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Epistle of the Holy Synod of the Church of Greece to UNESCO



«As you know, as of March 16, 1983, the Turkish State has ratified the International “Convention concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage” (UNESCO, Paris 1972).

The Church of the Holy Wisdom (Aghia Sophia) of God was founded by the Christian Emperor Justinian, inaugurated on December 27, 537AD and was designed as a space for religious worship, dedicated to the Wisdom of God, Jesus Christ. It is a masterpiece of architectural genius and world-renowned as a monument of Christian culture par excellence. Its value remains universal because Christianity is of a supranational, ecumenical radiance.

After 1453 the church of Haghia Sophia was converted into a mosque. From 1573 the church and its elements suffered damage caused by the Ottoman State (destruction of Christian elements of the church, dismantling or plastering of mosaics, coating of walls with Islamic motifs so that Christian icon paintings may be covered) and additions irrelevant to its purpose at the time of its construction (addition of minarets, addition of Islamic symbols of Khalifs to the interior of the

church) so that it may be used as a mosque. This use was aimed at symbolising the conquest of Constantinople by the Ottomans on a political level.

By means of a Cabinet decree of Turkey dated November 24, 1934, the church was turned into a museum, its nature as a monument was recognized and its Christian name (Haghia Sophia, Ayasofya) was preserved.

In June 1931, the American scholar and archæologist Thomas Whittemore was allowed to proceed to the uncovering of certain significant mosaics depicting Jesus Christ, the Mother of God, Saints of the Eastern Orthodox Church of Christ, as well as Christian Emperors of the Eastern Roman Empire. Recently, further Christian antiquities that had been covered by the Ottomans were unveiled (mosaics depicting six-winged Seraphs).

On July 10, 2020, it was announced that the Turkish Council of State (10th Chamber) accepted an annulment claim lodged by the "Association of Foundations and Service to Historical Artefacts and the Environment" and revoked the aforementioned Turkish Cabinet decree of November 24, 1934, thereby allowing the conversion of the monument into a mosque.

Essentially, the ruling of the Turkish Council of State converts the Church of Haghia Sophia from a monument of cultural heritage into a symbol of conquest. Moreover, the aforementioned ruling enables the Turkish State to use a monument of Christian culture in a manner intended to insult the Eastern Orthodox Christian Church as well as the other Christian denominations around the world, as this church constitutes to the Christians of the entire world one of the most famous and ancient examples of monumental Christian church building.

In the same spirit, it was announced by the Directorate of Religious Affairs of Turkey that the Christian frescoes of the monument will be covered during Islamic prayers inside it (i.e. five times a day) no will members of the public be allowed to enter it during prayers. Therefore, the free access of the public during specific hours will be limited and the Christian elements of the church will be covered, thus brutally mutilating the outlook and the integrity of the monument, so that it may be rendered a mosque. Furthermore, it is obvious that conservation work on the Christian antiquities of the of the church will be suspended, as they are no longer compatible with the repurposing of the monument.

The church is visited by Christian pilgrims from around the world, among whom members of the Church of Greece, who from now on will have no unobstructed access to the monument in view of its conversion into a mosque and the hiding of its Christian antiquities (mosaics etc.).

For these reasons we kindly request that you exercise your powers pursuant to the international treaties for the protection of the monument and that you manifest your opposition to its conversion into a mosque in the way(s) that you deem most

effective.

† IERONYMOS of Athens,

President
The Chief Secretary
† Philotheos of Oreoi»