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Ecumenical Federation of Constantinopolitans

The necessity of respect of the religious Rights of the Greek-Orthodox Community of Istanbul

The Ecumenical Federation of Constantinopolitans is the worldwide federation of the associations of the expatriated Greek Community of Istanbul which were forced to leave their native land, contrary to their wish, during the half period of the 20th Century. This Community has principally a religious identity. This is due to historical reasons and the fact that Istanbul has been the seat of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople, the spiritual centre of the Eastern Orthodox Church, as established by the Chalcedon Saint Synod in 451, having more than 300 million believers around the world.

The Greek-Orthodox community faces bureaucratic restrictions, structural discrimination, confiscation of property and denial of legal status of its institutions briefly as follows:

The Patriarchate, this World recognised and well respected religious institution has no legal status in the country. This fact creates serious problems related to its religious rights.

The Patriarchate has been served in the last 150 years by clergy and staff trained in its Chalki Theological School, in the island of Heybeliada near Istanbul. The School has been closed in 1971 by a ruling of the Turkish Ministry of Education prohibiting non-state universities. The School had functioned since its foundation in 1843 under the Ottoman Empire and continued to function under the Turkish State supervision after the establishment of the Republic of Turkey in 1923, until its closure in 1971. It is sad that the numerous appeals in the last 42 years to the Turkish Government had no positive answer to cease this severe violation of religious right. As a result, the Patriarchate faces serious obstacles in training the clergy and staff of itself and of the churches under its jurisdiction all over the world. In recent years the Turkish officials have promised to proceed to the opening of the School, however these promises have not been yet fulfilled.

Another issue relates to the confiscation of the property of 17 historical monasteries which are declared as "abandoned" by the State and placed under its direct supervision despite the fact that their use by the Greek-Orthodox community is permitted. Furthermore, another related issue is the continuing illegal occupation of the three Greek-Orthodox churches and their property in Karakoy/ Galata Istanbul during the period 1923- 1965 by the so called and self declared in 1924 Turkish Orthodox Church with the support of that time Turkish Governments. This act is against all the rules of the Christian religion. The mentioned churches and their properties should be returned to their legal owners which is the Ecumenical Patriarchate and the Greek-Orthodox Community of Istanbul.

Moreover an important issue, related to the religious rights, is the contents of the School books as has been indicated in the past also by our Federation as well. Concerning the books of the history course, during the last year, a significant improvement was done to eliminate unfounded negative claims against the minorities. Still, some false references is done against the minority schools. As an example is in the history book of 11'th year (Mid Education,

pages: 204-5) it is written that, during the last period of Ottoman Empire, the minority and foreign schools were in the same category and were promoting nationalist policies, which is against the truth, since the schools were established by citizens of the Ottoman Empire and contributed greatly to the social and economic development of their country. Additionally, in the history book of the 12'th year (Mid Education) an entirely false statement is depicted on Patriarchate related to Cyprus issue (page: 161). It is important also these remaining wrong statements to be eliminated.

We want also to draw your attention to an issue which is highly related to mutual understanding among religious. The recent conversions to mosques of monuments being used for many decades as museums (following their restoration by the Republic of Turkey), while were originally built as churches, is not only contradictory to the scientific principles of monument preservation but also to the much needed today interreligious cooperation. The two historic churches of Haghia Sophia in Iznik (8th century Nicaea) and Trabzon (13th Century) are already converted to mosques while in August issue of the magazine "Skylife" of the state majority shareholder Turkish Airlines, published a key note article with the title "Haghia Sophia: Mosque of Sultans" advocating also the conversion of the Haghia Sophia from museum to mosque, despite the fact that the church of "Haghia Sophia" has been a museum since 1934.