



**GREEK ORTHODOX ARCHDIOCESE OF AMERICA  
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**Archepiscopal Encyclical on the Day of Mourning for Hagia Sophia**

July 24, 2024

To the Most Reverend and Right Reverend Hierarchs, Pious Priests and Deacons, Monks and Nuns, Presidents and Members of the Parish Councils, Honorable Archons of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, Members of Leadership 100, Day and Afternoon Schools, Philoptochos Societies, Youth, Greek Orthodox Organizations, and entirety of the Christ-loving Plenitude of the Sacred Archdiocese of America:

Everything is clothed in beauty; everything you will perceive  
with eyes full of wonder. But no words are sufficient  
to describe the illumination in the evening: you might say that some  
nocturnal sun filled the majestic temple with light.

Paul the Silentiary, *Description of Hagia Sophia*

My beloved brothers and sisters in Christ,

We mark the fifth anniversary of the seizure of the Great Church of Holy Wisdom, Hagia Sophia, with further mourning; for the Chora Monastery Church has now been converted for an alien purpose. The fact that both of these monuments to the Byzantine genius have been forcibly re-converted to mosques adds to the grief that we all feel just days after the Fiftieth Anniversary of the invasion and subsequent illegal dismemberment of Cyprus. We can never forget that of the over five hundred churches in the occupied region, at least seventy-seven have been converted into mosques — another sign of cultural misappropriation and religious triumphalism unsuited to our modern, interconnected world.

But even though our spiritual monuments have been defaced and subjected to veils and wrappings that make a pretense of respecting their intended aesthetic, their spiritual brilliance cannot be diminished by such feeble efforts. As Paul the Silentiary rhapsodized of Hagia Sophia over fourteen hundred years ago, “Everything is clothed in beauty....”



Because the essence of these monuments is not found only in their physical presence, but in their intended spiritual meaning and activity — the worship of God through Divine Liturgy. Their architectural forms and interior illuminations were designed to nurture the adoration of our Lord Jesus Christ through the Holy Mysteries in which we partake of His Divine Presence. The spaces themselves came alive through our glorious worship; even the magnificent columns of Hagia Sophia were perceived to move, “as if they were yielding to one another in a choral dance, with a structure of crescent shape hanging above them” [ὡσπερ ἐν χορῶ ἀλλήλοις ὑπεξιστάμενοι, καὶ αὐτῶν ὑπεράνωθεν οἰκοδόμημα μηνοειδὲς ἀποκρέμαται], (Procopius of Caesarea, *On the Buildings of Justinian I.* i.35).

Our monuments now stand silent in the face of history’s exigencies, while they await their redemption. In the meantime, let us take some measure of comfort in the knowledge that a “nocturnal sun” continues to illumine them from within. This paradoxical starlight is visible in every Orthodox church building throughout the world, perceived as we worship “in spirit and truth” (John 4:24), and share in the beauty they continue to manifest, even if a harsh and misplaced ignorance has sought to cover their sacred purpose.

With paternal love in our Lord Jesus Christ,

† ELPIDOPHOROS  
Archbishop of America