

Renewed int'l interest, persistence to reopen Ecumenical Patriarchate's Halki seminary



Developments and speculation surrounding the Ecumenical Patriarchate's still-closed Theological School of Halki have significantly increased over the recent period.

Speaking over the weekend at the Zoodohou Pigis Abbey in the Baloukli district, west of Istanbul, the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople, His All Holiness Bartholomew I, called for the reopening of the all-important seminary, which is located on the same-day Princes' isle of Halki.

His All Holiness underlined, "...During its 127 years of operation, the seminary has produced around 1,000 graduates, all excellent deacons of the Church until 1971, when it was suddenly and unjustly shut down by the authorities – despite our best efforts and prayers, and in the face of the promises constantly made to us... we will not stop because we consider it our inalienable right".

Turkish authorities ordered the Patriarchate's school of theology closed in 1971, ostensibly because it operated outside the Turkish state higher education system.

Successive Turkish governments have since refused to allow its reopening.

Expatriate media reports later noted that the Ecumenical Patriarch told members of a delegation of the American Hellenic Educational Progressive Association, or AHEPA, that the reopening of the seminary is only a matter of time, and that contacts are continuing with the current Turkish government.

US administrations have also taken a particular interest in the school's renewed operation, considered by Washington as a matter of religious freedom in Turkey.

In a related development, the US ambassador-at-large for international religious freedom, Sam Brownback, was quoted by Greek media on Sunday as saying there are "no excuses" for the seminary's continued closure.

His statement, echoing standing US policy regarding Halki, comes after a visit last week to the island seminary and the affiliated Orthodox monastery of the Holy Trinity by US Chargé d'Affaires Jeffrey Hovenier, who later wrote on his Twitter account that "...It was an honor to visit #Halki Seminary to learn about its central place in the life of Greek Orthodoxy. Its presence is a testament to the rich religious past and present of this region. I hope to see it reopened soon."