

Exclusive comments by US Amb. Pyatt: Orthodoxy plays important role in strengthening our people-to-people ties, connecting Greek Diaspora to homeland



US ambassador to Greece Geoffrey Pyatt this week acknowledged the importance that Orthodoxy holds for Greek culture and the country's people, in exclusive statements to the Orthodoxia news agency, while also attesting to Mount Athos' significance for Orthodoxy and Washington's standing support for the reopening of the Ecumenical Patriarchate's Halki seminary.

Citing his numerous meetings with Orthodox Church hierarchs over the years, including Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew and Archbishop of Athens and All Greece Ieronymos, the veteran US diplomat added that "...Orthodoxy preserved Hellenism through Ottoman occupation and has been a key to keeping Greeks together during the economic crisis. Greek Orthodoxy also plays an important role in strengthening our people-to-people ties and connecting the Greek Diaspora to their homeland."

The US ambassador reminded that the Ecumenical Patriarch, His All Holiness Bartholomew I, will arrive in the United States in the fall, the first such visit in roughly a decade, an auspicious development that comes in the wake of the

enthronement of new Archbishop of America Elpidophoros.

The Patriarch's visit and the election of a new primate for the Greek Orthodox Church of America also coincide with a more visible US diplomatic activity vis-à-vis in the wider region and contacts with Orthodox hierarchs.

For instance, US ambassador-at-large for International Religious Freedom, Samuel Brownback, held meetings in Athens, Thessaloniki and on the semi-autonomous monastic community of Mount Athos last May.

"He (Brownback) voiced strong support for closer U.S. ties with Greek Orthodoxy, including our (US) support for reopening the Halki Theological Seminary," Pyatt said, while pointing to the high-level Greek Orthodox participation at this week's second Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom in Washington D.C., namely, Archbishop Elpidophoros and the Greek Orthodox Patriarch of Jerusalem, His Beatitude Theophilos III.

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo opened the sessions at the Washington conference, which was hosted by the State Department.

Asked specifically about the new Archbishop of America, who succeeded the Elder Archbishop Demetrios and was enthroned last month in New York City, Pyatt said:

"I'm very enthusiastic about the new Archbishop, as I have met him many times and understand what a great representative he is for Orthodoxy and for Greece. I know he will be a great leader for our Diaspora. He is an important force in uniting the Greek Diaspora and deepening the already strong U.S.-Greece people-to-people ties. He has already had meetings with our President, our National Security Advisor, and several top U.S. government officials, and we wish him every success as he begins his mission in the United States."

Asked by the Orthodoxia news agency over stepped up contacts between US diplomacy and canonical Orthodox Church entities around the world, Pyatt said:

"... The Ecumenical Patriarch and the Orthodox Churches more broadly play a critically important role as religious leaders on a variety of issues: in the Middle East and, of course, in Ukraine, but across the wider Orthodox world. In this regard, we greatly appreciate the Ecumenical Patriarch's leadership on a number of issues with geopolitical significance, especially Ukrainian autocephaly. And I would also reiterate that Amb. Brownback highlighted U.S. support for reopening the Halki

Theological Seminary during his visit to Athens, which affirms our government's commitment to religious freedom and tolerance".

The US ambassador also offered his impression of his visit to Mt. Athos last year:

Orthodoxia news agency: "Mr. Ambassador, you've visited the semi-autonomous monastic community of Mt. Athos and also posted references on social media regarding these visits. Was the purpose of these visits to represent your administration and nation vis-a-vis the specific monastic community - in an exclusively diplomatic capacity - or is there more context to your visits there, given that Mt. Athos holds a very significant place in Orthodoxy and Christianity in eastern Europe?"

"The monastic community of Mount Athos is unlike any other place in the world: a singularly important Orthodox and UNESCO World Heritage site that attests to northern Greece's longstanding historical role as a cultural crossroads. I had always wanted to visit and was very pleased to have been invited to visit by His All Holiness Patriarch Bartholomew last year. I was impressed by the warm welcome I received from the Monasteries, sketes, representatives of the governing Holy Community, and the civil governor. I was honored to meet with Abbott Ephraim and the monks at Vatopedi as well as the monks at Simonopetra. Mount Athos is so important to the Greek psyche, I cannot imagine being the U.S. Ambassador here without seeking to learn more about it."

Finally, asked what issues – or even concerns – were brought up in discussions he's had over the years with Greek-Americans, US citizens of Greek descent and Greek citizens with deep ties to America, Pyatt underlined:

"It is important to remember that for many Greek Americans, especially those of the generations after migration, their primary connection to Greece comes through the Church.

"What I've heard from the Greek Diaspora over the past three years has been a strong desire to help Greece, to deepen the U.S.-Greece bilateral relationship, and amplify U.S. efforts to support Greece in its economic recovery, during tragic times

like last summer's fires, and on strengthening people-to-people ties. I think it's a testament to Greek institutions, like the Church, that Greece weathered the crisis, exited its bailout program, and is taking a leadership role in the region."