

(original text in Italian)

Bartholomew 1

By the grace of God
Archbishop of Constantinople - New Rome
And Ecumenical Patriarch

To the Most Revd Prof Piero Coda
Dean of the Sophia University Institute
Figline and Incisa Valdarno (Florence)

Most Reverend Monsignor,

With great joy and due attention we have received and read your letter of 12 September 2017, forwarded us by the Most Eminent Archbishop Gennadios, Metropolitan of Italy and Malta, by which our Humble Person was informed of the launch of the Ecumenical Chair of Studies courses at the Sophia University Institute at Loppiano in Tuscany already starting in the 2017-18 academic year.

Our joy was then transformed into emotion because this initiative of your University Institute is dedicated to the prophetic meeting between two great pioneers of today's ecumenical movement: our great and unforgettable predecessor, the Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagoras, and the Servant of God of blessed memory, Chiara Lubich, founder of the Focolare Movement – the Work of Mary.

We warmly congratulate you on this initiative, because that meeting was not a casual event but a work of God's Grace, which sealed a fellowship of Christian love, authentic friendship and fraternal collaboration between our Ecumenical Patriarchate and the Focolare Movement that continues to this day. The great and prophetic Patriarch, whom we had the honour and blessing of serving during our early days as a cleric in the Ecumenical Patriarchate, conferred on the unforgettable Chiara the name of the glorious saint, protomartyr and isapostle Tecla, because he saw in Chiara the same apostolic zeal that this disciple of our Lord Jesus Christ possessed, through St Paul, his Apostle to the Gentiles.

We rejoice in the great collaboration that exists between your University Institute and our Holy Orthodox Archdiocese of Italy and Malta and in the fact that our Most Eminent Metropolitan, our beloved brother and concelebrant in Christ, Gennadios, will give the inaugural address as the work of the Ecumenical Chair of Studies begins on 14th December next and then give a series of lectures on the Spirituality and Divine Liturgy of the Orthodox Church, followed by the Most Eminent Metropolitan of Silivria, Maximus, who will thereafter give a series of lectures on the Ecclesiology of the Orthodox Church, with specific reference to the theological dialogue between our two sister Churches. We also express our satisfaction at the large number of students, whether lay or clergy, participating in this important academic initiative, some of whom are preparing doctoral theses.

With nostalgia, we remember our visit to your University Institute precisely two years ago, on the occasion of the conferral on our Humble Person of the Honorary Doctorate in the Culture of Unity, and most certainly the Abrahamic hospitality we received from the professors, students and focolarini friends. Although we deeply desire to be present at the solemn inauguration of the Ecumenical Chair of Studies on 14 December, it will not be possible for us. We assure you of our presence in spirit and in prayer. His Eminence Metropolitan Gennadios of Italy and Malta has been given the responsibility to represent us and to read this patriarchal message.

Before concluding this brief message allow me to address two paternal exhortations to you, which are inspired by the name of your University Institute and your Movement. We wish that all of you, professors, students, clergy and lay people may always possess sophia, wisdom, the sophia of God and not that of the world. However, to acquire Divine Wisdom it is first necessary to ask for it by praying to God intensely, as Solomon did. From the moment Solomon asked for something good and just, God granted it to him. The second exhortation is always to keep the flame burning, the fire of faith in Christ, the one true God, Lord and Saviour of the world, and the spirit of genuine fraternal communion that characterized your founder and His faithful servant Chiara.

I extend a special, heartfelt greeting to the President of the Movement, Dr Maria Voce – Emmaus, and to all of you, our focolarini friends, who are so dear to us.

In a few days, we will celebrate the Nativity of Our Lord God and Saviour Jesus Christ. In the knowledge that Christ is not only born every 25 December, but each day, every hour and every minute, our desire for all of you is that your hearts may become a small crib, worthy to receive this extraordinary Child, this *“new Child, who is our God before all ages”*, the God of peace and mercy, that our troubled world needs so much.

From the Sacred Centre of Universal Orthodoxy we invoke upon all of you from the depths of our heart the intercession of the Holy Protectors of Christian and Greco-Roman Literature, Basil the Great, Gregory the Theologian and John Chrysostom, wishing you a Good Academic Year full of spiritual and material fruits, a happy and holy Christmas and a prosperous and peaceful New Year 2018.

From the Phanar

26th September 2017

+ Bartholomew

Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople

Fervent intercessor for you all with Christ