

CHALLENGES WE SEE IN THE ORTHODOX CHURCH REGARDING EQUAL ACCESS TO HOLY SITES

Practical examples on conflicts and ways to solve them

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Mister Chairman,
Your Holiness,
Your Beatitude,
Excellencies,
Distinguished participants at this Conference,

INTRODUCTION

Let me begin by thanking the organizers of this international conference for inviting His All-Holiness the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, whom I represent here. They have chosen a topic that is of vital importance to all of us without exception: *“Holy Sites – places for conflict of dialogue”*. It’s needless to say that the inter-religious dialogue is of burning concern to all political and religious leaders and to all people.

PEACEFUL COEXISTENCE

In recent times more and more is said about of peaceful coexistence, tolerance and dialogue among the world religions. The Orthodox Church, and especially the Ecumenical Patriarchate,

¹ **His Grace Bishop Athenagoras of Sinope** represents His All-Holiness the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew at the international conference *“Holy Sites – places for conflict or dialogue”*, 26th – 28th of July 2008, Stiklestad and Trondheim, Norway.

has voiced its concern and advocacy for the amelioration of the human condition and the role of religion in enabling people to reconcile and live in peace. This can indeed be most effectively achieved through dialogue that engages religious people of good will and faithful to God's message of peace and love among all people.

What we need to do through the inter-religious dialogue is to help strengthen mutual understanding between cultures, religions and ethnic groups. It's important to underline the unique character of every religion and culture, and considering cultural and religious diversity to be an important feature of human society. This we could do by promoting inter-religious tolerance among younger generations introducing questions of the dialogue between civilizations and religions into an educational process with a view to helping young people to respect and understand religious and cultural difference without hostility.

HOLY SITES – PLACES FOR CONFLICT OR DIALOGUE

Let me turn now our attention to the main topic of this conference and mention a well known example of a challenge we experience in the orthodox church regarding equal access to holy sites. As a representative of the Ecumenical Patriarchate I'll mention the situation in Turkey, where our Church was founded in the very time of the Apostles. It is the place of the seat of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, the Centre of Orthodoxy. It was in that area that the 7 Ecumenical Councils took place. It was in that area that many of the great fathers of the Church lived: among them I mention the great Cappadocians. It is the place of thousands of saints. It was the place where monasticism got also development: let's think of the Stoudion Monastery in Constantinople. But also where our liturgical and artistic tradition got an important development: in the Great Church of Christ, the Agia Sophia. This church has a great importance for us Christians, both symbolic and fundamental!

The Church of Agia Sophia, associated with one of the greatest creative ages of man, was also the Cathedral of the Ecumenical

Patriarchate of Constantinople for more than one thousand years. Originally known as the Great Church, because of its large size in comparison with the other churches of the then Christian World, it was later given the name of Agia Sophia, the Holy Wisdom of Christ, the second person of the Holy Trinity.

Justinian conceived the grandiose project of rebuilding the Great Church from its foundations. Nothing like it was ever built before or after. Construction work lasted five years [532-537] and on December 27, 537, Patriarch Minas consecrated the magnificent church.

But then came bitterness: a source reveals the extent of destruction and pillage which Constantinople suffered in the hands of the Catholic Crusaders after 1204 and the difficulties that the great church had to face from the 13th century onwards. Paspatis writes: *"In 1396, during the patriarchy of Kallistos II, a note was made in the second volume of patriarchal documents [Millosich-Muller] listing all the existing gold and silver sacred vessels, hieratic vestments, crosses, gospel-books and holy relics. The destitution of the celebrated church, looted by the Latin Crusaders became evident. I mention the most important objects, from which pillagers removed pearls and other ornaments of gold in later times"*.

On Tuesday, May 29, 1453, Sultan Mehmet the Conqueror entered the vanquished city late in the afternoon and rode to Agia Sophia. He was amazed at its beauty and decided to convert the Cathedral into his imperial mosque.

Nothing like Agia Sophia was built before or after. Nothing. Upon entering the Great Church on its consecration Justinian is said to have exclaimed: "Solomon, I Have Surpassed Thee!" comparing Agia Sophia to King Solomon's Great Temple in Jerusalem.

Agia Sophia was conceived, was built, was consecrated and functioned as the Mother Church of Orthodoxy. In the hearts, the minds and the souls of the Christian faithful and in particular of the Orthodox Christians, Agia Sophia has never ceased to be their Holy place and the Mother of Churches.

