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Greek Orthodox hardliners oppose the papal visit

Pope John Paul II has arrived in Athens, in the first papal visit to Greece in modern times.

No senior members of the Greek Orthodox Church attended the airport welcome and the streets were deserted as he was driven to meet Greek President Costis Stephanopoulos.

Protests from Greek Orthodox Church hardliners, who refer to the pontiff as "the arch heretic" and "the grotesque, two-horned monster of Rome", are expected during the two-day visit.

Security around the Pope will be very tight and 4,500 policemen were to be deployed for the first day of the visit.

Greek Orthodox leaders have reluctantly accepted the papal visit - only because it is a pilgrimage, they say - but they want the Pontiff to use the occasion to ask for forgiveness, as he did with the Jews.

The sacking of Constantinople is still a source of bitterness, nearly 800 years after Catholic crusaders attacked the city, (the present day Istanbul) then the centre of the Orthodox world.



The Pope: Following in the footsteps of St Paul

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Christodoulos, the Archbishop of Athens and All Greece, in a speech later on Friday is to speak of the "open wounds" that have prompted strong reaction to the visit.

"Traumatic experiences remain as open wounds on (the Greek people's) vigorous body," he will say. "Yet until now, there has not been heard even a single request for pardon."

The Archbishop will join the Pope on a visit to the hillside where St Paul preached to Athenians in the first century.

A church spokesman said no joint prayers or theological discussions will be held.

On Saturday the Pope will lead religious services in a covered stadium before travelling to the airport for the flight to Damascus.



Archbishop Christodoulos will not pray with the Pope

Ancient hostility

The BBC's Paul Wood in Athens says that although such an outright apology is unlikely, many expect the Pope to issue a statement of reconciliation.

The hostility towards Rome dates back a thousand years, to the Great Schism of 1054 that confirmed the division of the Christian church into Eastern and Western branches.

With about 98% of the Greek population baptised in the official Orthodox faith, much of that antipathy remains alive.

Greek Orthodox followers regard theirs as the true faith, and accuse Rome of attempting to impose its supremacy over the Christian world during past centuries.

Our correspondent says it may well be the Pope's most ambitious attempt to heal the historic rift with the Orthodox church.

He will also be attempting to reach out to other faiths in his next stop - Damascus, the scene of St Paul's conversion, where he will become the first pope to set foot inside a mosque.

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The Vatican says it will be the first time that Muslims and Christians have prayed together in an organised way.

Following in the footsteps of St Paul, he will return to Rome via the staunchly Catholic island of Malta, where the apostle was shipwrecked.



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