“The Sacredness of Space and Dialogue”

01/01/2026 | Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew

His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew Keynote Remarks, on December 8 2025, at the 12th International Academic Consultation between Judaism and Orthodox Christianity on the theme “Sanctity of Place – Sanctity of Space”.

Your Eminence Metropolitan Emmanuel of Chalcedon;
Dear Rabbi Mark Dratch, Chair of the International Jewish Committee for Interreligious Consultations;
Your Eminences, Excellencies, and Graces;
Esteemed Rabbis, Clergy, and Scholars;
Honorable Guests;
Ladies and Gentlemen;

It constitutes for us, not merely joy, but a spiritual debt, our participation in this twelfth gathering of the International Academic Consultation between Judaism and Orthodox Christianity. The subject chosen for this year, “*Sanctity of Place – Sanctity of Space*”, is not a simple thematic choice of academic interest. It is a call to reflect upon the very foundations of our spiritual identity.

For, when we speak of space, we do not refer exclusively to the edifices, the stones and the architecture which we respect and inhabit. Nor do we limit ourselves to the geometric dimension of the place. Our mind turns primarily to those internal, sacred spaces which we cultivate within us, in the “inner chamber” of the heart, but also to the common space which is opened up through dialogue, solidarity and peace with our fellow human beings.

We desire today, as you commence your proceedings, to submit a few thoughts regarding the critical articulation, the correlation between space and dialogue. We are dealing with two realities, which in our traditions are inextricably interwoven. They constitute, we would say, the environment and the content of the divine-human encounter. They are the means, the conduits, through which the presence of God becomes palpable, experiential, and where man is called and learns to respond faithfully to this Presence.

In the Orthodox Christian experience, it is true that sacred space takes flesh and bones in a visible manner in church architecture, in iconography, in liturgical life. However, it would be a mistake to limit the meaning of sacred space there. Its deeper essence, the outline, the purpose and its sanctifying power, cannot be understood in the absence of dialogue. And when we say dialogue, we mean the existential conversation of God with humanity, of heaven with earth, and certainly, of ourselves as communities of faith that journey together in history.

For this reason, we do not desire to speak of sacred space as an abstract theological notion, as an intellectual “concept”, or as an artistic tradition. We speak of a living witness. A witness that shapes and is shaped by the sacred dialogue. Dialogue with God, with the “other”, with the entire world.

It is characteristic, that which visitors experience when they enter an Orthodox church for the first time. They often describe a sense of transport, a transition to the transcendent. The walls and the domes which are fully inscribed with storied figures, the air which carries the fragrance of the

incense, the light which seems to move and to breathe. None of these things is accidental. This atmosphere is intentional. In Orthodoxy, sacred space is not decorative. It is a confession. It is a declaration of faith. It reveals, with material means, that which we believe.

The Orthodox temple, in its structure and its decoration, constitutes a proclamation that God entered into creation. That the eternal Logos became flesh and dwelt amongst us. The Evangelist John the Theologian formulates this in an unsurpassable manner in the Prologue of his Gospel: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. […] All things were made through him; and without him nothing was made that was made. In him was life; and the life was the light of men. And the light shines in the darkness; and the darkness did not comprehend it” (John 1:1-5). This is the reason for which icons hold such a central position in our worship. They are not idols. They bear witness to the union of the divine and the human nature in the person of Christ, the Light of the World, who came to reveal the calling of man.

No Church Father expressed this truth with greater clarity and simplicity than Saint John of Damascus. Writing amidst the storm of Iconoclasm, he formulated the famous phrase: “I do not worship matter, but I worship the Creator of matter, who became matter for my sake” (St John of Damascus).

This statement is shattering. It confirms the significance of sacred space within Christian history. Space, time, matter – the elements of God’s Creation – can be ennobled. They are able to be transformed by Divine Grace and offered back to God as worship and praise. Through her iconographic and architectural tradition, the Orthodox Church confirms that the created world is capable of becoming a mystery of His glory.

Space is sanctified, because God has already sanctified it by creating the universe, setting the boundaries of the heavens, the earth and the seas (cf. Gen. 1:1-10). Time is ennobled, because God entered into history. He spoke to the Patriarchs and the Prophets (cf. Exod. 3:1-6 and 1 Kings 19:11-13). He commanded His people to rest and to observe the Sabbath as a holy day (cf. Exod. 20:8). Matter is transformed, because God provided for His people, feeding them (cf. Exod. 16:4 and Matt. 14:13-21) and anointing His servants (cf. 1 Sam. 16:10-13 and Luke 4:16-21).