Today, I am here to tell you that Agia Sophia stands as the greatest testimony to serve as an international tourist attraction. Where once emperors and patriarchs, prelates, saints and sinners moved in solemn procession, tourists now loiter and stare. The images looking down from the walls are no longer the windows to heaven, but silent witnesses to profanity. Gone are the chanting priests. Gone too are the smells and the bells of the East. No longer do the cherubim descend to accompany and to praise the Holy Mysteries. The Great Church is little more than a mound of architecturally ordered stones devoid of the life of the liturgy.

And what to say about the Agia Irini church, next to the Agia Sophia? This church is even older and was the place of the II Ecumenical Council! This church serves the Turkish State as an site for the promotion of material goods, of modeling shows and of musical concerts.

Not so far away is the Church of the Pantocrator (The Almighty) and not too far from there is the Holy Monastery of Chora. The Chora Church (Turkish Kariye Camii) is considered to be one of the most beautiful examples of a Byzantine church. The original church on this site was built in the early 5th century. The majority of creation of the current building dates from the 11th century. Around fifty years after the fall of the city to the Ottomans, Atık Ali Paşa, the Grand Vizier of Sultan Bayezid II, ordered the Chora Church to be converted into a mosque — Kariye Camii. Due to the prohibition against iconic images in Islam, the mosaics and frescoes were covered behind a layer of plaster. It became a secularized museum in 1948. The interior of the building is covered with fine mosaics and frescoes.

I could continue... but it already says something important about Christian Holy Sites in Turkey of today. It's enough to think of the thousands churches and monastery in Turkey and those in the occupied part of Cyprus. We think about the churches in Cappadocia, the churches in the great historical cities of Asia Minor, Ephesos, Nicea, Smyrna and much more.

The present Ecumenical Patriarch does a lot of efforts in order to be

able to celebrate once in a while in one of them. And the positive thing is that – due to his good relations with local authorities – he grants permission to do so. In the year 2000 he managed to organize a huge celebration of the Divine Liturgy with the other primates of the Orthodox Church in the ruins of the historical church of Saint Sophia in Nicea (Izник). But since more than 20 years once a year celebrations take also place in the historical basilica of Saint Nicholas in Myra and the last years also in the ruins of a church in Cappadocia.

What we want is that those churches can remain holy places and be granted some restoration.

But there is more! Our Ecumenical Patriarchate has first of all the priority for religious freedom. Founded by St. Andrew the Apostle in 37 C.E., the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople exists as the first throne of the Eastern Orthodox Church charged with leading the 300 million Orthodox faithful worldwide.. Since the fall of Constantinople in 1453 to the Ottoman Turks, it experiences a reduced freedom by both the Ottoman Turks and by a succession of Turkish governments throughout the 20th century.

Nobody can deny that the Ecumenical Patriarchate has a long experience of peaceful cohabitation. We are in a dialogue with Turkish government officials regarding the state of the Ecumenical Patriarchate. Among the host of issues - there are several ones – I bring to this dialogue only those ones directly related to our subject:

1. the Turkish government does not give legal recognition to the Ecumenical Patriarchate as a legitimate, independent entity.
2. it deprives the Ecumenical Patriarchate from educating and training its own clergy. In 1971 the worldwide famous Theological School of Halki - which exists as the sole seminary in which to train clergy for the Patriarchate - was closed.
3. Turkish authorities deny the Ecumenical Patriarchate all aspects of basic property rights. To date, 75% of the Ecumenical Patriarchate's 1,747 properties have been confiscated.

Let's not forget that we talk about valuable places of great historic significance to hundreds of millions where much of the New Testament and sacred creeds, including the Nicene Creed, were codified.

CONCLUSION

We live in 2008 and it's time for freedom of religion, especially in the European context. It's needless to say how much the person of the present Ecumenical Patriarch is promoting dialogue and respect for each other. He was visited by lots of personalities, keeps good contacts with politicians from Turkey and from all over the world. Many promises were given, but nothing has changed.

No government should have the right to determine the use of a holy site or that of a church. No government should determine the sainthood of holy figures and no government should ever dare to determine who will be the leader of a religion, or how that leader should be selected.

States have to respect human rights treaties, as well as the international law about human rights. Contemporary international human rights treaties enshrine the duty of all states to permit the free exercise of religious belief. At least implicit here is an obligation on states to defer to the sanctity of religious places. Otherwise, the freedom to share religious witness with fellow members of the group would mean little.