

His Eminence Archbishop Elpidophoros
Introductory Remarks for HALC Conference Call with
United States Governmental Staff

July 14, 2020

New York, New York

Dear Friends,

Before beginning some brief introductory remarks, I want to thank the Board of Directors of the Hellenic American Leadership Council, and particularly the HALC Executive Endy Zemenides for organizing this conference call today.

I am grateful that you have all agreed to be part of this Q & A, and to listen not only to the pain of Greek Orthodox Christians around our Nation and the world, but the pain of all Christians and all people of good will and good faith.

What has happened was not impossible to be seen in advance. It is nearly fifty years since the forced closure of the Theological School of Halki; as well as the recent the re-conversion of three other famous Christian Churches into mosques: the Hagia Sophia cathedral in Iznik in 2012 (and this is Nicaea, the site of the Second Ecumenical Council), the Hagia Sophia Church in Trabzon in 2013, and the exquisite Church of Chora – one of the greatest artistic achievements of all world religions – into a mosque late last year. All of these were designed to be museums in the Turkish secular state, but the secular boundaries of Turkey have been encroached upon for years.

The issue that may be of greatest interest to you, beyond this cultural misappropriation, is that the very reason that Ataturk, the founder of the modern, secular Turkish Republic, converted the Hagia Sophia into a museum, was that he wanted to enshrine Hagia Sophia as the sign and symbol of the transition from a theocratic empire, from the mentality of conquest, to that of equal citizenship in a secular society, in a secular state. This is the significance of Hagia Sophia as a museum, as a monument. The mentality of a conqueror, who claims a conqueror's rights, changes the relationship of the state to its citizens.

As you may know, I am a Turkish citizen myself, but I do not accept this mentality of conquest, because I am not a conquered minority. I am an equal citizen in my own country, no matter if I am Christian, of Greek origin, or Armenian, or Syrian, or if I am Jewish. We all are equal citizens. But, if the state endorses the mentality of conquest, saying it is the state's right to have Hagia Sophia as a mosque, then this is a triumphalist path that leads to insecurity and anxiety, especially for the minorities.

Turkey can do better than this. And we all want better than this. The response of the Western Powers.

I am thankful to be speaking with you today and I look forward to your comments and questions.