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Archbishop Elpidophoros Speaks Exclusively to *The National Herald* on Hagia Sophia

BOSTON – Archbishop Elpidophoros of America, speaking exclusively to The National Herald about the conversion of Hagia Sophia into a mosque, expressed deep concern regarding the course Turkey is taking. He said, “now we have to wonder what the re-conversion of Hagia Sophia signals for the future of all minorities in Turkey. Diversity is strength, not weakness.”

The Archbishop said that, “I hope that our community, the Omogenia here in the Diaspora, takes this heartbreak to heart. We need vigilance and advocacy at a level we have never imagined.”

The entire interview follows:

***The National Herald:** Your Eminence, what does this decision by Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan mean for relations with the Christian world in general and with the Ecumenical Patriarchate in particular?*

Archbishop Elpidophoros: The Christian world is deeply pained by this move, and indeed the Ecumenical Patriarchate. Its status quo as a monument was an indication of acceptance of past history and current realities. We had hoped that the last years would have brought about more inclusion for the religious and ethnic minorities of Turkey. We had hoped for the re-opening of the Theological School of Halki on the island of Heybeliada. As you know, before I was elected Archbishop of America, I was the Abbot of the Holy Trinity Monastery and the School there, a monastic institution since the Ninth Century. Now we have to wonder what the re-conversion of Hagia Sophia signals for the future of all minorities in Turkey. Diversity is strength, not weakness. There should be no more room for monolithic views of society in the modern world. Look how the pandemic has reminded all of us – negatively for sure – of how interconnected and interdependent we truly are. We need to accept that the unitary versions of societies no longer work, even for the majority.

***TNH:** What do you think the Omogenia can do?*

Archbishop Elpidophoros: What we can and should do is to educate our neighbors and our political establishment about the plight and the situation that affects our brothers and sisters of all faiths. This could be seen coming for quite a while; the conversion of the Hagia Sophia cathedral in Iznik in 2012 (Nicaea, the site of the Second Ecumenical Council), the Hagia Sophia Church in Trabzon in 2013, and the ruling that has converted the Church of Chora – one of the greatest artistic achievements of the Orthodox Faith – into a mosque late last year. I hope that our community, the Omogenia here in the Diaspora, takes this heartbreak to heart. We need vigilance and advocacy at a level we have never imagined.

***TNH:** What actions have you taken and what do you expect from the U.S. authorities?*

Archbishop Elpidophoros: The past days have been literally non-stop for me. I convened the Holy Eparchial Synod and we published a press release and a synodical encyclical. We did the same with the Executive Committee of the Assembly of the Orthodox Bishops in America. I have been swamped with calls of expression of support and sympathy, as well as inquiries about the implications of this inexplicable move by the Turkish government. I have responded to requests for interviews to national and international outlets, and I chose to use our social media channels to inform and educate multiple constituencies in the USA and around the world. And I will not relent in my efforts. As for our government, we can say that there has been a sensitive response, one with empathy from political leadership. But as we say in America, there is little use in closing the barn door once the horse is out. We have much to do to educate ourselves about our own history, and in this process, we would have educated and engaged our government. But we must never lose hope. It is the assurance of things not yet seen, as the Apostle says. Therefore, we must apply ourselves with even greater vigor.

***TNH:** Does the fact that you came from Constantinople prevent you from expressing yourself freely about the actions and decisions of the Turkish government?*

Archbishop Elpidophoros: I express myself as I choose, and always cognizant of my ministry as Archbishop and as a faithful son of the Ecumenical Throne. I believe that this time calls for circumspection and reason, even in the midst of heightened emotions. I hope that everyone can put their pain in the service of our mission, to serve the world with love, compassion, and truth. My experience as a Constantinopolitan helps me to discern that of all things we want to do, some can have results, some can succeed, and some can make things worse. Because the question here is this: do we just want to protest in order to feel better, for our own for internal consumption, or do we want to have results? There is a wise saying I learned in Constantinople: "Do you want to eat grapes or just hit the vine dresser?"