

The Pope and the Ecumenical Patriarch

by Theodore G Karakostas It has been widely reported in the media that Pope Benedict will be visiting Turkey at the end of November. What has been virtually ignored by American media outlets

is the purpose for the Papal visit. There is great historic and religious significance to the Pope's trip, for he will be visiting Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomaios I in Constantinople. The local flock of the Ecumenical Patriarch in Constantinople has been reduced to a mere 2,000 or so after decades of State sponsored pogroms and persecution by various Turkish administrations.

At the present time, the very existence of the Ecumenical Patriarchate is jeopardized by the closure of the Orthodox theological Seminary known as Halki, on the island of Heybeliada. In addition to the refusal by Turkish authorities to allow the reopening of Halki, the Ecumenical Patriarchate is the target of hostile demonstrations by Turkish ultranationalists who have made it their goal to expel the Ecumenical Patriarchate. Despite the difficulties that the Ecumenical Patriarchate has faced, it remains one of the most important Christian institutions in the world today.

The Ecumenical Patriarch is considered "First Among Equals" by the fourteen autocephalous Eastern Orthodox Churches, and the Patriarchate holds a primacy of honor over the world's Orthodox Christians. Although spiritually powerful, the gradual elimination of Greek Orthodox Christians as a result of the genocide and ethnic cleansing undertaken by the Ottoman rulers known as "Young Turks" and their immediate successor, Mustafa Kemal is threatening the future of the "Great

Church of Christ" as Orthodox refer to the Ecumenical Patriarchate.

In the aftermath of the savage slaughter that emanated when Turkish nationalist Kemal conquered the Christian City of Smyrna and massacred 100,000 Greek Orthodox Christians in 1922 after Turkish extremists set the city ablaze, the new Turkish leadership ordered the expulsion of over 1,000,000 Greek Orthodox Christians from Asia Minor and Eastern Thrace. The Treaty of Lausanne referred to this process as an "exchange of populations", while today we would call it ethnic cleansing. During the Second World War, Turkey's government imposed excessive taxes on the Greeks of which many were eventually deported to exile in Anatolia from which they never returned.

The date of September 6 has no significance for Christians in the West, but for Greek Orthodox this is a day of mourning. On that day in 1955, under the protective eye of the Turkish government, mobs in Turkey systematically destroyed Greek Churches, homes, and businesses. Orthodox priests and Bishops were forcibly circumcized on the street while Greek women were raped. Churches of great historic and spiritual value were desecrated in unspeakable ways. This pogrom ushered in the final stage for the final destruction of Greek Orthodox Christianity from its historic cradle five centuries after the fall of Constantinople to the Ottoman Turks.

Today, the Turkish government refuses to recognize the use of the term "Ecumenical" by the Patriarch despite the fact that "Ecumenical Patriarch" has been his official title since the sixth century. Ankara also insists that the Ecumenical Patriarch has no

significance beyond being the local Bishop of the very few Greeks left in Turkey today. Such assertions are a denial of religious freedom and serve to incite the paranoia of Turkish nationalists and the violence that has manifested itself against the Ecumenical Patriarchate in our own time.

A further tragedy has befallen Cyprus which was invaded by Turkish forces in 1974. As a result of the Turkish invasions of Cyprus, over 200,000 Greek Cypriots were ethnically cleansed and Greek Orthodox Churches in Cyprus have been systematically destroyed or converted into Mosques. Hopefully, the Papal visit to the Ecumenical Patriarchate will bring much needed attention to the plight of the Christian East.