

Hagia Sophia offers bittersweet wonder for pilgrims



Article by Corinna Robinson

On its second full day in Istanbul, Türkiye, the joint pilgrimage “From Rome to New Rome,” led by His Eminence Archbishop Elpidophoros of America and His Eminence Cardinal Joseph Tobin, made its way through the winding streets of the Old City, which was and remains the beating heart of Constantinople.

The day’s emotional pinnacle was a visit to the Hagia Sophia—once the Great Church of Christendom, now transformed into a mosque. Commissioned in the 6th century by Emperor Justinian I, the Hagia Sophia was a marvel of its age due to its unprecedented use of a pendentive dome, lending the immense ceiling its signature weightless, heavenly appearance. For nearly a millennium it was the largest church in the world, a beacon of Orthodoxy, where patriarchs were enthroned and emperors crowned.

Nearby, the pilgrims also visited the Church of Sts. Sergius and Bacchus, affectionately known as the “Little Hagia Sophia.” Built during the same era and sharing much of its sister church’s architectural style, it, too, now functions as a mosque.

While the Hagia Sophia’s architectural grandeur remains undiminished, today the churchgoers’ reverence and wonder were bittersweet. The basilica’s 2020 transformation into a mosque cast a spirit of mourning over the visit—a sorrow shared by Christians globally, particularly those of the Eastern Orthodox tradition who once called the church home. The few mosaics left are lonely in their solitude, and others are veiled from sight. At the Great Church’s little sister, the only reminder of the site’s Christian origins is an inscription. Yet even amid these saddening realities, these spaces remain testaments to the faith of their founders.

The day began, however, with a more hopeful note: a visit to the Church of St. Anthony of Padua, one of the few remaining Catholic churches in Istanbul. There, the group participated in its third prayer service for Christian unity, this one led by

Cardinal Tobin and focusing on the Church as a community of believers. At the service's conclusion the Cardinal led the pilgrims in a stirring rendition of "Hail Mary, Full of Grace."

Tomorrow, the group will journey to Nicaea (modern-day İznik), where they will commemorate the 1700th anniversary of the First Ecumenical Council, which still binds Christians together through the words of the Nicene Creed.

Photo: Orthodox Observer/Brittainy Newman

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