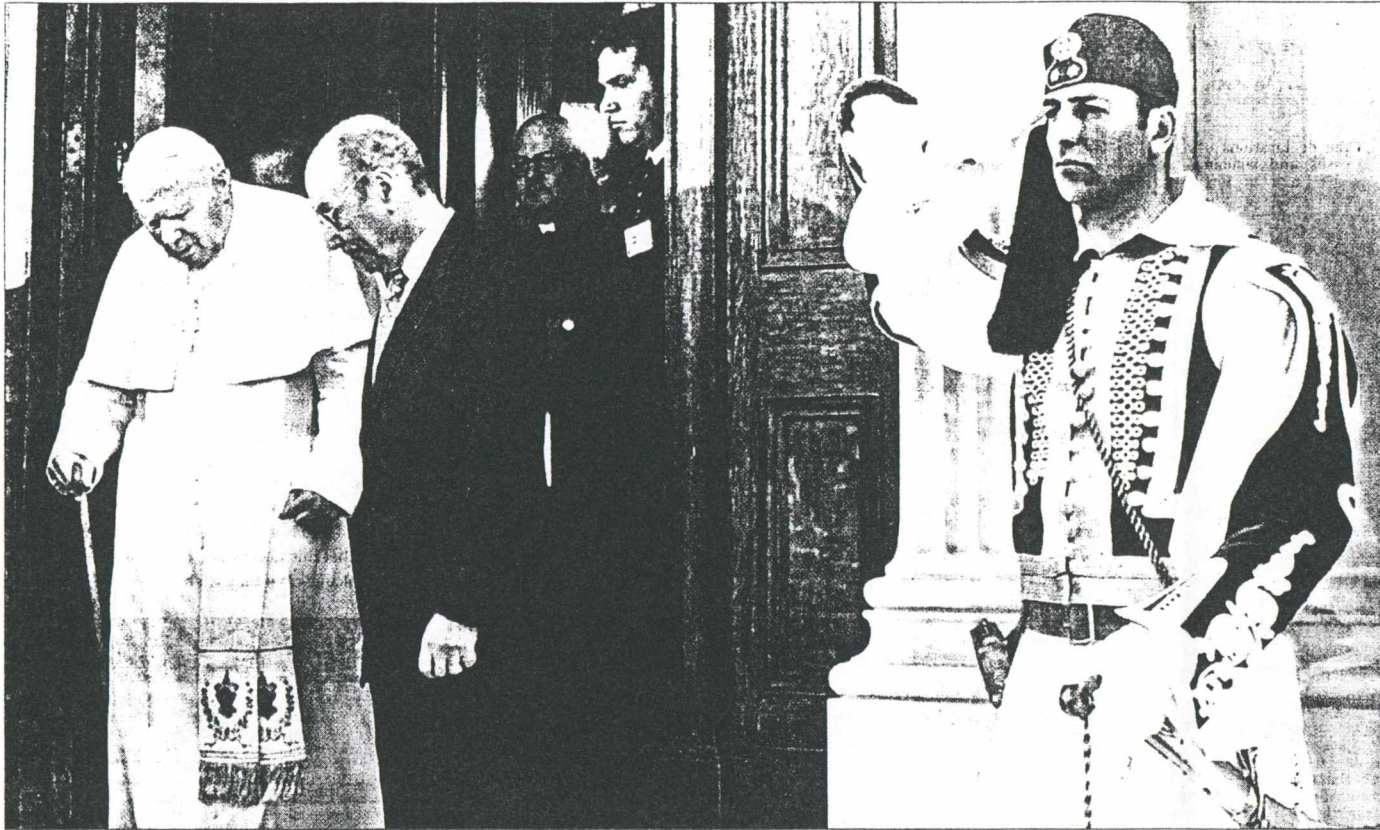


Picture EPA



The head of state, Costis Stephanopoulos, escorts the Pope from the presidential palace in Athens yesterday during the first visit to Greece by a pontiff in nearly 1,300 years

# Pope asks Orthodox Church for forgiveness

By JULIUS STRAUSS  
IN ATHENS

THE Pope took the historic step yesterday of asking forgiveness for sins committed by Roman Catholics against the Orthodox Church during 1,000 years of feuding.

His apology, offered to Archbishop Christodoulos, head of the Greek Orthodox Church, did much to sweep away acrimony surrounding the papal visit to Athens, the first in nearly 1,300 years.

Looking weak and stammering slightly, the Pope also expressed regret for the sacking of Constantinople by Crusaders in 1204, an event that still rankles in the Orthodox world.

The Pope said: "For the occasions past and present when the sons and daughters of the Catholic Church have sinned by actions and omission against their Orthodox brothers and sisters may the Lord grant us the forgiveness we beg of him."

The Archbishop had earlier berated the Pope for the Catholic Church's lack of contrition, but he clapped enthusiastically at the words. The two men later embraced.

The pontiff, who will be 81 this month and is suffering from Parkinson's disease, has let it be known that one of his most fervent desires was to heal the 1,000-year rift between Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism.

The schism dates back to 1054 when papal delegates on a visit to the Byzantine Empire were so enraged by the casual reception their grievances received that they formally excommunicated Constantinople.

The acrimony became all the greater after 1204 when Crusaders on their way to Jerusalem attacked and burned much of the ancient capital of Byzantium after relations between the western and eastern branches of the Holy Roman Empire soured.

Preparations for yesterday's visit to Athens, which will end this morning with a Mass at a basketball stadium, were marred by bickering and arguments over protocol. The Athens visit is the opening leg of a pilgrimage that takes the Pope on to Syria and Malta in the footsteps of St Paul.

Archbishop Christodoulos agreed to meet the Pope only after arm-twisting by the centre-Left government. Under pressure from hardliners in his own Church, he

refused the offer of joint prayers or the opening of doctrinal debate.

When the Pope landed at Athens, he was met only by secular authorities and representatives of Greece's tiny Catholic Church.

There were no cheering crowds lining the road and passers-by were kept far away from the cortege as it drove into Athens surrounded by dozens of police motorcycles and shadowed by a helicopter. Police sources said the security operation was one of the largest in Athens since the Second World War, deploying more than 7,000 officers.

Government officials feared damage to Greece's reputation after weeks of protests by Orthodox zealots. Some Orthodox priests held all-night vigils, praying that the Pope would cancel his trip.

In the afternoon a few dozen radicals held noisy protests. Riot squads stood by in case of violence. One protester, Father Isidoros,

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wearing long, black robes and with a red cross on his square hat, held aloft a dozen black balloons. He said: "I am in mourning. For me the Pope is the root of all evil."

Despite a lower than expected turnout for the protests, there is an underlying unease among Greeks that the Vatican's efforts to reunite the Christian Church will eclipse Orthodoxy.

Many are also incensed by the Catholic Church's support for the small Uniate Church in eastern Europe, which follows eastern rites but has given its allegiance to the Pope.

Nevertheless most Greeks said they were either pleased the Pope had come; or were indifferent.

After an afternoon break the Pope met Catholic officials at the city's cathedral. Later he was due to give a short speech on a hill by the Acropolis near where St Paul received a similarly tepid welcome from the Athenians nearly 2,000 years ago.