

Patriarch discusses climate, world peace, other issues with Biden, Blinken

WASHINGTON (CNS) – Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople said he had “a warm and productive meeting” with President Joe Biden at the White House on Oct. 25 but that their discussion also involved a shared sense of urgency about the world’s climate crisis.

“In the course of our conversation, we touched on many issues that pertain to the peace of the world and the hope for increased environmental justice on this single planet that we all share,” the patriarch said in a statement he released after the meeting. “We note with appreciation the president’s commitment to environmental responsibility and his willingness to lead the way.”

“We have supported these efforts for the entirety of our 30-year patriarchy, and we shall continue to do so,” added the 81-year-old patriarch, who is celebrating the 30th anniversary of his election this year.

Patriarch Bartholomew said he expressed to Biden “our concerns for global stability” and the role that “constructive and positive religious movements can bring” to such stability.

“Our efforts for promoting Christian unity and interfaith understanding and cooperation have but one principle – dialogue. We consider dialogue as the most effective means to address any challenge of the present or the future,” he added.

A White House statement issued after the two leaders met said Biden congratulated the patriarch on his 30 years “of moral and spiritual leadership.”

“They discussed efforts to confront climate change, steps to end the global COVID-19 pandemic and the importance of religious freedom as a fundamental human right,” the White House said. “Their meeting underscored the critical role that faith communities play in confronting the range of global challenges we all face, as well as (their) decadeslong friendship and partnership.”

The same day Patriarch Bartholomew also met with Secretary of State Antony Blinken at the State Department. It was his first meeting in person with the United States’ chief diplomat.

According to a news release from the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America, the patriarch informed Blinken about issues of concern to Orthodox Christians in the United States and throughout the world and the efforts of the Ecumenical Patriarchate “to promote interreligious dialogue and environmental awareness.”

In particular, it said, Patriarch Bartholomew “raised concerns about the plight of Christians in the Middle East and Northern Africa, expressing his hope for stability and religious freedom in the region.”

He also addressed the climate crisis, “underlining the responsibility of all leaders to fulfil their promises to address climate change,” the release said.

“Finally, he emphasized the vital importance of interreligious cooperation among all faith leaders for the sake of mutual tolerance and peaceful coexistence around the globe,” it added.

Various Church officials joined the patriarch in the Biden and Blinken meetings. Among them were Archbishop Elpidophoros of America, Elder Metropolitan Emmanuel of Chalcedon, and senior members of the Ecumenical Patriarchate and the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America.

Various State Department officials joined with Blinken in meeting with the patriarch. Attendees of the White House visit included Steven Ricchetti, assistant to the president and counselor to the president, and Amanda Sloat, special assistant to the president and senior director for Europe at the National Security Council.

Later in the day, Patriarch Bartholomew and those in his delegation were guests at an ecumenical reception on Capitol Hill sponsored by the National Council of Churches.

"The future of the ecumenical movement resides in 'the dialogue of love' through the creation of new symbols and common actions," he told those gathered at the reception. "We need to open our hearts to the language of dialogue. This is the ultimate condition for the restoration of unity among Christians.

"The 20th century was a time for growing restoration of relationships. The 21st century should become the century of the restoration of unity."

He said the path to Christian unity "has been neither peaceful nor painless."

"Unity is a task that remains difficult to fulfill," he added. "But the bonds of friendship among divided churches and the bridges by which we can overcome our divisions are indispensable, now more than ever. Love is essential, so that dialogue between our churches can occur in all freedom and trust."

Patriarch Bartholomew arrived in Washington Oct. 23 to begin a 12-day apostolic visit with stops in Pittsburgh, Indiana and New York.

On Oct. 24, the first day of his Washington itinerary, the patriarch "felt unwell due to the long flight and schedule of events upon arrival," said a statement from the Greek Orthodox

Archdiocese of America.

He stayed overnight at George Washington University Hospital on the advice of doctors. He was released the morning of Oct. 25 and resumed his schedule.