



GREEK ORTHODOX ARCHDIOCESE OF AMERICA

GREEK ORTHODOX LADIES PHILOPTOCHOS SOCIETY, Inc.

The Status and Issues of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople

The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE)

2016 Human Dimension Implementation Meeting, Warsaw, Poland

Working Sessions 12 and 13

Freedom of Thought, Conscience, Religion, or Belief

Freedom of Religion

September 26, 2016

Presented on behalf of the Greek Orthodox Ladies Philoptochos Society, Inc.

by

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Introduction

On behalf of the Greek Orthodox Ladies Philoptochos Society, Inc. (the "Society" or the "Philoptochos"), I thank you for allowing me to discuss with you the difficult environment faced every day by the Orthodox Ecumenical Patriarchate in Istanbul.

The Mission of the Greek Orthodox Ladies Philoptochos Society.

The Greek Orthodox Ladies Philoptochos Society, the official philanthropic organization of the Greek Orthodox Church in America, was established in November 1931, by the late Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagoras I, who was then serving as Archbishop of North and South America. It is an affiliated organization of the Greek Orthodox Archdioceses of America, which is jurisdictionally under the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople.

The members of the National Board of Philoptochos are dedicated church women who offer countless hours to the philanthropic, humanitarian, and Christian mission of the Church. There are 475 Philoptochos chapters in the United States and we have over 26,000 active members. The structure of the Philoptochos includes the National Board, Metropolitan Boards, and Chapters in every parish of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America.

The mission of the Society is:

- To help the poor, the destitute, the hungry, the aged, the sick, the unemployed, the orphaned, the imprisoned, the widowed, the handicapped, the victims of disasters, to undertake the burial of impoverished persons and to offer assistance to anyone who may need the help of the Church through fund raising efforts; and



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- To promote the charitable, benevolent, and philanthropic purposes of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America, through instructional programs, presentations, lectures, seminars and other educational resources; and
- To preserve and perpetuate Orthodox Christian concepts and the Orthodox Christian Family, and through them, to promote the Greek Orthodox Faith and traditions, in accordance with its doctrines, canons, discipline, divine worship, usages and customs;

In furthering these goals, the Society's 26,000 members have provided meals to over 800,000 people in the United States and Europe, provided millions of dollars of economic assistance for the advancement of medical research and care for children in medical and physical need, supported missions and missionaries worldwide, and have provided **unwavering support to the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople, its mission and purpose throughout the world.**

Please refer to the material we have made available to the delegates of this Conference as well as the Society's website www.philoptochos.org.

As Greek Orthodox Christians, our support of the Ecumenical Patriarchate and His All Holiness Patriarch Bartholomew is constant. We support the work of the philanthropic programs and institutions of the Ecumenical Patriarchate including, but not limited to, Balukli Nursing Home, orphanages, schools and shrines and we work to increase awareness of the Ecumenical Patriarchate with distribution of information just as we are doing here today. We wish to see our Patriarchate thrive and engage in its mission in safety and without interference of any kind. As Vice President Joseph Biden so eloquently stated in July of 2014:

The great faith of the Greek Orthodox Church should have what people of all faiths deserve: the freedom to practice one's religion without any restriction.

WHY WE SUPPORT THE ORDER OF ST. ANDREW

The Philoptochos Society as well as the Order of St. Andrew are affiliated organizations of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America. The Order of St. Andrew, which is presenting remarks at this HDMI Conference as well, is a United States-based organization of Orthodox Christian laymen who have been honored for their outstanding service to the Orthodox Church by the granting of a Patriarchal title, or offikion, Archon of the Great Church of Christ, bestowed upon them by His All Holiness the Ecumenical Patriarch, and personally conferred by the Exarch of the Ecumenical Patriarchate in America, His Eminence the Archbishop of America. The Archon's mission is to defend the Ecumenical Patriarchate, which is headquartered in Istanbul, Turkey, to promote its well-being and advancement, to preserve its important role in the spiritual life of Orthodox Christians, as well as all persons of faith in the world. Our mission is further founded on the precepts of the 1948 U. N. Declaration of Human Rights, which recognizes freedom of religion as one of the four basic human rights. Members of the Order are found in the U. S. Congress and all levels of government, in academia, the professions, business, and the arts.

The National Philoptochos works closely with the Order of St. Andrew in advancing its goals, coordinating programs and assisting the Order, wherever possible, in promoting, protecting and projecting the Ecumenical Patriarchate, the Holy Orthodox Church and its historical role and standing in the world.



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THE ECUMENICAL PATRIARCHATE

The Ecumenical Patriarchate was founded by the Apostle Andrew in 37 A. D. and has served as a vital religious center for Orthodox Christians ever since. In 451 A. D., the Fourth Ecumenical Council of the Christian Church conferred upon the Bishop of Constantinople equal rank to Rome and special responsibilities throughout the rest of the world. The title "Ecumenical Patriarch" dates from the sixth century and reflects and confirms the stature in which the Bishop of the city, then known as Constantinople and now as Istanbul, and has been held by the rest of Christendom ever since. The Ecumenical Patriarch, the successor of St Andrew, the Apostle, is the 270th holder of this title. He is the spiritual leader of 300 million Orthodox Christians worldwide. Our current Ecumenical Patriarch, His All-Holiness the Archbishop of Constantinople, New Rome, Bartholomew I, still retains responsibilities and privileges not available to any other Orthodox hierarch.

As previously reported, the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Istanbul for many years has faced a hostile environment, which at times threatened its very existence by unjust government decrees and policies, including a state-orchestrated Istanbul Pogrom in 1955, causing the Orthodox Greek population from 1.5 million in 1923 to dwindle to 67,550 in 1965. Subsequent discrimination and lack of freedom of religion have caused it to rapidly diminish to about 2,000 this current year.

