

International news

Penitent Pope attempts to end holy war

John Paul woos Orthodox Greeks by apologising for sins of crusade

Michael Howard in Athens

Pope John Paul II made a bold attempt to heal the 1,000-year split in Christianity yesterday by asking God to forgive Catholics for past sins against Orthodox Christians.

The pontiff, who was in the Greek capital on the first leg of his six-day "jubilee pilgrimage" retracing the footsteps of St Paul, prayed for forgiveness for "the occasions, past and present, when sons and daughters of the Catholic church have sinned by action or omission against their Orthodox brothers and sisters".

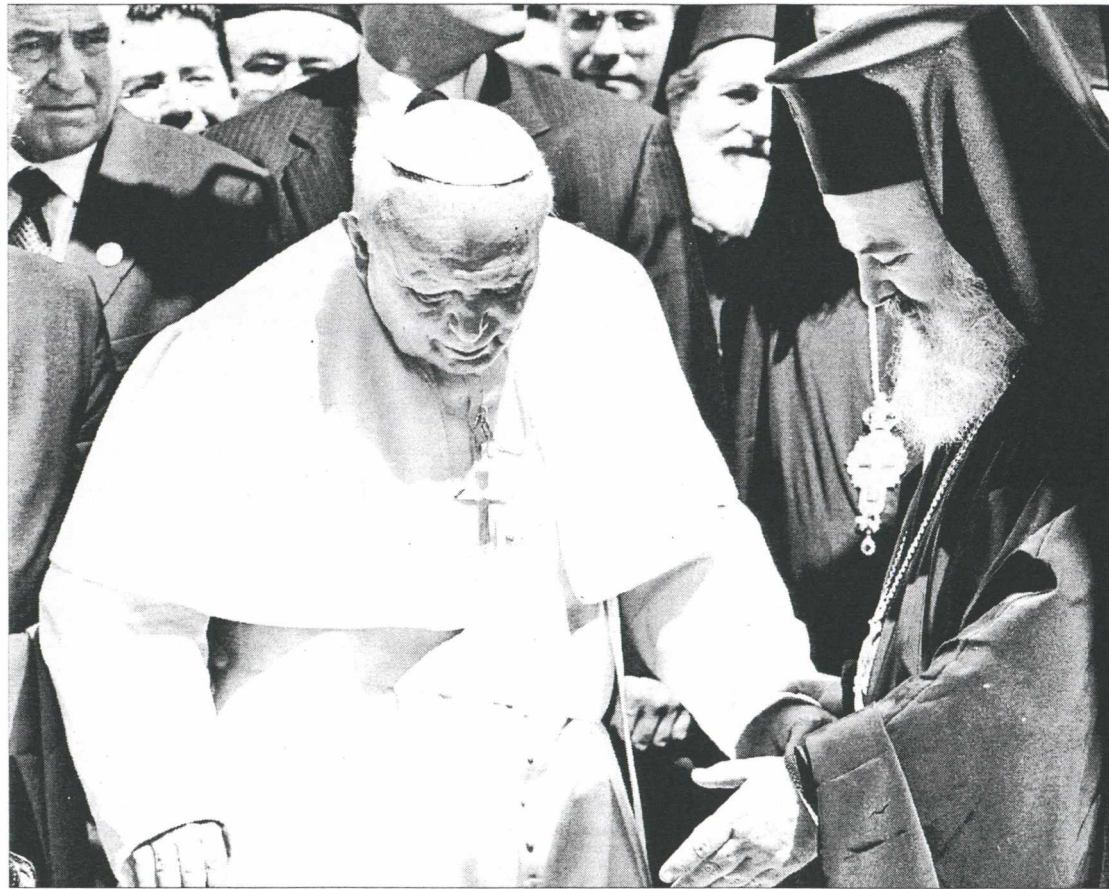
He is the first Pope to visit the predominantly Orthodox country since the "Great Schism" of 1054, which divided Christianity into its eastern and western branches. The visit is one of the most controversial of all his 93 apostolic trips outside Italy and has provoked uproar within Greece's conservative-minded Orthodox church.

The increasingly frail pontiff, who is accompanied by four doctors, sees the pilgrimage as a way of advancing his dream of reconciliation between Catholicism and Orthodoxy, as well as an opportunity to improve relations with the Muslim world. He will visit Syria tomorrow, and then Malta.

But Greece's monks, parish priests and nuns were furious with the church leadership for lifting its long-held objections to the visit, and religious hardliners had promised a hostile reception for the Pope, whom they dubbed the "arch-heretic" and "the grotesque, two-horned monster of Rome".

Archbishop Christodoulos, leader of the Greek Orthodox church, had been called the "anti-Christodoulos" for his decision to lobby the church's ruling body, the holy synod, to agree to the visit.

