



Office of the Metropolitan
312 Garfield Street
Johnstown, PA 15906

July 19, 2020

Protocol No. 29/2020

Glory to Jesus Christ!

Dear Reverend Fathers and Faithful Laity of our God-Protected Diocese,

Today I write with a sense of great sadness, disgust, anger, determination, faith, and urgency.

On July 10, 2020 Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan formally converted The Great Cathedral of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople (present day Istanbul) into a mosque. Built in 537 AD during the reign of Emperor Justinian, for more than a millennium Hagia Sophia served as a place of rich spiritual and cultural inspiration for all. If you have ever been inside this World Heritage Site (I have visited it a couple of times) you know the awesomeness of this architectural wonder.

In 1453 when the Ottoman Sultan Mehmet II conquered Constantinople, the Great Church of Christianity was converted into a mosque. Later however, in 1934, it was converted into a museum by Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, the founder of modern Turkey. Transforming Hagia Sophia into a museum opened it up to all people of all faiths and not the property of any one religion. Over 3 million people visited each year.

This Friday July 24th which is scheduled to be the "inauguration date" of Muslim prayer services in Hagia Sophia, I am asking all priests of our Diocese to do the following three things:

- 1) to toll the bells of the parish (if they exist) several times during the day and evening in lamentation mode,
- 2) to lower all flags on Church property to half-mast, and
- 3) to chant the Akathist Service to the Theotokos during Friday evening with parishioners.

We will be joining with our Orthodox Christian brothers and sisters and indeed all Christians and people of goodwill around the world in this prayerful effort to return Hagia Sophia to the status of a museum, if not a church.

Let us, in this time of grief and mourning, appeal to the Most Holy Theotokos and Ever-Virgin Mary. She is the "only Hope of the hopeless" and the "the Repository of the Wisdom of God, the Treasury of His Foreknowledge".

With paternal love in our Lord Jesus Christ,

+Metropolitan Gregory

+Metropolitan Gregory of Nyssa

This Protocol is to be distributed by all means available including the emailing of parishioners as soon as possible.