

Order of Saint Andrew Condemns Conversion of Ancient Chora Church Into a Mosque



ORDER *of*
SAINT ANDREW
THE APOSTLE

Archons of the Ecumenical Patriarchate in America

The Order of Saint Andrew, Archons of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, notes with dismay Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's decision Friday, August 21, 2020 to convert Istanbul's historic and renowned Church of the Holy Savior in Chora to a mosque, just weeks after converting Hagia Sophia into a mosque as well. This is yet another contemptuous act against religious freedom perpetrated by the government of Turkey; the Order strongly condemns this action.

The Church of the Holy Savior in Chora was built in the fourteenth century on the site of churches that date back to the fourth century. It was one of the most celebrated churches in Constantinople, as it contained mosaic icons and frescoes that are some of the foremost examples anywhere in the world of Byzantine iconography.

When the Ottoman Turks conquered Constantinople in 1453, that magnificent Christian art was plastered over, but was revealed to the world again when the Turkish government designated the building a museum in 1945.

Now that artwork, part of the creative heritage of the entire world, risks being lost. Contrary to assurances, Erdogan has not yet made the icons and frescoes of Hagia Sophia available for viewing since he converted that historic and magnificent cathedral to a mosque. The Church of the Holy Savior in Chora contains even more breathtaking examples of Byzantine iconography. If international human rights organizations do not act now, they could never be seen again.

This ill-advised decision once again makes a mockery of the Turkish government's commitment to religious tolerance and religious freedom. Hagia Sophia and the Chora Church have for centuries been a source of inspiration and enlightenment not only for millions of Orthodox Christians, but for people of other faith traditions all over the world. The Turkish government's appropriation of both as the property of one faith group not only constitutes yet another sign of that government's contempt for Turkey's rich Orthodox Christian heritage, but further imperils the religious freedom of the Ecumenical Patriarchate and the remaining Christians of that land.

We urgently call upon international organizations and governments of the world that are committed to religious freedom to compel the Turkish government to reverse this decision as well as the conversion of Hagia Sophia to a mosque, and to reestablish both with a status that respects their entire history, including their many centuries as centers of Christian prayer and worship.

In the Service of the Ecumenical Patriarchate,

Anthony J. Limberakis, MD
Archon Aktouarios
National Commander

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