

My name is Theodore McCarrick. I am the Catholic Archbishop of the Archdiocese of Washington. My interest in the difficulties which the Greek Orthodox Church faces in Turkey goes back a long time and I am delighted to have an opportunity to mention my concerns at this time to the distinguished members of the Helsinki Commission. (A slight digression would be that I was privileged to serve as a public member of the Helsinki Commission many years ago and attend meetings both in the Balkans and in the former Soviet Union. I know the good work that you have accomplished and I am delighted that you continue to consider the difficulties of freedom of religion as is now faced by the Greek Orthodox Church.)

This morning I am speaking not on behalf of the Catholic Church nor on behalf of the Conference of the Bishops of the United States of America. I speak solely and purely in my own name as a friend of the Orthodox Church and as one who has had the opportunity both because of my membership in the Helsinki Commission and also my privilege of serving as one of the original members of our own Federal Commission on International Freedom of Religion. It was in both these capacities that I became aware of the problems that the Greek Orthodox Church in Turkey is facing and where we have always the hope of bringing these problems clearly into the light of day so that our own nation might play a role in bringing them to a happy resolution.

My own interest in this question came about initially when I was privileged to be a member of the delegation of the Appeal of Conscience Foundation, led by my distinguished colleague and dear friend, Rabbi Arthur Schneier, some years ago. Thanks to the kindness of Patriarch Bartholomew, we were able to visit the island of Halki personally and to see the seminary which had in past times played so important a part in the life of this important Church. Subsequent to that visit, I spoke to a number of agencies in our own government, asking that this concern be raised with the government of Turkey. I believe that in the administration of President Clinton this was done in a strong manner, perhaps for the first time. I understand that it has been recently repeated because of the continuing interest and concern of President Bush.

The manner in which the Turkish government, since the days of the republic, has treated the Greek Orthodox Church is an indication of a lack of understanding of the importance of this institution. Historically, as has been pointed out so many times, the Greek Orthodox Church has been the guardian of eastern Christianity over many centuries. The head of the Church, the Ecumenical Patriarch, has been recognized as a successor of the apostle Andrew, who was first called among all the apostles of the Lord. His role as the spiritual leader of the millions of people throughout the world who are the faithful of the Orthodox community makes him one of the most important religious leaders on the globe. Unfortunately, to some in the Turkish government he is regarded only as the pastor of a small group of several thousand Greek Christians. It is perhaps here, which is the basis of the difficulties which the Church faces. It is in a lack of true understanding of the importance of the Patriarch and the importance of the Church. Turkey, one would hope, would be so proud to have among its citizens and among its religious leaders one whose influence is felt not only beyond its borders, but throughout the world.

The importance of His All Holiness, Patriarch Bartholomew, the present leader of the Church, is often underlined in the deep respect and esteem in which he is held by the other major religious leaders of the world. One instance of this would be the manner in which the Holy Father, Pope John Paul II, receives the Ecumenical Patriarch in the Vatican and gives him every honor beyond that of any Cardinal or any other ecclesiastical figure. He regards him as a dear brother and as a true successor of the apostles in every sense of that word. It is the Holy Father's constant reaching out to the Ecumenical Patriarch and to the Greek Orthodox Church that prompts so many of us to continue our plea for that Church to receive, especially in its central headquarters in the Phanar in Istanbul, a respect and dignity that its place among the religions of the world demands for it. I know that I would speak for so many Christians throughout our own country when I would urge our government to be sensitive to the plight of the Greek Orthodox Church in Turkey and to do everything that is possible to make sure that these very reasonable and understandable requests are taken into consideration by the Turkish government and are granted for the good of the Church and, indeed, it would seem to me, also for the good of the Turkish nation.

Prominent among these requests is the reopening of the theological school of the island of Halki. This theological school was in a sense the "West Point" of the Orthodox seminaries. Here, many of the leading Metropolitans and great theologians of the Orthodox world were trained. As you understand, since the Patriarch must be a Turkish citizen and since Turkish citizens would ordinarily be trained for the priesthood in a seminary such as Halki, the closing of the seminary makes it almost impossible for Turkish citizens to be prepared to accept the highest responsibilities in the Church today thus creating an enormous problem for the future of the Patriarchate and of the Church itself.

There are, of course, other difficulties which the Law on Foundations causes for the non-Muslim religious communities of Turkey today. The regulations which are in place for these religious institutions often base relations on police ordinances, often oblige corporation taxes to be paid by religious institutions, often freezes the revenues from property transactions of non-Muslim religious institutions. For years now, the Greek Orthodox Church has tried very gently, and yet very firmly and very clearly, to negotiate these difficult questions with the Turkish government and has not been successful.

I am honored to take part in this session with my dear brother, His Beatitude Archbishop Demetrios and Rabbi Schneier and those others who have gathered. This is a cause which is worth struggling for. It is a good worth striving for and it is a road on which the United States should be walking because of so many important consequences that can come about for the good of the world if the Greek Orthodox community in Turkey has a chance to exercise its religious freedom and to grow in grace and holiness under the protection of the law and the respect of its fellow citizens in the Turkish nation.

Thank you very much for letting me make this presentation.