

Metropolitan Vasilios of Constantia-Ammochostos reflects on peace process in Cyprus



It has been 46 years since the Turkish invasion of Cyprus led to the partitioning of the island, the northern third inhabited by Turkish Cypriots and the southern two-thirds by Greek Cypriots, whose government is internationally recognized. The August 1974 ceasefire line became a United Nations buffer zone, along which Cyprus remains divided.

The Church of Cyprus, a founding member of the World Council of Churches (WCC), strives for the unity of the island, together with other churches in the country.

Metropolitan Dr Vasilios, head of the diocese of Constantia – Ammochostos in Cyprus, shared his reflections on the ongoing quest for reconciliation. His Eminence was interviewed by email by the World Council of Churches (WCC) director of communication Marianne Ejdersten.

Your Eminence, can you describe the current peace process and the role of the churches and the interreligious dialogue?

Metropolitan Dr Vasilios: After the collapse of the negotiations in 2017 there was time for reflection, from a political point of view, for both sides. Some attempts were made at a later stage to come together again by the meeting of the leaders of the two communities, the most important being the decision of developing measures of mutual confidence. Unfortunately, there are some important factors which have influenced the development of a real engagement for negotiations.

The first and most serious factor is Turkey's aggression against Cyprus which unfortunately gets more and more aggravated, as it is clearly evident in the recent actions of Turkey to send out ships and search for natural gas in the Exclusive Economic Zone of Cyprus. The government of Cyprus has constantly declared that is willing to go to the negotiations but not under any condition of threatening by Turkey.

In addition to this, the Turkish-Cypriot community is found in a pre-election period since last year, and given the fact that Turkey finances the political structure of the so-called government of the occupied area of Cyprus one understands the interventions of the Turkish government in the whole procedure. This was particularly clear in the statements of the opposition parties, favoured by the Turkish government, which poison the whole situation and, consequently, destroy any hopes for restarting the negotiations for the time being.

Also, during this period, again in the context of the campaign in the election period, provocative actions clearly promoted by the Turkish government took place regarding the reopening of the city of Famagusta aiming to put it under the control of the so-called government of the Turkish-Cypriot community, contrary to the decisions of the Security Council of the United Nations concerning the city of Famagusta, that the closed city since 1974 has to be given back to the legal owners. Going even further into absurdity, it has been claimed that the whole of Famagusta belongs to the organization of "Vakoufia," which, of course, provokes great pain to the refugees, especially those originated from Famagusta, but also to the whole Greek population of Cyprus.

Additionally, the current situation of the pandemic of COVID-19 has also caused further isolation between the two sides, given that the crossing checkpoints were closed and there was no communication. It is only recently that checkpoints start to reopen.

How important is the prophetic role of the church?

Metropolitan Dr Vasilios: From the point of view of the church, during this period we were not able until now to conduct any services in the churches in the occupied area, as it was the practice before.

Therefore, 1. The collapse of the negotiations, 2. The situation created due to Turkey's aggression and 3. The charged atmosphere in the pre-election period and the COVID-19 pandemic, all these together played a major role for not having any religious dialogue or contact during this period.

Your Eminence, how do you look at the U.N.-led peace talks between the two sides had more or less collapsed in Geneva, Switzerland in July 2017. Do you see any signs of hope?

Metropolitan Dr Vasilios: The presidential elections in the occupied area are now postponed until October and recently they have decided for parliamentary election probably on January 2021. It should be noted that the actual Turkish-Cypriot leader, who is a quite moderate politician and ready for negotiations, is not favoured by the Turkish government and we have read some news that his life is even threatened. Our government has repeatedly said that after the elections in the occupied area, and in agreement with the UN, there could be a convocation in the same form as the one in Grans-Montana in 2017. A five-party conference with the two Cypriot communities and the three guarantor countries Greece, Turkey and the United Kingdom, under the auspices of the United Nations and an observer from the European Union, in order to seek for a peaceful solution to the Cyprus problem. Our government has declared its readiness to do that but until now we do not have any signs towards that direction from the side of Turkey. We would like to draw your attention to the wider region of Eastern Mediterranean and the actions of Turkey, which are very provocative not only for Cyprus but also for other countries in the area, such as Israel, Egypt, Greece, France, Italy and many others. Also, we should note the recent actions of Turkey in Syria and Libya and lastly but very important to us, the conversion of Hagia Sophia to a mosque. As the Holy Synod of the Church of Cyprus has recently declared:

“The Holy Synod of the Church of Cyprus, echoing the feelings of anger and

frustration of the Cypriot people, and of all the Orthodox alike, expresses its deep sorrow and grave concern, for the recent decision of the Turkish Authorities to convert Hagia Sophia into a mosque.

The Greek people of Cyprus has an additional reason to express their concern and sorrow for this ungodly and unacceptable action of the Turkish leaders, given that since 1974 the majority of ecclesiastical monuments in the Turkish-occupied area of the Republic of Cyprus have been plundered and destroyed, as the remaining walls witness to this day. Some churches have become mosques, others are used as stables or for military purposes, while some of them are totally destroyed in the effort to obliterate any sign of the traditional Christian identity of the land. After all this has been the tactic of Turkey throughout its whole history with regard to the lands they conquered. But, “if people remain silent, the stones will cry out”. It is with sadness that we have seen statements of Turkish-Cypriots who, in an attempt to support the Turkish government, have falsely accused the Greek-Cypriots for destroying Turkish-Cypriot monuments, while they can see in the occupied areas where they live the destroyed Christian churches that they have themselves ruined, but yet without being ashamed of that they come out with such unsubstantial accusations.” [...]

“We are afraid that this incomprehensible and unjustified action, as it has been rightly said, “might lead to a deep breach between Christianity and Islam”. Although it might be an incomprehensible and unjustified action for us, it is a conscious choice for the Turkish government since they have decided to move away from Europe and fulfil their Islamic vision of an Ottoman Empire. Consequently, the problem is clearly deeper, we could say it is a systemic problem, as it is against the Christian principles and the Christian faith, and also it creates a Muslim identity which must be different from the Christian one.”

How can the global fellowship pray for you and accompany you in the peace process?

Metropolitan Dr Vasilios: Thank you very much for your prayers and your interest about the situation in our country, which is from the very beginning supporting the church and the people of Cyprus. I do not see any possibility for a mediating role of the WCC, at least for the time being, taking also into account the difficulties due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Given that our church is willing to have peaceful conditions for all Cypriot citizens, Christians, Muslims and people from all religious communities, we are closely following the whole situation.

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