At this point, we stand on common ground, deeply harmonised with the Jewish tradition. Our spiritual family was born within the sacred geography of Israel, there where place and presence are connected closely. From the altars of Abraham to the ladder of Jacob, from Sinai to the Temple of Jerusalem. Both Judaism and Orthodox Christianity understand that God does not remain indifferent to the cries of His people. He does not abstain from history. He meets us at specific times, in specific places, through specific persons. Sacred space, consequently, is not merely symbolic. It is relational. It signals the meeting between humanity and the Divine.

As we said before, if sacred space is the environment of the divine-human encounter, sacred dialogue is its content. One of the clearest examples of this interaction is found in the theology of the icon. In the Orthodox understanding, the icon is not merely religious art. It is a theological statement, it is a prayer, it is a liturgical entity. It is a bridge that permits our participation in the holiness of the depicted person, always in the light of the mystery of the Incarnation.

The iconographer works with deep respect, following a process which is itself a form of prayer. From the preparation of the wood, the layering of the gesso, the design, the placement of the gold leaf, the painting from darkness towards light, the inscription of the sacred name, until the final blessing of the icon in the church. Every step is a dialogue that fills the space with grace. The iconographer listens. He listens to the Scriptures, to the tradition, to the holy figure he is depicting. The Church answers with prayer and blessing. The faithful answer with veneration, lighting candles, offering their supplications.

Copyright JCRelations

Beyond the icon, however, the very building of the temple honours the sanctity of space and of dialogue in varied ways. The orientation towards the East echoes the Jewish orientation towards Jerusalem and the hope of the final restoration. The dome, particularly in the Byzantine style, reflects the heavens, surrounding the faithful with the presence of Christ, of the angels and of the saints. The iconostasis – often misunderstood as an obstacle – is in reality a threshold. It reveals that the great mysteries of God can be approached but never exhausted. It is permeable, but not trivial. Transparent, but not empty.

This architectural evolution narrates a centuries-old dialogue. Between Scripture and culture, Jewish roots and Greek forms, persecutions and imperial favour, monastic austerity and royal splendour. Thus, the dialogue is not a mere discussion, but a process of discernment, a dynamic encounter that shapes identity. Sacred space participates in this discernment, reminding us that holiness is not static, but unfolds continuously.

And if icons and architecture sanctify the visible world, Orthodox hymnography and psaltic art sanctify the auditory world. Here, another space is filled with grace through sound. The Church traditionally did not use musical instruments, not because it considers them unclean, but because the human voice is the sacred instrument par excellence, one of the many faculties sanctified by God when He created man “in His image and likeness” (Gen. 1:26).

We could say that whilst architecture shapes physical space and icons the visual, psalmody shapes the inner space – the space of the heart. And here, our dialogue with Judaism is natural and profound. The Psalms, the cantillation of the Torah, the melodies of Jewish prayer, formed the foundations of Christian liturgical music. Byzantine chant, as well as the varied musical traditions of the East, are founded on the conviction that the human voice can convey divine words with integrity, humility, and beauty.

However, sacred space is not a museum of beauty. It is not a lifeless window into the past. It constitutes a moral and spiritual vocation to experience our faith within the world. It calls us to holiness, to justice, to compassion. The corporeal experience within the church – from the open naves that resemble ships ready to transport the faithful, to the postures of prayer – reminds us that worship is not a flight from the world, but a transformation for the sake of the world.

At this point, we find again a strong resonance with the Jewish tradition. Sacred space is inseparable from moral responsibility. The prophets constantly challenge Israel to recognise that holiness without justice, or worship without mercy, is a delusion. We read in Micah: “Hath the Lord told thee, O man, what is good? or what doth the Lord require of thee, but to do judgment, and to love mercy, and to be ready to walk with the Lord thy God?” (Micah 6:8). And the Prophet Amos writes with shattering power: “I hate, I have rejected your feasts… and let judgment roll down as water, and righteousness as an impassable torrent” (Amos 5:21, 24). Both passages confirm that in the eyes of God, authentic holiness must be expressed through justice and mercy.

