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Statement of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America on the Conversion of the Monastery of Chora to a Mosque



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As we reflect upon the glorious celebration of the Resurrection of our Lord this past Sunday, our hearts and minds are drawn to the powerful Icon of this sacred moment in the history of our salvation at the Monastery of Chora in Istanbul. Across the globe and throughout the centuries, this Holy Icon, residing in the Funerary Chapel of the Monastery, has inspired millions upon millions to the hope of the Resurrection.

The image itself has been reproduced again and again to be the ultimate description of the unseen “Harrowing of Hell” by our Lord Jesus Christ, even to the Saint Nicholas Shrine at Ground Zero, where the company of the redeemed includes the Heroes of that fateful day of 9/11.

So it is with a heavy heart that we received the news of the Turkish Government’s official announcement of the re-conversion of the Monastery of Chora, a beacon of cultural heritage open to all, from a museum to a mosque, where the brilliant

iconography is now covered for an alien purpose.

This decision, following upon the seizure and re-conversion to a mosque of Hagia Sophia, strikes a discordant note in the symphony of mutual respect and understanding among people of all faiths.

The logic of “the right of conquest,” upon which the re-conversion of Hagia Sophia into an Islamic mosque on July 2020, was also predicated, signifies a regression of human civilization to medieval standards. Moreover, the practice of prayer at “conquered monuments,” in the 21st century, by a religious officiant brandishing a sword, reintroduces the element of violence and intertwines it with religious sentiment, with all its implications.

The Chora Monastery, renowned for its breathtaking Byzantine mosaics and frescoes, holds a unique place in the tapestry of human expression. To see it now misappropriated, its treasures hidden from view, is a loss not only for our Orthodox brethren but for all people of faith who find beauty and meaning in its sacred art.

It is the Turkish’s government prerogative to make decisions as it sees appropriate. However Holy Scripture offers this useful advice: «Πάντα μοι ἔξεστιν, ἀλλ᾽ οὐ πάντα συμφέρει», “all things may be possible for me, but not everything is beneficial” (1 Corinthians 10:23). Immediate political expediency should not obscure the long-term damage. All people of faith are called to embrace a shared responsibility to avoid the unnecessary pain and division caused by such decisions.

We call on the Turkish Government to reconsider the decision to re-convert the Chora Monastery, recognizing the gravity of this action and its implications, especially since the world center of Orthodoxy, the Ecumenical Patriarchate, is located in Istanbul, and in a country where many of citizens belong to other religions and denominations.

Finally, the American Government should be concerned about these developments. First, because it contravenes a long-recognized principle of complete separation of Church and State.

And second, these decisions of the Turkish Government (the re-conversion of Hagia Sophia and Chora Monastery, as well as other monuments), have the potential to undermine the human rights and freedoms as well as to sanction the weaponization of religion.

Resurrection (Anastasis) Fresco – Chora Monastery (14th Century)

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