



## HOLY METROPOLIS OF CONSTANTIA - AMMOCHOSTOS CHURCH OF CYPRUS

### LETTER TO EU LEADERS AND OFFICIALS

Dear Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am Bishop Vasilios, and I am writing to you as Metropolitan of Constantia-Ammochostos, as a member of the hierarchy of the Church of Cyprus. My Diocese apart from the city of Paralimni, where I have a provisional episcopal see, also comprises the district of Famagusta. In fact, my episcopal see should have been located in the city of Famagusta (Ammochostos). Unfortunately, this is not possible due to the political situation in our country. You should know that after the Turkish invasion in 1974, two-thirds (2/3) of the territory of my Diocese is still occupied by the Turkish army, including the village where I was born and the monastery, Saint Barnabas, where I served as a monk. During the time of the Turkish attack, I was hidden and protected by the elders of the monastery, saving my life while nearly ten thousand Greek-Cypriots were killed, as they did not manage to escape. Myself I am a refugee in my own country.

About 200.000 Christian refugees had to leave their homes and their churches in order to save at least their lives. Since then, we are witnessing a destruction without end of all the churches and Christian monuments in the occupied area controlled by the Turkish army. What we know from our research is that before 1974 there were around 600 Christian churches, chapels, monasteries and cemeteries in that area [attached as

“Catalogue of Christian churches and monuments”]. For more information we also send to you the catalogue of the churches and monuments of our Diocese, which are located in the Turkish-occupied area and shows the great destruction of these monuments and the terrible condition in which they are found today [attached as “A culture under destruction”]. The absurdity in that case is that Turkey is one of the three guarantee countries for the sovereignty and the integrity of the Republic of Cyprus (see *Treaty of Guarantee*, Nicosia 1960).

It would not be unknown to you that the International community reacted to the following violation of human rights and the destruction of our churches, wall paintings and icons and helped to get back at least those mosaics and icons which could be found in the international American and European art markets. But you may also understand that the loss of cultural heritage, integral part of our cultural identity, is hard to bear by the Cypriot people. Especially even more as they are still expecting a solution of the so-called “Cyprus dispute”, which means the reunification of our island.

In recent years, a number of churches in the occupied area have been restored by a mixed committee composed by both Turkish-Cypriots and Greek-Cypriots, and in some cases with European funding. What is new though is that, following Mr. Erdogan’s example, the Turkish-Cypriot side shows no respect to these churches as worship places for the Christians and they even transform them to marketplaces, as you can see from the photos of one of the most important of the restored churches, the Archangel Michael’s church in Lefkoniko [see attached images]. Thus, I make an appeal to all the European leaders and Institutions to take serious actions for saving and preserving the cultural heritage of the occupied area of Cyprus that is under destruction. It should be seen as world cultural heritage, and everyone has the responsibility for its protection.

Furthermore, I would like to express my great sadness because of the situation we are experiencing, and especially due to the efforts of the Turkish president Mr Erdogan

to increase the Islamic fundamentalism and fanaticism against Christians, by accusing all non-Muslims, especially Christians, that they are against the Islamic world. We have already seen, as you know, fundamentalist Muslims attacking to Christians in their places of worship in Europe, and, of course, what happened in France as a reaction to the presentation of the caricatures of prophet Mohamed, an action which Muslims see as blasphemy and insult against their faith.

By referring to the tension between Christians and Muslims driven by Turkey for pure propaganda, it is not necessary to mention to you the recent transformation of Hagia Sophia to a mosque and many other Christian churches in Turkey, which is indeed very provocative for all Christians around the world.

Here, I shall underline to you that by this letter I have not the intention at all to promote any hate against Muslims or any believer of other religions. My great sadness and concern is that, first of all, Mr Erdogan willingly “forgets” or wants to hide all these unacceptable actions that lead to the destruction of the Christian monuments in Cyprus. Secondly, as the bishop of this particular area together with other bishops that their Dioceses are in the Turkish-occupied area and all the faithful people that originally come from that area, we are not able to practise our Christian faith and worship in our land, thus we are deprived of the right and one of the highest principles of religious freedom.

