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ΑΡΜΕΝΙΚΗ ΜΗΤΡΟΠΟΛΗ ΚΥΠΡΟΥ
ARMENIAN PRELATURE OF CYPRUS

**Speech by Dr. Antranik Ashdjian,
Chairman of the Executive Council of the Armenian National Administration of Cyprus
at the Dialogue Seminar on “Religious freedom in the Republic of Cyprus”
European Parliament, Wednesday 14 April 2010**

First of all, on behalf of the Armenian Apostolic Orthodox Church in Cyprus I would like to thank the Representation of the Church of Cyprus to the European Union, the Society Commission of the Conference of European Churches and MEP Dr. Eleni Theocharous, for the invitation to attend and address this Seminar.

The Republic of Cyprus has been, since its establishment in 1960, a truly multi-cultural, multi-religious mosaic. The Constitution of the Republic itself recognised the existence of two larger and three smaller communities, and identified them on the basis of their ethnic origin and religious background.

The Armenian community living on the island and having its own national identity, cultural heritage, language and of course, its religious identity and corresponding places of worship, was fortunate enough to be included as one of these five groups. The Constitution of the Republic granted the Armenians the right and privilege to co-exist in harmony with the Orthodox Greek-Cypriots, Muslim Turkish-Cypriots, Maronite and Latin Catholics. The Armenian community was also granted the right to elect a Representative in the House of Representatives with the status of an observer, but with the right of participation in parliamentary proceedings dealing with the cultural, educational and religious matters regarding the Armenian community.

Armenians have been a presence on Cyprus since 578 A.D., when the first Armenian settlers were brought in by the Byzantines. Many Cypriot, Armenian and foreign sources indicate that over the next centuries, throughout the Byzantine period, as well as the subsequent Frankish and Venetian Eras and the Ottoman occupation, mass settlement of Armenians occurred on the island.

Even though the presence of the Armenian Church is not documented in these historical reports, it is almost certain that these early Armenian settlements were also accompanied by the establishment of the first Armenian religious congregations on the island. It was later, in 973 A.D. that we encounter the appointment by Catholicos Khatchig I of a Bishop to preside over these Armenian congregations. Records state that in 1179 Bishop Thaddeus participated in the Synod of Hromkla, as representative of Cyprus, and Bishop Nicholaos represented the Armenian Church of Cyprus at the Synod of Sis, in 1307.

Furthermore, Armenian Church records indicate the existence of an Armenian monastery in the city of Famagusta, in the 12th and 13th centuries. This monastery is

documented as having been a theological and scholarly centre, where Bishop Nerses Lampronatsi, a prominent Armenian scholar and liturgical expert, studied and spent some years of his life at this monastic centre.

During the Medieval period, the Armenian Church maintained a strong presence on the island, with three churches in Nicosia, 3 in Famagusta and at least 3 in other villages, while the Armenian settlements were definitely more in number. None of these churches, except for the chapel of the Ganchvor Monastery, dedicated to Virgin Mary, survived the subsequent Venetian and Ottoman occupations of the island. The Ganchvor Monastery became inaccessible when the city of Famagusta was divided after the first inter-communal clashes of 1963.

Another monastic centre, founded in the 11th century and documented as an Armenian sanctuary from the 15th century onwards, was the monastery of St. Makarios the Hermit, also known as Sourp Magar or Magaravank or Armenomonastero, located in the Pendadaktylos mountain range. The monastery served as a pilgrimage site for centuries, until it fell under the occupation of Turkish troops in the aftermath of the invasion of July 1974.

After Cyprus was occupied by the Ottomans in the 16th century, the Armenian community of Nicosia, deprived of its churches, was granted the use of the 14th century church of the Virgin Mary, which was the chapel of Notre Dame, a former Benedictine nunnery. This church served as the seat of the Armenian Prelate of Cyprus until 1963, and was located in the Armenian Quarter of Nicosia, as part of a complex which also included the building of the Prelature, the Armenian School and the Genocide Monument.

The mass killings and deportations of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire in the late 19th and early 20th century, forced a huge wave of refugees to seek refuge in the then British colony of Cyprus. Many of these refugees went on to other countries in Europe and the Americas, but a significant number of them also settled in Nicosia, Larnaca, Limassol and Famagusta.

New congregations were established and churches erected in Larnaca in 1909 and in Limassol in 1939, while the communities in Nicosia and Famagusta were served by the existing churches in those towns.

The inter-communal clashes of 1963 and the subsequent segregation of the main communities of the island forced the Armenian residents of the Armenian Quarter of Nicosia and of Famagusta to flee from their homes, abandoning their historical places of worship, as well as schools, prelature, shops, houses and properties.

