



**Speech by his Grace Bishop Porfyrios
Director of the Office of the Church of Cyprus to the European Institutions at the
Seminar: “Religious Freedom and Holy Sites in the Republic of Cyprus”.
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“Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.” (Article 18, UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights)

Cyprus possesses a unique history and an ancient civilization that dates back to 9000 BC. Thanks to its geographical location close to the Holy Land, it was one of the earliest countries to embrace Christianity: in 45 AD, when the Apostles Paul, Barnabas and Mark travelled to the island and preached the gospel. It is for this reason that the whole island resembles an open museum of Christian Art, with a huge number of churches and monasteries in urban rural and mountainous areas, frequently decorated with mosaics, murals and icons from every historical period. In Cyprus, the religion of the vast majority of the population – 80% – is Orthodox Christian, while 18% are Muslims and 2% is Maronite Christians, Armenians and Latins.

Throughout history, the island’s religious communities coexisted and cooperated together without so much as a single religious conflict! On the contrary, the degree of mutual respect and acceptance was such that, in the towns and villages of Cyprus, Christian churches frequently stood next to Muslim mosques. People lived together, side by side, they took part in one another’s celebrations and they shared one another’s joys and sorrows.

This long tradition of peace and friendship among the island's communities was shattered and mortally wounded by the tragic events of 1974. On July 20th of that year, Turkey invaded Cyprus with a large military force and, since then, has continued to occupy 37% of the territory of the Republic of Cyprus, having expelled 170,000 people from their ancestral homes.

In the areas that remain under the control of the government of the Republic of Cyprus, the Turkish Cypriots and other Muslim residents of the island enjoy full religious freedom. The vast majority of the Muslim mosques have been maintained by the responsible authorities of the Republic. It has been discovered during maintenance work that a large number of mosques were once Christian churches, as Byzantine murals have been discovered beneath layers of plaster. Today, several mosques function in conditions of total freedom so as to adequately serve the religious needs of Muslims living in the government-held areas of the island.

Unfortunately, the same situation cannot be said to exist in the areas that are under Turkish military occupation. After the 1974 invasion, some 20,000 people, mainly Greek Cypriots and Maronites, remained in their villages in the Karpas Peninsula and the Maronite villages to the west of Kyrenia respectively. This group of people, known since then as "the enclaved", stayed in their villages in the hope that, following the ceasefire, they would be able to return to their normal lives. Their hopes were quickly dashed. The illegal occupation regime began to implement a policy of oppression, violations of human rights and harassment of the enclaved villagers in a systematic attempt to force them to abandon their homes. Today only around 500 of them still live in the occupied areas.

The European Court of Human Rights ruled in May 2001 that Turkey was responsible for gross violations of the European Convention on Human Rights in Cyprus, in particular concerning the right of the enclaved to freedom of movement, to religious worship and education and to respect for their private and family life.

Today, the occupation regime in the Karpas Peninsula allows only two priests to serve the religious needs of the enclaved. When other clerics visit the area they are not permitted to conduct services without special permission from the regime and obtaining such permission is almost impossible. Even Bishop Christoforos of Karpasia is only allowed to conduct a service once a year. Whenever he visits the district, he is placed under constant supervision and his movements are closely monitored.

Churches, which are the most obvious symbols of a place's identity, have undergone the most violent and systematic desecration. According to statistics from the responsible authorities of the Republic, more than 520 Greek Orthodox churches and 17 monasteries in the occupied towns and villages have been looted, purposely vandalized and, in some cases, demolished. Eighty churches have been converted into mosques, 28 are being used by the Turkish army as stores and barracks, and six have been turned into museums while others are being used as cultural centres, theatres, stables, barns, workshops, hotels and, in one instance, as a mortuary. Many have been destroyed, including the church at the Monastery of the Virgin Mary (Panagia Avgasida) at Milia in the Famagusta district which dated from the 15th century and was decorated with murals of the same period. In 2007, the same fate befell the parish church of Saint Catherine in the village of Gerani.

The cemeteries of our ancestors have been looted and destroyed. Graves have been opened and crosses and gravestones have been broken.

The contents of religious monuments have been stolen and a large number of these have been exported abroad for sale to collectors and auction houses. More than 15,000 icons, iconostases, holy implements, gospels, mosaics and murals dating from the 6th to the 20th century have been removed and have disappeared. Only a very few items have been discovered and repatriated.

A typical example is the case of the mosaics from the church of the Virgin Mary (Panagia Kanakaria) at Lythragkomi. In 1989, the Department of Antiquities in Cyprus took legal action over four mosaics depicting Christ, an Archangel, and the Apostles James and Matthew respectively, which Turkish thieves had removed from the apse of the church some time after 1979. Having been illegally exported from Cyprus, they were discovered in the possession of Peg Goldberg, an American art dealer, in Indiana in the United States. After a trial, the court in Indianapolis ruled in 1989 that the mosaics should be returned to their rightful owner, the Church of Cyprus.

Moreover, in 1997, German police raided three apartments in Munich owned by Aydin Dikmen, a Turkish trafficker in antiquities, and uncovered a large number of mosaics, murals and icons. They had been illegally removed from more than fifty churches in the occupied areas of Cyprus and transported to Munich to be sold.

In April 2009, the Helsinki Commission (an independent US government agency) reported on the threat to the religious monuments in occupied Cyprus, noting that “Turkey, during thirty-five years of occupying the northern part of Cyprus, has engaged in acts of destruction, desecration, and pillage of religious and archaeological sites”.

By providing financial support through the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the Partnership for the Future (PFF), the European Union has preserved two monuments in an exemplary manner: The Omeriye Baths (or Hamam) in 2005 in the government-held part of Nicosia and the Catholic Church of Saint Nicholas (Bedestan) in 2009 in the occupied part of the capital. Both monuments won the Europa Nostra Award (the European Union Prize for cultural heritage). For 2010, the European Commission will make €800,000 available for the architectural recording of the monuments. It is our hope that such actions mark the beginning of a more substantial EU involvement in the safeguarding of religious freedom and the timely preservation of the religious heritage of occupied Cyprus, a heritage which is both European and global. We have a duty and an obligation to safeguard and preserve it for ourselves and for future generations.