

Erdogan announces approval of Divine Liturgy at Panagia Sumela Monastery; seen as bid to allay stinging int'l condemnation over Hagia Sophia conversion



Stinging from heightened international condemnation over his decision to convert the iconic Hagia Sophia into a mosque, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan this week used a ceremony for the reopening of the historic Panagia Sumela monastery to announce that “...this year, our Orthodox citizens will be able to hold a service on August 15 at Sumela Monastery, something they could not do because of the works.”

The Panagia Sumela Monastery, which official Turkey refers to only as only “Sumela”, omitting the name Panaghia, as the Ever-Virgin Mary is known in Greek, officially opened on Tuesday after five years of restoration works.

A Patriarchal Divine Liturgy on August 15, on the feast day of the Dormition of Our

Most Holy Lady, was not performed last year.

Turkish media were quick to report that the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople, His All Holiness Bartholomew I, spoke by phone with Erdogan regarding the landmark site.

The Ecumenical Patriarchate had previously issued a statement stating that due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, Turkish authorities would not allow the Divine Liturgy to take place on August 15.

The Turkish state agency Anadolu first reported that the Ecumenical Patriarch had thanked the Turkish president for the restoration work at the monastery and for its reopening to visitors.

Pro-govt propaganda

In the article, entitled “Fener Greek Patriarch thanks Turkey over Sumela Monastery”, the state-run news agency of Turkey and now one of the Erdogan administration’s most vocal media “cheerleaders”, cited the decision to allow the Christian religious service to proceed after all.

The specific news agency toes the line of the official Turkish state, ignoring the title of Ecumenical Patriarch, and by extension, the historic ecclesiastical role of the Patriarchate of Constantinople as the most ancient of Orthodox Churches, and its Patriarch as the spiritual head of more than 350 million Orthodox Christians worldwide.

The historic monastery of Panagia Sumela and the Hagia Sophia cathedral in the nearby city Black Sea port city of Trabzon are among the most visited monuments in the ancient Pontus region, which encompasses much of the southeast Black Sea coastline and its hinterland. The monastery was for centuries the spiritual center for Pontian Hellenism.

In a related development, several Pontian groups and federations in Greece and elsewhere announced that they will advise Orthodox Christians not to travel to the Pontus region for the Aug. 15 service - saying the gesture by the Turkish president merely aims to allay widespread international condemnation over the reconversion of the Hagia Sophia into a mosque.