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Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople leads the official door-opening ceremony of lower Manhattan's St. Nicholas Greek Orthodox Church on Tuesday, Nov. 2, 2021. (AP Photo/Ted Shaffrey)

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The spiritual leader of the world's Eastern Orthodox Christians gave his formal blessing Tuesday to an ornate shrine that will replace a small parish church destroyed during the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks in New York City.

Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople, nearing the completion of [a 12-day U.S. visit](#) from his home base in Turkey, evoked somber memories of that day two decades ago as he presided at a ceremonial door opening at St. Nicholas Greek Orthodox Church and National Shrine near the World Trade Center.

“We stand here today on this hallowed ground at the World Trade Center, where the world changed in a cruel and terrible moment 20 years ago,” he said. “This sacred ground of the American experience is where the Orthodox Christian faith will take the lead in manifesting to the world that good is mightier than evil, that there is life beyond death and that love will always triumph over hate.”

[The domed shrine](#), designed by famed Spanish architect Santiago Calatrava, replaces a small parish church that was destroyed by the falling south tower on 9/11. Located in a small, elevated park overlooking the World Trade Center memorial plaza, it remains under construction with completion projected for next year.

The original church was the only house of worship destroyed on 9/11. No one was killed in the building, although numerous Orthodox Christians were among those who died in the attacks.

Tuesday's ceremony was largely held outdoors beneath an overcast sky, to the backdrop of choral chants. It began with the patriarch's blessing of a large cross, adorned with a wreath, which was then hoisted by crane atop the dome.

Bartholomew and others joined in a quiet procession with youths bearing crosses and candles before stopping to bless various items from the original church that were damaged on 9/11 but not destroyed. They included a contorted bell and a torn icon honoring the Virgin Mary.

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The white-bearded patriarch, wearing black and ornately decorated white vestments, then blessed the shrine's glass doors with holy water and tapped them with his staff before entering. He signed an ornamented book of Gospels to be used in worship at the church, as did other dignitaries including Archbishop Elpidophoros of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America.

Bartholomew also presented as a gift a relic of St. Nicholas — a hand of the ancient saint, he said: “We bring his physical and spiritual presence, in the sacred relic of his holy hand, which will find an eternal resting place within this National Shrine.”

The shrine, in addition to its sanctuary, will include a separate space for meditation and reflection for people of all faiths to remember those lost on 9/11. In September, on the eve of the 20th anniversary of 9/11, church officials held a ceremonial inaugural lighting of the building to set aglow one of its signature features, its translucent marble cladding.

Tuesday’s ceremony also marked the 30th anniversary of Bartholomew’s enthronement as patriarch, the longest reign of any patriarch on record, according to Elpidophoros.

As patriarch of Constantinople, Bartholomew is considered first among equals among Eastern Orthodox patriarchs, which gives him prominence but not the power of a Catholic pope. He does oversee Greek Orthodox and some other jurisdictions, although large portions of the Eastern Orthodox world are self-governing under their own patriarchs.

Bartholomew arrived in the United States on Oct. 23 and spent the following night in a Washington hospital after feeling “unwell,” church officials said. He resumed a busy itinerary the next day, including [a White House visit with President Joe Biden](#). On Tuesday he spoke with a firm voice and showed no obvious signs of fatigue while standing throughout the hourlong ceremony.

During the visit the patriarch has called for a strong response to climate change and for religious freedom and cooperation, and he drew attention to the plight of Turkey’s small minority Orthodox community, renewing calls for the reopening of an Orthodox seminary that has been closed by the that country's government. He received an honorary doctorate at the University of Notre Dame in Indiana, a recognition of his efforts at improving Catholic-Orthodox ties, and the American

Jewish Committee's Human Dignity Award.

He is scheduled to depart for home on Wednesday.

A 2017 Pew Research Center report found that there were about 200 million Eastern Orthodox worldwide. It said there are Orthodox in the United States, with nearly half of those Greek Orthodox.