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His Eminence Archbishop Elpidophoros, “Religious Freedom and the Ecumenical Patriarchate”, Presentation of the Religious Freedom Report by ACN International



Your Excellency Archbishop Ulloa,

Director Espinosa,

Professor Blanco,

Dear Friends and Colleagues,

I am profoundly grateful for this occasion to address such an esteemed ecumenical gathering, and I want to express special thanks to all of the dedicated persons of Aid to the Church in Need. For over three quarters of a century, you have pursued a righteous ministry on behalf of religious liberty and intense advocacy on behalf of those who suffer persecution around the world.

As a servant of, and a leader within, the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople, I have spent decades in the same ministry and advocacy, which is needed now more than ever.

As a Christian of Asia Minor and the Middle East, I have witnessed first-hand how minority rights can be unjustly abrogated. This year of 2023 is the centenary of the Asia Minor catastrophe for the Greek Orthodox, the Armenian, and the Assyrian Christians, which culminated in the horrific Burning of Smyrna in 1923, and the forced exchange of populations in the aftermath of the Treaty of Lausanne. All of these unfortunate events happened in the wake of the First World War, and Aid to the Church in Need knows all too well that the aftershocks of such traumatic conflicts do not end when the peace treaties are signed. In fact, the treaties themselves are often the beginnings of further convulsions of violence and terror. Your founding in 1947 testifies to the very needs that were present in the world at that time – to bring tangible relief and solace to the suffering.

As Archbishop of America – a country that prides itself on adhering to principles of religious liberty, tolerance, and freedom of conscience and expression – I have the distinct honor to lead an organization of committed laypersons, “The Order of Saint Andrew, Archons of the Ecumenical Patriarchate,” which supports the Mother Church of Constantinople in many and diverse ways. One of the Order’s leading initiatives is the rigorous pursuit of freedom for the Ecumenical Patriarchate, which is an institution of a purely spiritual mission. In the sacred person of His All Holiness, Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, whose now longest reign on the Throne of the Sacred See of Saint Andrew the First-Called Disciple, is being tested by the unprecedented war against Ukraine and its noble people.

And make no mistake, this is a war that is attacking the fundamental liberties in Christ of the Ukrainian People, as the Church under the control of the Moscow Patriarchate has forsaken the vocation of the Gospel of the Prince of Peace in exchange for unspecified spoils of a war against its own spiritual brethren.

His All Holiness and the Mother Church have stood bravely and resolutely on the side of freedom and integrity, in the face of enormous pressures. From a small

island of historic Orthodox Christianity within a culture that has been ethnically and religiously different for over five hundred years, the Ecumenical Patriarch speaks loudly and boldly for the sake of the truth.

Here in the Western Hemisphere, where historical Christianity is relatively new (in comparison to the lands across the Atlantic), we have the advantage of access to media, to governments, to academic institutions and non-governmental actors, who support our voices being heard. But we can never take for granted the freedoms we enjoy; for every religion has had, at one time or another, the upper hand within the society where it dwells. But history teaches the lesson again and again, that, as the philosopher Heraclitus said: “everything is in flux.” The rise in a bigoted form of so-called “Christian Nationalism” in the United States these past few years should be a warning to all that no one is guaranteed the protection of the society of their belief-system, no matter how long they have inhabited the land.

Therefore, our work for promoting freedom of conscience and expression – in both spiritual and societal settings – must be constant and ever-vigilant. Through our efforts in the United States and the Order of Saint Andrew, we feed into as many streams of mass media as we are able, and we maintain close contact with governmental and inter-governmental agencies. Whether it is through our involvements at the United Nations, or our contacts at the U.S. State Department and the diplomatic corps, we aim to keep issues of vital importance in the foreground of the appropriate bodies, while at the same time, we work assiduously in the background to create spaces of mutual respect and understanding.

As People of Faith, we know that the smallest mustard seed can produce a large and impactful effect. We are not afraid to make our case known and to speak truth to power, for we know that the power of love will always overcome the lust for power, and even the smallest candle can disperse the darkest shadows.

As the Sacred Archdiocese of America, the largest Eparchy in the world of the Mother Church of Constantinople, we are committed to assisting the Great Church, Which is small in numbers but immense in history and presence. Maintaining Her proper and canonical role as the prophetic voice and herald of freedom and dignity for every human being is our daily mission and vision. Without the righteous and clarion call of leaders of all faith communities, we allow those who would silence minorities and even drive them from their ancestral lands to act unrestrained.

Such persecution against the Church cannot be tolerated in a modern world, and we must extend our canopy of protection to all who suffer from unjust hatred and prejudice.

Although we Greek Orthodox Christians do not have definitions as precise as our Roman Catholic Brethren, allow me – on this occasion when Panama celebrates the 510 Years of the establishment of the Diocese and the Feast of Santa María La Antigua – to quote a saying from the Blesséd Virgin Mary herself. In Latin, if you please, as it was placed in the Purgatorio of the Great Dante Alighieri: Vinum non habent.[*] “They have no wine.”

In that briefest of solicitations to Her Divine Son, the Virgin implores on our behalf, that the Lord should supply us with our every need. Santa María La Antigua is with us. She knows that we need God’s protection and supply. She will never forsake us, and we must be loyal to Her and never forsake our responsibility and duty to our fellow human beings. To defend their rights. To safeguard their liberties. And to speak and speak loudly when injustice and persecution prevail anywhere in the world.

Thank you for this extraordinary opportunity to address you today.

Thank you for the work that you do every day to overshadow the world with compassion and decency.

And may our Good and Loving God always protect and preserve the noble People of Panama, with liberty and blessing, now and forever. Amen.

Photos: GoARCH/Brittainy Newman

[*] Purgatorio: Canto 13, 29.

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