Sacred space ought to overflow into sacred action within the world that God loves. There where the neighbour suffers and the stranger seeks refuge. If our sacred spaces do not lead us into a sacred dialogue with the world, then they risk becoming temples of idols and false piety. In the same spirit, the text issued in 2020 by the Ecumenical Patriarchate, titled “For the Life of the World: Toward a Social Ethos of the Orthodox Church”, states characteristically: “God created humanity in His image and likeness and endowed every man, woman, and child with the full spiritual dignity of persons fashioned in accordance with the divine personhood of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. In so doing, He brought into being a new sphere of created freedom, the distinctively human space of liberty” (§62).

What do all these things mean for the work of our consultation today? We live in a world fragmented by violence, polarisation, and the misuse of religion for destructive ends. Our traditions

are called to give a different testimony: that God sanctifies space in order to sanctify human relations. Judaism teaches that the Holy One dwells where His people gather to study the Torah. Orthodox Christianity teaches that the Kingdom of God is revealed where the Church gathers to celebrate the Eucharist. These statements are not contradictory. They point towards the same mystery: that God is revealed through and within our relationships with Him, our neighbour, and creation.

We shall be found wanting before God if we do not honour one another, respecting sacred spaces as places of sacred dialogue. How can we fulfil this obligation?

Permit us to propose the following thoughts. We honour and encounter one another when:

We listen to the stories of the other.

We learn to see the image of God in the face of the “other”.

We acknowledge the wounds of history with sincerity and humility, without embellishments.

We honour the sacred spaces of the other without seeking to dominate or reshape them.

We work together for the protection of places, such as Jerusalem and the Holy Lands, which are sacred to us both, as well as for the life of our communities – churches, synagogues, cemeteries, homes, hospitals, and schools.

Recognising the sanctity of place, we are called to safeguard not only physical locations, but the dignity of the people who inhabit them. Sacred space is violated not only when a shrine is desecrated, but also when the dignity and life of others are threatened. This is the message we endeavoured to highlight during the recent visit of His Holiness Pope Leo XIV to Constantinople, through our Joint Declaration where we emphasised: “In particular, we reject every use of religion and the name of God to justify violence. We believe that authentic interreligious dialogue, far from being a cause of syncretism and confusion, is essential for the coexistence of peoples of different traditions and cultures” (29 November 2025). Our dialogue, therefore, is not academic; it is spiritual, pastoral, and ethical.

Distinguished guests, Dear Friends,

Permit us to conclude with a simple observation, perhaps self-evident but often forgotten: sacred space is not something we merely inherit. It is something we create.

Every act of hospitality creates sacred space. Every gesture of respect creates sacred space. Every sincere discussion, like this one here, creates sacred space.

Here, in this Consultation, we are building sacred space together, as we encounter one another in a field of learning, trust, and hope. As we continue our dialogue, may we be strengthened by the witness of our traditions and our spiritual giants, so that we do not withdraw into isolation, but expand the boundaries of holiness in our world.

We pray that this meeting becomes a new icon – an image in which the light of God will be reflected in our common commitment to peace, understanding, and respect for the sanctity of every human life.

We wish you every success in your proceedings and we await with interest the conclusions of your consultations.

Copyright JCRelations

Thank you for your kind attention.

Patriarch Bartholomew, born Demetrios Arhondonis, completed undergraduate studies at the historic Theological School of Halki, before pursuing graduate studies at the Pontifical Oriental Institute of the Gregorian University in Rome (Italy), the Ecumenical Institute in Bossey (Switzerland), and the University of Munich (Germany). His doctoral dissertation, submitted to the University of Athens (Greece) was in the field of Canon Law, and he was a founding member of the Society of Canon Law of the Oriental Churches. Ordained to the Diaconate in 1961 and to the Priesthood in 1969, he served as Assistant Dean at the Theological School of Halki (1968–1972) before his appointment as Personal Secretary to the late Ecumenical Patriarch Demetrios (1972–1990) as well as election as Metropolitan of Philadelphia (1973) and, subsequently, Metropolitan of Chalcedon (1990). was elected in October 1991 as the 270th Archbishop of the 2000-year-old Church founded by the Apostle Andrew. His formal office is Archbishop of Constantinople-New Rome, and Ecumenical Patriarch, a historic title dating to the sixth century.

Source: Ecumenical Patriarcate, 11 December 2025.