OUR CONCERNS FOR THE PATRIARCHATE

"The Greek Orthodox Communion is locked out and we don't fit in but the fire has not gone out"

By C.N. DOMBALIS, D.D.

What most of the 200 million Greek Orthodox Christians do not know is that the spiritual center of the second largest Christian denomination is under the influence of the Turkish government. We have lost control of the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Istanbul, Turkey. We the Orthodox, who number approximately 5 million in the United States of America, have the following legitimate concerns for the future of our Patriarchate and our church:

1. Our Ecumenical Patriarchate is located in Turkey, a nation with a population of 40 million. Of these 40 million inhabitants, only some 4,000 are Greek Orthodox Christians, and many are either aged or infirmed. Some 50 years ago, the Greek Orthodox population numbered over 300,000, but because of political and religious restraints, Orthodox Christians abandoned the land of Turkey where they had lived for centuries.

2. The Ecumenical Patriarch, by Turkish law is required to be a Turkish citizen. The Holy Synod, the cabinet of the Patriarchate, which numbers 12 Metropolitans, by Turkish law is also compelled to be of Turkish citizenry. As the years pass, the Greek Orthodox inhabitants cannot statistically raise up from in their midst qualified candidates to fill the reoccurring vacancies. What will happen to the Patriarchate in 15 years or 25 years? The Patriarchate will be bankrupt of leadership.

3. The restriction of citizenship upon the members of the Holy Synod also severely hampers the flow and exchange of vital information necessary for the administration of a world wide communion. Bishops from other lands cannot serve the Holy Synod and this restraint impoverishes Orthodoxy in many areas of the world. There is no representation other than from the small Greek Orthodox minority residing in Turkey. How can the Holy Synod enrich Orthodoxy abroad, when they don't know and understand our needs?

4. The Turkish government also exercises a review and sanction of any candidates for the Patriarchal seat. Many capable and dynamic leaders, men of profound content, were rejected by the Turkish government and removed from possible selection by the Holy Synod. Patriarch Gregorios, who was viewed favorably by the Turkish government but who was later found to be in disfavor, was hanged from the main gates of the Phanari (the site of the Patriarchate in Istanbul) in the early 19th Century.

5. The impact of the Patriarch and of the Holy Synod on
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the Greek Orthodox Church in the Americas has been questionable. The future Archbishop of the Americas will be selected by a Patriarch and a Holy Synod under Turkish influence and without any representation from the Greek Orthodox Church in the Americas. Be assured the new Archbishop will be from amongst the members of the Holy Synod and a Turkish citizen, for the position of Archbishop of the Americas is the most desired post in world Orthodoxy. We will not see again the likes of Archbishop Iakovos, spiritual leader of Orthodoxy in the Americas, one whose life’s commitment has shaped Orthodoxy and world wide Christianity.

The Patriarchate is our legitimate Christian heritage and we need to extricate any further nonchristian influence. We, therefore urge the Nation of Turkey, in the spirit of freedom of religion:

1. To abide by “The Declaration of the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Beliefs” adopted by the United Nations’ 36th General Assembly, which advocates the freedom of each religious community to choose its own leaders instead of having them imposed by government.

2. To remove the review and sanction upon Patriarchal candidates, and to authorize free elections for our spiritual leaders.

3. To permit future Patriarchs to be citizens of any nation.

4. To allow non-Turkish Greek Orthodox to become members of the Holy Synod.

The above legitimate concerns are mandated to prevent the eventual extinction of the Patriarchate. Should the Turkish government refuse to honor our petition, the Greek Orthodox Church in the Americas should seek the following alternatives:

1. The Patriarchate is to abandon Constantinople (Istanbul) and proceed into exile. The precedent for such a move was established in 1204, when the Latin occupation of Constantinople (Istanbul) compelled the displacement of the Patriarchate to Nicea until 1261, when the City was again occupied by the Emperor Paleologos. The Patriarchate may then resettle in a nation where freedom of religion is an inherent right.

2. Should the Patriarchate under continuous Turkish domination remain in Istanbul, we in the Americas will be compelled to seek an autocephalous status as in Greece, which would permit us to elect our own spiritual leaders: Archbishop and Bishops. The previous status of an autonomous Orthodox church in the Americas will be rejected, for otherwise we would be administered by an Archbishop who was selected without United States representation on the Holy Synod, and who was appointed to the post by a non-Christian government.

3. If the Greek Orthodox Church in the Americas is denied the status of autocephalous by the Turkish government, we would, establish a Patriarchate in the Americas as found in the Balkans, which nations sought to escape Turkish influence nearly two centuries ago.

Our compassion for the Ecumenical Patriarch in Istanbul will not be diminished. We will continue to contribute annually to its support. We will not estrange ourselves from the Patriarchal center. Our action will insure that the election of spiritual leaders in the Americas will be free from foreign influence.

This is our time in history. Our great Orthodox Church has been traumatized since 1453 A.D. We are locked out and don't fit in. We must be taken into account. A healing process requires the initiative of the Turkish government. We in the Americas treasure the freedom of religion assured by the first article of the Bills of Rights.

This is our time in history, for we have a rich classical heritage of freedom.

This is our time in history, for our church is endowed by men and women who will sacrifice for all we hold dear.

This is our time in history for we have a belief in human dignity and worth.

This is our time in history. Our free spirit will neither be strangled nor crushed. We will endure that future generations will know joy of freedom of religion.