



Speech of His Grace Bishop Porfyrios of Neapolis “Religious Freedom in the Republic of Cyprus” at the event: “Human Rights within the European Union” (05-12-2018).

In July 1974, as many of you will know, Turkey invaded Cyprus with a large military force, taking advantage of the coup d'état carried out by the military junta in Greece against Archbishop Makarios III, the elected President of the Republic of Cyprus. On August 16, the fighting stopped but 43 years on, the wounds to body of the island have still not healed. Some 37% of its territory remains occupied by the Turkish army, which maintains a force of 40,000 soldiers there. In so doing, it has made Cyprus one of the most heavily militarised places in the world. Some 180,000 Greek Cypriots were expelled from their homes and properties. Today, around 500 remain enclaved in the Karpas peninsula and the Maronite villages. In November 1983, the occupation regime declared the independence of the so-called “Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus”, in a move that was condemned by the United Nations Security Council. No other country, apart from Turkey, has recognised the illegal entity.

As a result of the invasion, Christian monuments and those of other faiths, sacred and archaeological sites were desecrated, looted and destroyed. Everything that adorned the 575 Orthodox churches in the occupied areas was stolen. Some 20,000 holy icons, wall paintings, mosaics, gospels, sacred vessels, manuscripts, old books, iconostases and, generally speaking, anything that could be stolen for material gain was looted and sold abroad. The Church of Cyprus, in conjunction with the responsible state authorities (the Law Office, the Police and the Department of Antiquities), is constantly making intensive efforts to discover and repatriate our stolen cultural heritage. It is found mainly in Central and Western Europe, the UK and the USA in auction houses, art galleries and elsewhere.

In this brief presentation, I will refer to the access to, and use of, our monuments and holy places in the occupied area of Cyprus, as well as to the situation as regards Muslim monuments under the jurisdiction of the authorities of the Republic of Cyprus.

A. Free access

In the buffer zone, which represents 3% of the Republic's territory, and inside several Turkish military areas, there are around 50 Christian churches. With the exception of the Maronite Church of Saint Marina, no-one may approach or access them. After their efforts of the last four years, the religious leaders of Cyprus and the Embassy of Sweden succeeded in obtaining the approval of the Turkish army and the Turkish Cypriot leader, Mr. Mustafa Akinci, to begin restoration and conservation work on the churches of Saint James and Saint George, which are located in the Nicosia buffer zone. The task was undertaken by the bicomunal Technical Committee on Cultural Heritage.

Inside the fenced-off town of Varosha there are 14 Orthodox churches. No-one is allowed in this area which is entirely under the control of the Turkish army. These looted monuments have been abandoned to weather elements with no upkeep or protection. Varosha is known around the world as a "ghost town" due to its isolation and dereliction.

B. Use of religious monuments

Straight after the Turkish invasion and the systematic looting of the religious monuments and holy sites, they started being used for other purposes. Around 80 churches were converted into mosques – a favourite tactic of the Turks from much earlier times. They did the same thing following their first conquest of the island in 1571, when the Catholic cathedrals of Nicosia (Hagia Sophia) and Famagusta (Saint Nicholas) and a number of Orthodox churches were converted into mosques. Indicatively, let me refer to the Churches of the Panagia at Lysi, of the Virgin Panayia Evangelistria at Karavas, of Saint Ambrosios at Ayios Amvrosios, of the Archangel Michael at Pano Zodia, of Saint Andrew (Apostolos Andreas) at Neapolis, Nicosia, the biggest church in Cyprus before the invasion, of Christ the Saviour at Akanthou, and others. There are instances where the occupation regime, with funding from Turkey, has built new mosques but while the other churches are not being used as mosques, they are not being returned to, or maintained by, their rightful owners and are, instead, put to other uses. Despite our efforts, through the dialogue among the Religious Leaders, there are still monuments being used as stables. Examples of this are the church of Saint George at Melounda and the Monastery of the Virgin (Panayia Avgadisa) at Milia, Famagusta.

Many churches have been turned into cultural centres for dance, handicrafts and other activities. Examples include the churches of Saint Luke at Lapithos, of the Virgin (Panayia tou Trachona) in Nicosia and of the Holy Cross at Kythrea.

The Monastery of Saint Anastasia at Lapithos has been turned into an old people's home and the church of Saint Luke in Nicosia has been given to an NGO. Other churches are

being used as army stores, such as those inside Turkish military areas (the churches of Saint George at Kythrea and Voni, etc).

A large number of churches, after being completely looted, were abandoned to weather elements. As a result, many of them today are on the verge of collapse. Such churches include those dedicated to Saint Anastasios at Peristeronapigi and the Archangel Michael at Hartzia, the Monasteries of Saint Paraksevi at Vasileia, Saint George Rigatis at Kyra and Saint Nicholas at Davlo, and many other churches and chapels in towns and villages.

A small number of the 575 churches have been maintained by the bicommunal Technical Committee on Cultural Heritage since 2011. These are seven Orthodox churches and the Armenian Metropolis in Nicosia. The main funding for these projects comes from the European Union. The churches include the church of the Virgin at Trachoni and the church of the Archangel Michael at Lefkoniko.

The cemeteries in the occupied areas, with very few exceptions, have been vandalized and ruined. Crosses and gravestones have been smashed and, in many instances, the graves have been destroyed, possibly out of some kind of mania for revenge or in an attempt by adventurers to discover hidden treasures.

The holding of religious services in the occupied areas of the island is not allowed without written permission from the regime. In villages where enclaved Cypriots live, at Rizokarpaso, Ayia Triada and Kormakitis, services are permitted in the main churches without the need for written approval. For all the other occupied churches, there are strict criteria and a process which is testing the patience and dignity of those asking for permission to conduct services. Since the opening of the checkpoints in 2003, refugees have been asking for services to be allowed in the church of their parish or village once a year, usually on the feast day of the patron saint of the church and the village.

Over the past four years, due to the extreme policies implemented by the Turkish Cypriot leadership, the number of church services permitted to take place in the occupied areas has fallen. On average, based on data from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, it appears that about half of the applications are approved and the others are either rejected or receive no response.

In the areas of the Republic that are under government control, there are approximately 100 Muslim monuments. The vast majority are maintained by the responsible authorities (Department of Antiquities and District Administration). Most of the Muslims in the government-controlled areas are foreigners working in Cyprus, mainly from the Middle East, Egypt, Libya, etc. The Turkish Cypriots who reside permanently in the government-

controlled areas are very few. Eight mosques are in full-time operation to fulfil their religious needs. Should they so wish, they may pray in the other mosques once they have obtained the key from the responsible authority. Services are held at two mosques in Nicosia, Larnaca and Limassol respectively, as well as at one in Paphos and one at Dali.

As Church of Cyprus, we are working with the other Religious Leaders of the island to bring an end to what is an unacceptable situation in an EU member state and to gain the total restoration of religious freedom for all the legal residents of Cyprus. The difficulties and problems have nothing to do with religion, but are a result of the expansionist greed of neighbouring Turkey. The help and support of all of us is necessary and valuable.