The invasion and occupation of 36% of Cyprus by Turkish troops in the summer of 1974 meant that the Armenian Church lost access to the Monastery of Sourp Magar, as well as the 9,000 donums of land surrounding it, with 30,000 carob and olive trees. Hence, the Church lost its main source of income for the funding of its diakonia.

During the period between 1963 and 1981, the Armenian community in Nicosia did not have a place of worship of its own; Liturgies and sacraments were conducted in the Hall of the Armenian School, in a small Greek-Orthodox chapel that was made available by the late Archbishop Makarios III, as well as the Anglican cathedral of the capital. In 1981 the new cathedral dedicated to the Virgin Mary was erected adjacent to the school building, with the generous contributions of the Government of Cyprus, the United Church of Westfalia and members of the Armenian community. In 1984 the Seat of the

Armenian Prelacy was established in the new Prelature building erected within the same complex.

Today, the Armenian Church of Cyprus operates under the spiritual leadership of His Holiness Aram I, within the jurisdiction of the Armenian Orthodox Catholicosate of the Great House of Cilicia, itself a Church in exile after the loss of its historical Seat on the southern coast of Asia Minor. The Church is governed by a Diocesan Council, comprising of 12 elected laymen and 2 clergymen, under the Chairmanship of the Prelate.

Three churches operate under the jurisdiction of the Diocese of Cyprus, one each in Nicosia, Larnaca and Limassol. Services for Armenian faithful living in Paphos are held in a Greek Orthodox chapel, kindly made available by the Bishop of Paphos.

Apart from its pastoral mission, the Armenian Church operates Sunday Schools, Ladies' Guilds, a department of Christian Education, while it also participates in Ecumenical events, organises a variety of cultural activities and publishes a monthly newsletter.

Having lost its main sources of income, the Church receives a yearly state grant, which today amounts to the sum of €60,000, to cover the expenses of its mission. Furthermore, the government of the Republic of Cyprus pays the annual salaries of the clergy serving the Church.

The government of the Republic of Cyprus also funds the operation of three Armenian schools, in Nicosia, Larnaca and Limassol, where Armenian children are taught the Armenian language and history and receive religious education. The government also sponsors the activities of various cultural, youth, charity and sports societies.

Ever since 1963 and 1974, no Armenian hymn has been sung and no Armenian prayer recited in the abandoned Armenian churches in the occupied part of Cyprus. No priest, not even any member of the Armenian community, had been allowed access to these religious shrines, until the partial lifting of restrictions in crossing to the occupied northern part of Cyprus in April 2003. This enabled members of our community to visit the occupied churches located in Nicosia, Famagusta and the Sourp Magar Monastery. With mixed feelings, we have visited these sites to witness the effect of three decades of neglect, abandonment and sadly, vandalism.

Unfortunately, the regime in the occupied north does not recognise the ownership status of the Armenian Church on these sites, and consequently we are denied the right to repair the wounds of time that these places of worship bear and cannot practice worship in them. Only Armenians are subject to restrictions in the free right to worship, unlike Greek-Orthodox, Maronites, Latins and Anglicans.

In the past few years, the Armenian Church has been successful in persuading the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), to undertake the study, planning and financing of the restoration of the Armenian church and complex in the now occupied Armenian Quarter of Nicosia. The restoration process will primarily serve to save the frail complex from further structural deterioration, and we are hopeful that once completed, it will also be restored as a place of worship.

Under UN protection, our community has twice so far been allowed to hold pilgrimages to the Monastery of Sourp Magar, on the First Sunday of May in 2007 and 2009. The date was symbolic, as it coincided with the traditional feast of the Monastery, but the pilgrimage and subsequent assembly in the desecrated church of the Monastery

fell short of the religious ceremonies that were performed during that day prior to the Turkish invasion of 1974.

I have tried to give a picture of the life through the centuries of the Armenian Church on the island of Cyprus. This short historical overview is descriptive of the fate of the Armenian Church, as guardian and leader of the Armenian People throughout history. A Church with a mission and a flock, but often left without places of worship, often persecuted and oppressed, but always able to survive and carry on with its mission. In our case, we have survived and flourished over and over again as a community because of the strong will of our people to survive and the good will of the leadership and people of Cyprus.

And I end by indicating in a pictorial way the contrasts and contradictions within this small island which we all call our common home:

- a flourishing Church with well-attended places of worship and an active flock practicing full freedom of worship in the government-controlled part, and
- centuries' old abandoned and desecrated shrines, void of sanctity and empty of flock, where entry regulations are imposed, customs checks performed and free practice of one's faith is disallowed on the Turkish-occupied part.