

Orthodox leader chastises Athens for identity crisis

Helena Smith in Athens

It could have been a scene out of a Byzantine play: hundreds of thousands of nuns, priests and ordinary Greeks, some holding icons, others waving flags, enraptured by the rousing words of a black-robed cleric pledging to stand his ground to the end.

Last night, for the first time in the history of the EU's only Orthodox state, close to half a million faithful gathered in Salonika to hear Archbishop Christodoulos, their spiritual leader, denounce the government for pushing the country into an identity crisis.

"First we are Greek Orthodox and then European," said his holiness in language more in keeping with a political speech than that usually used by the church.

The decision by Greece's determinedly modernist prime minister, Costas Simitis, to drop the nation's long-cherished habit of stating religious beliefs on personal identity documents could now cost him dearly. Mr Simitis, a western-trained university professor, announced the reform by saying it was the only way of ensuring the fundamental human rights of all Greeks, not least Catholics, Jews and Muslims.

As thousands of protesters chanted "Greece means Orthodoxy", the archbishop said the decision to drop religious affiliation from identity cards — a reform much-heralded by Brussels — was tantamount to stripping Greeks of the essence of their being.

"I'm not here to turn you into fanatics," he boomed. "I

am here to explain that this law is wrong ... if the people, millions of people, are against it then it has to be withdrawn."

As the guardian of Hellenism through 400 dark years of Ottoman rule, the Orthodox church was inextricably bound up with the history and traditions of Greece, he said.

"It is part of the identity of this country," the leader thundered as faithful cheered from rooftops and some 80 bishops looked on. "People have said dreadful things about this rally ... poison has come out of their mouths, but they must understand that we will not give up."

Human Rights groups have often complained of the discrimination suffered by religious minorities who are noticeably absent from the state and military arena in Greece, in sharp contrast to other EU countries. But the fervour with which the move has been met has surprised politicians.

Above all, clerics fear the identity crisis will be the beginning of a much wider campaign to separate the church, Greece's biggest landowner, from the state, as is the case elsewhere in the 15-nation European bloc.

Across the political spectrum, last night, there was growing concern that the archbishop's fighting spirit could ignite a civil war with hundreds of thousands taking to the streets in Athens.

"I hope tonight's message, this sea of people, will be heard in Athens," the archbishop warned. "We will be doing the same thing in the capital next week ... may God be with us all."