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Pope John Paul II speaking with the Orthodox Archbishop of Athens, Christodoulos, during their historic meeting in the Greek capital Friday.

In Greece, John Paul Apologizes to Orthodox

By Alessandra Stanley
New York Times Service

ATHENS — Pope John Paul II arrived here Friday on the first leg of a six-day pilgrimage and asked God to forgive Roman Catholics for sins committed against Orthodox Christians during the 1,000 years that the two church branches have been split.

"On 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," he said in an address to Greece's Orthodox leader, Archbishop Christodoulos.

John Paul, in the first visit by a pope to Greece in more than 1,000 years, specifically cited the Crusaders' 1204 sacking of Constantinople, the capital of the Byzantine Empire, an act he said filled today's Roman Catholics with "deep regret."

Moments before the pope's address, Archbishop Christodoulos told him that an apology was needed for a range of grievances, from the schism to a lack of publicly expressed concern over the island of Cyprus, which is divided between Greece and Turkey.

"Traumatic experiences remain as open wounds," the archbishop said. "Yet until now there has not been heard even a single request for pardon." The archbishop's spokesman, Haris Konidaris, said: "The pope has issued a similar mea culpa to the Jews. So I think he owes one to the Orthodox world."

Archbishop Christodoulos, who grudgingly accepted the pope's visit to Greece after he was invited by the government, applauded the pontiff's call for forgiveness. After the speeches, the two church leaders embraced.

Every step of the pope's trip to Greece has been mired in controversy and tense negotiation, with Orthodox priests and monks holding vigils and marching

under signs that read "the heretic pope" and "two-horned monster of Rome."

As a sign of the delicate relations between the churches, no senior Orthodox clergy came to the airport to greet the pope.

John Paul's pilgrimage in the footsteps of St. Paul, which will also take him to Syria and Malta, promises to be one of the most diplomatically challenging of his papacy. The ailing pope, who turns 81 this month, wants to use his trip to promote reconciliation with Eastern Orthodox churches — his mission to end a schism dating to 1054.

His is an unreciprocated desire.

John Paul has visited other Orthodox countries — Romania and Georgia — and plans to go to Ukraine in June, despite objections of Ukraine's leading Orthodox church. The Greek Orthodox Church resisted

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overtures from the Vatican for years, reluctantly relenting only after President Konstantinos Stephanopoulos traveled to Rome in January and invited his fellow head of state.

So far, protests have been fierce but also small. Most Greeks do not seem opposed to the visit. But some ultraconservative Orthodox leaders fear that the pope will use his trip to portray himself as Christianity's leader, as opposed to the head of what they consider a splinter heretical church.

Greece's Roman Catholics view themselves as a beleaguered minority in a country that is 95 percent Orthodox. But the most contentious issue for Orthodox believers are the Byzantine Catholics, who follow Eastern rites but are loyal to Rome. The Orthodox church views them as a kind of Trojan horse to convert Orthodox believers.

Fearing protests, Greek church officials persuaded the Vatican to remove from the papal entourage Cardinal Ig-

nace Moussa I Daoud, head of the Vatican office for relations with Eastern churches and a former patriarch of the Syrian Catholic Church, which uses Eastern rites but is in communion with Rome. Cardinal Daoud is expected to rejoin the pope in Damascus.

Concerns that Orthodox hard-liners could disrupt the visit are so strong that the Vatican abandoned plans to hold an outdoor Mass at the 80,000-seat Olympic Stadium and will instead hold it in an 18,000-seat indoor arena.

The conflicts surrounding the pope's trip to Athens are not solely a reflection of the rift between Orthodoxy and Catholicism, however. The Orthodox Church bitterly opposed the Socialist government's plan to remove religious affiliation from Greek identity cards. Last year, Archbishop Christodoulos led huge protest rallies and collected more than 3 million signatures against a measure he viewed as an effort to secularize Greece. The government is pressing ahead anyway.

The government's decision to invite

the pope, despite religious leaders' objections, was seen as yet another affront to the church's authority.

■ Ukrainians Not Opposed to Trip

Most Ukrainians either approve of an upcoming visit by Pope John Paul II or do not care one way or the other, according to poll results released Friday. The Associated Press reported from Kiev.

A total of 44 percent said they viewed the visit "positively," according to the poll by the Socis research company, while 23 percent were indifferent, according to the Interfax news agency. Only 5 percent viewed the visit negatively.

"In general, the attitude to the papal visit is a moderately positive one," said Oleksandr Stehniy of Socis. The poll sample was 1,200 people, and no margin of error was given.

John Paul is scheduled to visit Ukraine June 23-26. Ukraine is predominantly Orthodox, but unlike Greece, it has a large Catholic minority.



Hussein Malla/The Associated Press

Visitors standing before the tomb of John the Baptist in the Omayyad Mosque in the old sector of Damascus on Friday. Pope John Paul II is scheduled to arrive in Syria on Saturday and will visit the mosque Sunday.