The Turkish national government has initiated some steps which begin to address some of these issues. At the time, the then Prime Minister Erdoğan (now President) and others in the national government initiated some positive steps that may be considered the beginning of a foundation upon which the pillars of religious freedom and institutional human rights for the Ecumenical Patriarchate can be rebuilt.

The road to complete and unfettered religious freedom continues to be uphill, and challenging. The April 30, 2015, report of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), recommended that the US State Department add ten countries as Tier 2 Countries, those countries whose governments engages in or tolerates at least one of the elements of the "systematic, ongoing, and egregious" standard, but do not fully meet the CPC standard, to its list of "countries of particular concern"; among the ten countries is Turkey. In the May 2, 2016, report of USCIRF, Turkey is still in the Tier 2 Countries to be watched.

Thus, it is paramount to make large, positive, essential and measurable steps to resolve the key issues of interest towards freedom of religion and human rights expeditiously.

This paper reviews the key issues of concern as they apply to the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople.

Issue 1: Government Interference in Patriarchal Elections

The Turkish government imposes restrictions on the election of the Ecumenical Patriarch and Hierarchs who vote for him by requiring that they must be Turkish citizens. In fact, the government arbitrarily can veto any candidate for the position of Ecumenical Patriarch.

With the dwindling population of Hierarchs and Orthodox Christians in Turkey, we may not be able to elect an Ecumenical Patriarch in the not too distant future. This is tantamount to the asphyxiation of the



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leadership of the Holy Mother Church and a clear illustration of the direct intervention of the Turkish government in ecclesiastical matters.

Issue 2: Non-Recognition of "Ecumenical" Status

The Turkish government does not recognize the "Ecumenical" status of the Patriarch and Patriarchate.

Turkish authorities do not allow the use of the term or title of "Ecumenical" for any religious activity whatsoever despite the fact that it has been used since the 6th century A.D. and recognized throughout the world. Turkey regards the Patriarchate as an institution whose leader is seen as the spiritual head of Orthodox Christians in Turkey alone rather than the leader of 300 million Orthodox Christians worldwide.

Issue 3: No Legal Identity

The Ecumenical Patriarchate has no legal identity or bona fide legal personality in Turkey.

The lack of a legal identity is a major source of problems for the Ecumenical Patriarchate including non-recognition of its ownership rights and the non-issuance of residence and work permits for "foreign" (i.e. - non-Turkish) priests who are essential to the continuity and functioning of the Ecumenical Patriarchate. The Turkish authorities do not allow the Ecumenical Patriarchate to own any property - not even its churches! The Patriarchal house itself is not recognized as the Patriarchate's property and even the Girls and Boys Orphanage Foundation on the Island of Buyukada (Prinkipos) for which the Patriarchate has held a deed since 1902 is not legally recognized by the Turkish government. The inability to secure work permits by "foreigners" who work at the Ecumenical Patriarchate results in these individuals having to leave the country every three months to renew tourist visas which disrupts the operation and productivity of the Ecumenical Patriarchate and discourages staffing from abroad.

Issue 4: Closing of Halki Seminary and Inability to Train New Clergy

The Ecumenical Patriarchate is unable to train new clergy in Turkey and its theological school was forcibly closed down by the Turkish Government.

The Theological School of Halki was forcibly closed down by Turkish authorities in 1971. Since its closure, the Ecumenical Patriarchate has had to send the young men from its community desiring to enter the priesthood to one of the theological schools in Greece. In many instances, they do not return given the onerous restrictions in getting work permits and the general climate of intimidation. Despite promises by the Turkish government to re-open our theological school, there has been no progress. Left unresolved, the administrative functioning and future of the Ecumenical Patriarchate is imperiled.

Issue 5: Confiscation of Property

The Turkish Government has confiscated thousands of properties from the Ecumenical Patriarchate.

Through various methods, the Turkish authorities have confiscated thousands of properties from the Ecumenical Patriarchate and the Greek Orthodox community over the years including our monasteries, church buildings, an orphanage, private homes, apartment buildings, schools and land. Left unchecked,



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the remaining Greek Orthodox community of Constantinople (present day Istanbul) - the cultural heirs of the Byzantine Empire - will be threatened and ultimately be no more.

The Greek Orthodox Ladies Philoptochos Society, while recognizing some minor progress that has occurred in Turkey in regard to these issues, recommends that the government of Turkey do the following:

- (a) Officially recognize that the Ecumenical Patriarchate and its institutions have legal personality and standing, with rights to acquire, own, build and repair property
- (b) Officially recognize the "Ecumenical" status of the Patriarch and Patriarchate.
- (c) Fairly and expeditiously implement the August 2011 decree allowing for the return of all confiscated property.
- (d) Allow the Ecumenical Patriarchate to reopen the Theological School of Halki.
- (e) Abstain completely from any national or local government interference related to the internal governance of the Ecumenical Patriarchate.
- (f) Fully implement the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to which Turkey has subscribed, and provide equal rights to all religious minority communities.

In closing, the Society joins our fellow Christian, Jewish, Muslim and other brothers and sisters of all faiths to condemn the current barbaric acts of intolerance in the Middle East, the forced evacuation of peoples from their homes and countries, and the destruction of World Heritage historic monuments. As the Ecumenical Patriarch has proclaimed, we cannot remain indifferent or silent before such irrational persecution, cultural intolerance and appalling loss of life. We ask world leaders to take whatever steps necessary to end this calamity.

Finally, we reiterate our belief that the great faith of the Greek Orthodox Church should have what all people of all faiths deserve: **The freedom to practice one's religion without any restriction.**

Thank you.