In addition to that, as you know, Mr Erdogan recently visited the Turkish-occupied area in Cyprus and without shame, without any respect for the Cypriot people, especially those originating from Famagusta and still have their properties in the city and have been illegally occupied by the Turkish army since 1974, without taking into account that in this city there are numerous Christian churches and monuments still standing and shouting loudly to those that are ready to listen and hear (unfortunately not all European leaders), and against all decisions of the Security Council of UN (especially the resolutions 550/1984 and 789/1992 concerning Varosha), he organized a so-called “picnic”

in the area of Varosha. At the same time, the sovereignty of Cyprus is being unacceptably violated by a Turkish research drillship in the Exclusive Economic Zone of Cyprus and constant illegal flights of Turkish military drones. I hope you can follow how the aggressive actions of Turkey's President develop every day. Now he even claims that he can distribute part of the Economic Zone of Cyprus to Egypt and Israel and leave the rest to Turkey. This constitutes a continuous violation of the sovereignty of a country member of the European Union. One is right to wonder, what is this European Union then without any real solidarity to the member countries and their people? Alas, this is not the kind of Europe that was promised to the European peoples. You make them now believe that these promises were mere illusions. Personally, I was one of those who believed in the European values and vision. Now we feel that you are pushing us to nihilism. You by yourselves and with your "political decisions" cause an explosion in the very foundations of Europe.

I am writing to you not as a political or religious "hardliner". For many years, I have been actively participating in Church dialogues as member of the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches. I have used every possibility to co-operate with people from the Turkish-occupied area, I celebrated the liturgy in a church in the medieval Famagusta and other churches in occupied communities. But the actions of the Turkish government destroy all hopes and positive approaches from both sides to reach a peaceful and respectful co-existence.

The people of Cyprus are very much disappointed from your position as European leaders and especially by the previous presidency held by Germany. It is evident that Germany follows its own economic and strategic interests in Turkey, as it was the case when the Genocide of the Armenians during World War I took place, and the German government did not interfere for similar reasons. I am wondering whether this kind of politics is based on morality or if it is merely a cruel and egocentric action, despite of the

pain you provoke to European citizens. We hope that the current presidency held by Portugal will prove to be different, and that it will defend the rights of Cyprus, a member country, and, by extension, the common interests of the whole European Union.

You have before your eyes the results of the unacceptable actions of Turkey against Cyprus and still you hesitate to react and make any real effort to stop Mr Erdogan and correct his behaviour. Instead, you sell him weapons so he can attack European as well as other countries and kill innocent people. I want to say that it is time to prevent Turkey from committing another genocide like that of the Armenians, of the Greeks in Asia Minor in 1923, of the national cleansing of Cypriot people from the occupied territories, of the extermination of the Kurds and now again against the Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh, just to mention a few among many other cases.

In Cyprus we have experienced terrible war crimes by the Turkish army, we are still witnessing the ongoing illegal settlement of Turkish immigrants in our lands and the constant violation of the UN Security Council decisions and resolutions concerning Cyprus and the area of Varosha in particular (UN resolutions 550/1984 and 789/1992). Clearly, this is not to be expected from a country that is considered a peace guarantee in Cyprus. An appeal to the International Court of Justice seems to be the only appropriate way out of this situation. Cypriot people have no trust in Turkey anymore. The aggressive rhetoric and actions of the Turkish government during the previous months, threatening and insulting everyone, and that almost sparked a war conflict with Greece. The Turkish government now tries to adopt its foreign policy and present a different face, altering their rhetoric and show willingness for a dialogue, especially after the election of the new US president. To us, this behaviour of Turkey undoubtedly seems to be clearly political tactics and not a real and stable shift from their strategic goals and expansive visions. We have no trust in this Turkish government, how can you trust them?

We have had enough of empty words. It is time now to take actions. May we hope that you will listen to our voice and not put this letter away in the trash? Then, we shall congratulate you for your responsibility and for your commitment to the fundamental goals and values of the European Union!

I would also like to express the wish that we will soon come out of this pandemic and continue a prosperous development for the benefit of all the people in Europe and the whole world.

Bishop Vasilios



Metropolitan of Constantia and Ammochostos

20<sup>th</sup> of January 2021

Holy Metropolis of Constantia and Ammochostos

Paralimni, Cyprus