christian unity.

This land has been sanctified by the life and teachings of the holy and glorious Apostle and
Evangelist John the Theologian, the Apostolic Father, Bishop, and Martyr St. Polycarp of
Smyrna. In this city, the Holy Martyrs of Smyrna, including the Metropolitan Saint
Chrysostomos, and countless hierarchs, priests, deacons, and lay faithful have borne witness
through their courage, perseverance, and unwavering faith, even unto death.

This church holds a pivotal place in the history of our Franciscan Christian presence and
mission in Türkiye, as well as in our ongoing relationship with the Orthodox Church. The
original church here was constructed by the Franciscan Friars in 1341 and stood until it was
destroyed by an earthquake in 1688. It was rebuilt and reopened in 1698, later being
declared a cathedral by His Holiness Pope Pius VII. After a fire in 1889, it was rebuilt once
again, with a design by Gustave Eiffel, who was also in Izmir at the time designing the
Konak Pier. Throughout this history, this church was under the care of Franciscans from
Italy. Thankfully, it was spared from the catastrophic burnings of 1922, enabling the
Franciscans to offer hospitality to many affected by the disaster.

The date of today's official opening and Divine Liturgy is particularly significant. For in the
Catholic Church, the 8th of December is the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception of the
Blessed Virgin Mary, while in the Orthodox Church, the 9th of December marks the great
Feast of the Conception of the Theotokos by St. Anna. Today's celebration, therefore,
honours both our differences, which we acknowledge and respect, and our shared desire to
pursue the path of true and prophetic ecumenism.

When our Minister General visited Türkiye last year, a highlight of his trip was his audience with His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I of Constantinople on the 6th of April, 2023. This occasion also saw the signing of a ten-year agreement to share the property of our Parish Church of Santa Maria in Izmir for the Divine Liturgies of the Orthodox Church—an enduring symbol of our ongoing fraternal collaboration and practical ecumenism. Brother Massimo and Brother Ignacio have asked me to convey their deepest regrets at not being able to be present today for this historic and sacred celebration, but they assures you of their prayers and blessings.

We extend our gratitude to His All-Holiness for his steadfast commitment to promoting dialogue and mutual understanding among Christians, as well as for his advocacy for religious tolerance among people of all faiths. We are deeply inspired by His All-Holiness' initiatives to uphold religious freedom, human rights, and the protection of our common environment—urgent priorities that resonate deeply with the values held by Franciscans worldwide as we strive to build a just, peaceful, and sustainable world for all creation.

On this momentous occasion, we are profoundly honoured that the Ecumenical Patriarchate has prepared the plaque which will be unveiled today. We offer our heartfelt thanks to His All-Holiness Patriarch Bartholomew I for this lasting symbol of the enduring bond between our two communities, and for our continued collaboration in the spirit of Christian unity.

Our present Franciscan presence and the mission of the International Fraternity for Ecumenical and Inter-religious Dialogue in Türkiye is the fruit of the exchange between His All-Holiness and our former Minister General, Herman Shalück, in 1995. We remain deeply grateful for His All-Holiness' paternal affection towards our Franciscan fraternity in Istanbul and for the warm welcome and gracious audiences that he continues to offer to the participants of our international formation course in ecumenical and inter-religious dialogue that is held in Istanbul each year.

In closing, the Order of Friars Minor once again expresses our profound gratitude to His All-Holiness, His Eminence and to all gathered here for this beautiful occasion. May this sacred moment serve as a reminder of the strength found in our shared faith and the importance of unity, dialogue, and collaboration in our witness to the Gospel. Let us continue to work together, in the spirit of love and peace, to build a world that reflects the compassion and mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ.

May God bless each of you and all the faithful of this holy city.
Peace and all Good.

BROTHER JOHN WONG, OFM
Delegate General of the Order of Friars Minor in Türkiye