Metropolitan Hilarion: Any attempt to change the present status of Hagia Sophia will violate the interreligious balances established in Turkey

Apprehensions for the preservation of the ancient church of Hagia Sophia built in Constantinople (now Istanbul) in the first half of the 6th century have been raised by the recent events when on 29 May 2020 Muslim leaders read the Quran in it.

On June 6, commenting on the current situation at a request of the host of 'Tserkov i mir' [The Church and the World] programme, Ms. Ye. Gracheva, Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk, head of the Moscow Patriarchate department for external church relations, reminded the audience that the compound of Hagia Sophia has been a museum since 1934 by the decision of Kemal Ataturk and since 1985 it has been included in the UNESCO world heritage list.

"For millions of people around the world, especially for Orthodox Christians, this church is a symbol of Byzantium and a symbol of Orthodoxy', the archpastor said, 'It was built in the 6th century by Emperor Justinian precisely as an Orthodox church of the Eastern Roman Empire. We, Russian people, hold this church dear also because it was precisely in it that Prince Vladimir's ambassadors felt during the liturgy that they did not know 'whether they were on earth or in Heaven' and decided to tell about it to Prince Vladimir. As a result of this mission Prince Vladimir made the historic decision to baptize Rus'.

'Any attempt to change the present status of Hagia Sophia as a museum will violate the fragile inter-confessional and interreligious balances which have been established by now', was the DECR chairman's conviction.

In this connection, His Eminence expressed hope that 'this church will remain a museum and that access to it will be open to all those who wish to come to it and that such developments will not provoke interreligious tension'.

DECR Communication Service

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