The Greek Orthodox church harbours a litany of perceived



The Pope is escorted by Archbishop Christodoulos, leader of the Greek Orthodox church. It is the first papal visit since the schism of 1054 Photograph: AP

misdeeds that date back 1,000 years—from the schism in 1054 through the sacking of Constantinople by the fourth crusade in 1204, to the "poaching" of Orthodox believers in eastern Europe by the Uniate church, or eastern rite Catholics, whose services resemble Orthodox ones, but who show allegiance to Rome.

More recently, many Orthodox Greeks have been outraged by what they regard as western (read Catholic) aggression against fellow Orthodox Serbia.

But yesterday John Paul, who has made atonement something of a leitmotif of his papacy, attempted to address Orthodox grievances.

At a long meeting with Archbishop Christodoulos, he broached the touchy subject of Constantinople. "It is tragic that the assailants, who set out to secure free access for Christians to the Holy Land, turned against their own brothers in the faith," he said. "The fact that they were Latin Christians fills Catholics with deep regret."

Christodoulos clapped his hands in relief as the Pope spoke. A few minutes before, the popular archbishop had delivered a stinging rebuke to the pontiff for the Vatican's historic lack of contrition.

"Traumatic experiences remain as open wounds on [the Greek people's] vigorous body," Christodoulos had said. "Yet until now, there has not been heard even a single request for pardon."

Archimandrite Vasilios Drossos, of the archdiocese of Athens, said the Pope's

remarks were "very very positive". "He was apologising for something which has its roots in historical fact. It is now time to look forward," he said, adding that he hoped dialogue between the churches would now be on a "much sounder footing".

He said the Pope's visit would act as a sign to the world's 200m-300m Orthodox that "they would no longer feel out of the mainstream". It was a good omen for a possible papal trip to the Patriarchate in Moscow, the most powerful

of the various national Orthodox churches, he added.

But hardliners remained unconvinced. Father Anathasios, a monk of Mount Athos, one of Orthodoxy's most revered places, accused the Pope and the Greek church leadership of staging a confidence trick. "Orthodoxy is the true way — all others are mistaken," he said.

Other conservative Orthodox, including members of the Old Calendarists, who adhere to the Julian calendar but are regarded as schismatic by the

The Greek press view

Eleftherotypla, centre-left daily

The Greek tradition of hospitality, which predates Christianity, is enriched by the Christian injunctions to love thy neighbour and even thine enemies. During the Pope's visit, let elementary Christian dignity prevail, with a civilised attitude that is not reminiscent of the Dark Ages

Kathimerini, centre-right daily

With direct shots about the silence of the pontiff over the tragedy of Cyprus, references to the sufferings Greece has undergone from the Catholic west and emphasis on the need for cooperation of both sides without intolerance, Archbishop Christodoulos greets Pope John Paul today

Ethnos, populist daily

Those who feared objections to the visit would provide an opportunity for negative comments to be made about our country, have been justified. It is natural for there to be a few hundred, or even thousand, fanatics in a country, but it is anything but natural for the biggest TV channels to have them as guests every day and the leading topic of news bulletins

Avgi, leftwing daily

Here's a coincidence: the re-release of the Exorcist opens in Athens cinemas today

Greek church, rang church bells in protest

Archbishop Christodoulos had issued repeated calls for calm from hardliners opposed to the Pope's presence. But critics say he bears some responsibility for inflaming religious passions in Greece. He has been engaged in a protracted struggle with the modernising socialist government of Costas Simitis about its decision to remove the statement of religion from Greek national identity cards.

"The Pope is still a heretic,"

read one quickly prepared poster in Athens last night. But as arch-heretics go, the Pope looked pretty mild-mannered, even humble, as he emerged from his jet into the spring sunshine.

"Where are his horns?" Yiannis Dimitrakopoulos, six, asked his father at the gleaming new Athens airport as the frail 80-year-old pontiff removed his cap and gave a short wave before descending. "He must have left them in his Pope-mobile," came the reply.

Due to the Pope's lack of mobility, the traditional kneeling and kissing of the soil was replaced by the offering of a bowl containing earth from the hill of the Areopagos, facing the Acropolis, which the Pope was due to visit last night. This is where St Paul preached the sermon to the unknown God to the Athenians in the 1st century.

At the Areopagos a "common message" was read out on behalf of the Pope and Archbishop Christodoulos, calling for Europe's Christian roots not to be forgotten.

The Pope's visit, which will finish this morning with a mass for Greece's 200,000 Catholics at the Olympic basketball stadium, was conducted amid tight security.

As he sped towards the centre of Athens in a bulletproof Mercedes, the roads were lined not with well-wishers, but with many of the 8,000 policemen who had been drafted in for the occasion — more than for the equally controversial visit of President Bill Clinton in 1999.

Every last detail of the visit has been the subject of tough negotiations, from the size of the venue to be used for the mass this morning, to the music that would accompany his triumphal approach to the Areopagos. The Four Seasons was chosen, and not the usual Handel's Messiah which the Orthodox church felt was too Catholic.

A member of the Holy Synod involved in the organisation of the visit said: "It was like painting an icon; arduous, and finicky, but worth it in the end."

Hear Michael Howard reporting from Greece at guardian.co.uk/audio