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Inaugural Mass includes ecumenical first



(Vatican Radio) An historic first will grace the Mass, March 19, that will inaugurate the pontificate of Pope Francis . After a separation of nearly 1,000 years, the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople will attend the inauguration of the Pope of Rome.

Delegates from more than 20 Christian churches and ecumenical organizations announced their attendance. However, the presence of Bartholomew I is of historic significance.

It is not clear if a Patriarch of Constantinople -- who is considered "first among equals" in the Eastern Orthodox Communion -- has ever attended the installation of a Pope of Rome. The event is certainly unique in the more than 950 years since the break in relations between Constantinople and Rome in 1054.

Fr. James Puglisi, who is the Minister-General of the Franciscan Friars of the Atonement and director of an ecumenical centre in Rome, called Centro Pro Unione, says the participation of Bartholomew I sends a strong signal in favour of ecumenical dialogue.

"First of all, it's a recognition of two local churches, the Church of Rome and the Church of Constantinople, which has ecclesiological significance. And the second reason is that the Metropolitan of Pergoman, John Zizioulas, who is the co-chair of the Orthodox-Catholic dialogue, is going to accompany him," he said.

"So I think the importance of this is a way of showing, from the Orthodox side, the willingness to go further in this dialogue and to breach the divisions that have kept us apart for centuries," he added.

"They see in Pope Francis a person who has accepted a simple lifestyle, one that conforms to the Gospel," he continued. "And emphasizing, first and foremost, that he is bishop of Rome, and I think that was really important. When he appeared, he spoke to his Church, who now elected him as head. And so, I know the Romans are very pleased with that, but I think it has ecumenical significance that shows that he intends to exercise his ministry, first and foremost, as bishop of Rome."

Representatives from the Oriental Orthodox Church, including the Coptic, Syrian and Armenian Orthodox churches, as well as from the Lutheran, Methodist and Baptist churches are also expected to attend.

The Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, who is preparing for his own inaugural ceremony March 21, has delegated Archbishop John Sentamu of York to represent the Anglican Communion.

Metropolitan Tikhon of the Orthodox Church in America will also be in attendance, along with Br. Alois Löser of the popular ecumenical Taizé Community in France.

Listen to the full-length interview with Fr. James Puglisi, SA, by Laura Ieraci: [real](#) [mp3](#)