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“Religious Freedom and Holy Sites in the Republic of Cyprus”
Seminar in the European Parliament
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Makariotate,
Eminences and Excellencies,
Distinguished Participants,

Allow me to start my short contribution to this seminar by giving thanks to the Representation of the Church of Cyprus in Brussels and His Grace Bishop Porfyrios for allowing the Church and Society Commission of the Conference of European Churches (CEC) to associate itself with the organisation of this important event. I would also like to include in these acknowledgments MEP Eleni Theocharous and all those who have helped to organise this event, giving witness to the situation in the Republic of Cyprus.

I am speaking here as a representative of the Conference of European Churches and its Church and Society Commission. The Conference of European Churches was founded in 1959 as a bridge-building organisation, in particular as a bridge-builder between the churches East and West of the Iron Curtain, which for so many years dominated the history of Europe in the last century.

The Church of Cyprus belongs to the oldest and most Eastern of our 125 member churches from the Anglican, Orthodox, Protestant and Old-Catholic traditions. And the island of Cyprus is already mentioned in the Bible (e.g. Acts 11,19) as a refuge for a group of Christians, who were persecuted in Jerusalem. This is probably the beginning of a long history of tolerance and mutual respect in Cyprus during the time before 1974, as was described by previous speakers.

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In 1989, the Conference of European Churches, together with all Christians and all people in Europe, rejoiced over the fall of the Iron Curtain. Soon after, in 1990, all European Heads of State and Government met in Paris to adopt the *Charter of Paris for a New Europe*, which reads: “Ours is the time for fulfilling the hopes and expectations our peoples have cherished for decades: steadfast commitment to democracy based on human rights and fundamental freedoms; prosperity through economic liberty and social justice; and equal security for all our countries”. This basis was echoed by the churches in Europe, which stated together in the *Charta Oecumenica (2001)*: “On the basis of our Christian faith, we work towards a humane, socially conscious Europe, in which human rights and the basic values of peace, justice, freedom, tolerance, participation and solidarity prevail”. It is on the basis of this commitment that churches in Europe continue to contribute to the further integration of our continent and to a world, in which justice, peace and sustainability are fundamental values.

The year 1989 certainly was a *Kairos*. People lived under the impression that walls and borders dividing Europe politically had disappeared and that new opportunities had opened. While the churches in Europe were part of grasping this momentum, they were also conscious that not all walls had disappeared: Cyprus was still and is, until today, divided by the “Green Line”.

No wonder, therefore, that the Conference of European Churches at almost all of its Assemblies and at almost each meeting of its governing bodies addressed the issue of the divided Cyprus. And from their own involvement in the history of a divided Europe, the churches knew very well that where there is political division, justice suffers, the implementation of human rights suffers, people suffer, peace is in danger.

It is, therefore, for this reason that the Conference of European Churches in its public statements refers to the “unacceptable present situation created by the continued occupation of 37 per cent of the island, as well as violations of human rights and basic freedoms”. Already in 1996 the CEC asked for a “negotiated political settlement, which will restore the unity of the island, grant freedom of movement for all its inhabitants, ensure information about all missing people and facilitate the return of the displaced people to their homes”. (CEC Central Committee, Bossey, 1996)

Just recently in October 2008, the Central Committee of the Conference of European Churches enjoyed the *philoxenia* (hospitality) of the Church of Cyprus at its meeting in Paralimni. It expressed its “joy for the resumption of the dialogue between the Greek and the Turkish communities in Cyprus” and expressed its concern “that the unification of the island should be facilitated by the withdrawal of occupying forces from it, for the well-being of all citizens of Cyprus, and the promotion of peaceful Christian-Islam co-existence”. (CEC Central Committee, Paralimni, 2008)

The implementation of religious freedom is often an indicator of the implementation of human rights in general. To maintain and have access to places of worship, which are the property of a religious community, belong to the right to exercise one’s religion. Several of the church representatives, who gathered in Paralimni, used the occasion to visit the occupied territories of Northern Cyprus to witness for themselves the ongoing desecration of churches, holy sites and monuments. The news was alarming and previous speakers in this seminar gave witness to the ongoing destruction and collapse of the Christian and cultural heritage in the Northern part of the island.

The CEC Central Committee expressed its sorrow “at the ongoing desecration, since 1974, of churches and religious monuments in the Northern part of the island” and asked for the Turkish occupying army “to allow the urgent and necessary restoration and maintenance of this Christian and European cultural heritage, and the return to use of the churches by Christians in Cyprus”.

Ladies and Gentlemen, it is good and important that this seminar is taking place in the European Parliament. The implementation of human rights, religious freedom and the restoration and use of holy sites is not only an internal Cypriot issue. It is a European issue. As the new Europe is built on democracy, human rights and justice, the European Institutions must have an interest in implementing these values all over Europe and beyond. And frequent questions from Members of the European Parliament to the European Commission, as well as resolutions of the Parliament, show that the European Parliament is taking its responsibility seriously, aiming at the implementation of human rights and religious freedom in Turkey and in the Republic of Cyprus.

However, not much, if anything, has changed with regard to the restoration and accessibility of churches in occupied Northern Cyprus. Therefore, as a fellowship of churches in Europe, we want to seize the momentum of re-established talks between the Greek and the Turkish Cypriot communities in order to alert the European Institutions, as well as the broader public, to the ongoing destruction of holy sites and of the cultural heritage in Northern Cyprus. The issue must be addressed during these talks. Time is pressing. As His Beatitude, Archbishop Chrysostomos II, has said in a recent interview: another thirty-eight churches and monuments are near to collapse (Weekly Standard, 1 Feb. 2010). Therefore, we urge the European Institutions to do all in their power to accompany the present talks between the Greek and the Turkish communities to a successful end, leading to European values and standards being implemented. We ask the European Institutions to use all of their influence for the protection and the restoration of the holy sites in the whole of the Republic of Cyprus.

Last but not least, as the Conference of European Churches has expressed several times in the framework of the EU accession negotiations with Turkey, the political talks must be accompanied by an inter-cultural and inter-religious dialogue of the people, if tolerance and mutual respect are to be lived out. The same seems to be true for the situation in Cyprus: if reconciliation and the unification of the island are to be achieved, it needs the inclusion of the religious communities in the dialogue and a dialogue of the people across religious and cultural borders. Churches in Europe, as well as the Conference of European Churches, stand ready to support and facilitate such a dialogue.

Thank you!