



Metropolitan Hilarion: Decision to transform Hagia Sophia into a mosque is a blow to the entire world Orthodoxy

The decision made on 10 July 2020 by the Turkish authorities to deprive Hagia Sophia of the status of museum and to transform it into a mosque was commented on by Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk, head of the Moscow Patriarchate department for external church relations, in his interview to Russia 24 TV news.

- To what extent the decision of the Turkish Council of State on the status of Hagia Sophia was expected?

- It was expected because it had been announced on several occasions. But we still hoped to the last moment that the Turkish authorities would reconsider this draft decision and it is with great regret and deep pain that we take in its adoption today.

It is a blow to the world Orthodoxy because for all the Orthodox Christians throughout the world this Hagia Sophia Church is the same symbol as is St. Peter's Cathedral in Rome for the Catholics. This church was built in the 6th century and dedicated to Christ the Saviour, and for us it remains a church dedicated to the Saviour. And for this reason we take in the decision made today with a great regret.

- Do you think it can make an impact on Turkey's relations with the Christian world?

- I think the adopted decision will undoubtedly make an impact on the relationships of this country with the Christian world because we have repeatedly heard, even in the very last days, the voices of Christian leaders who called upon the Turkish authorities to stop. There was a statement of His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia reminding how much this church means for the Russian Orthodox Church. It was during a worship service in Hagia Sophia that Prince Vladimir's envoys felt that they did not know where they were – in heaven or on earth. Upon their return to Kiev they told Prince Vladimir what they had seen and heard. So, the historic choice made by Vladimir is directly linked to his envoy's visit to Hagia Sophia. It can be said that the adoption of Christianity by Rus', which predetermined her entire history, is linked with this very church and it is an important symbol for us.

In Hagia Sophia, there are fragments of old mosaics that have miraculously survived and certainly many people are asking what will happen to them. As is known, when this church was turned into a mosque

for the first time, most of the mosaic images were battered off by hammers and only a small part of them have survived under the plaster. Then what will happen to these mosaics – will they be battered off or painted out by plaster or somehow hidden from the eyes of the Muslims who will pray near them? These and many other questions are asked now by Orthodox Christians throughout the world.

- Do you think in the current situation some compromise may be retained on the status of Hagia Sophia? Perhaps an agreement can be achieved to preserve the museum while holding services on certain days like in a mosque...

- It seems to me that the Turkish authorities have done everything to show that they do not wish to make any compromise; they do not want to hear the voices coming from outside. There have been repeated statements that the status of Hagia Sophia is Turkey's internal affair and the country herself decides what is to be done with this church. Therefore, it is evident now that Turkey has refused to make a compromise, refused to hear the voices of Christian leaders and political figures who appealed not to make this step. As is known, following the statement of His Holiness Patriarch Kirill, an appeal was made by the State Duma of the Russian Federation, but it was ignored as well.

Now some parachurch mass media in Ukraine and in Russia have come up with the idea that through this decision of the Turkish authorities, God has punished Patriarch Bartholomew for the schism in the world Orthodoxy. I cannot agree with it in any way because the blow is struck not on Patriarch Bartholomew, not on the Church of Constantinople but on the whole world Orthodoxy and on entire Christianity.

- It is not quite clear what has provoked such a stubbornness of the Turkish authorities who refuse to hear what is talked about in the world...

- Perhaps it should be mentioned here that there exist in Turkey a radical Islamism that makes an increasingly considerable influence on the policy of this state. When in 1934 Mustafa Kemal Atatürk decided to give Hagia Sophia the status of museum, his aim was to turn Turkey into a secular state and the status of Hagia Sophia as museum became the symbol of it.

Today's decision is undoubtedly influenced by radical Islamists who are gathering strength in today's Turkey. I believe we should not enter into discussion concerning the internal situation in this country, but it is clear that today's decision will also adversely affect the attitude of our people to the Turkish people and the interreligious relations.

- Will the Russian Orthodox Church initiate a discussion on this problem with all the Local Orthodox Churches as well as with the Turkish authorities?

- I think the statement made by His Holiness Patriarch Kirill speaks eloquently enough about the position of the Russian Orthodox Church.

For already quite a number of yours, we have held dialogue with the Turkey's Department for Religious Affairs and Hagia Sophia church has been placed now under the jurisdiction of precisely this department. Certainly, we will pose our questions in the dialogue with the Turkish Department for Religious Affairs but judging by the atmosphere in which today's decision was made and in which it was drafted, judging by the statements made at that, the Turkish authorities are not ready for dialogue and are not feel like holding it.

Of course, we will continue the attempts to bring Hagia Sophia back to the status it had in the last decades. This neutral status more or less suited everybody as a certain compromise, and the fact that the compromise now has been upset is seen as a return to the time of the Middle Ages, as a reminder of the disasters experienced by Orthodox peoples under the Turkish dominion.

- I will repeat once again: in the Orthodox and generally Christian world this decision of the Turkish authorities is taken with great sorrow.

- **The situation with Hagia Sophia Church is a religious problem of course, but there is an impression that it is also a political one...**

- It is obviously a political problem because the point is a decision of the Turkish authorities that is aimed in the first place at the population of Turkey. But it is sad that the position of other states and opinions of political leaders have been ignored, that a wound has been inflicted on the Christian-Muslim relations, which again provokes concern for the future of Hagia Sophia church. For instance, we know that all kinds of images are prohibited in mosques. Then what will happen to the priceless mosaics that have survived in it? They depict the Lord Jesus Christ, the Most Holy Mother of God, John the Baptist and also images of some representatives of the Byzantine history. What will be done with all this? Will the access to these mosaics continue; will they be open for visitors? Will they survive at all?

For us Hagia Sophia remains and will remain a church. And the fact that it has again been turned into a mosque is a very sad event.