

SJR

28

LETTER IN SUPPORT OF SJR 28,
RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR THE ECUMENICAL PATRIARCHATE

Chairman French, and distinguished members of the Senate Judiciary Committee.

My name is Vasilios L. Copadis, I am a member of the Holy Transfiguration Greek Orthodox Church in Anchorage, AK. My wife and I have lived in Anchorage for over 32 years. We have been members of the Holy Transfiguration parish since the church reopened in 1984. In previous years I have served both as a member of the Parish Council and as Parish Council President. I was also a member of our church's Diocesan Council, which is an advisory board to the Bishop of our Diocese and is headquartered in San Francisco, CA. I am writing to you in support of Senate Joint Resolution 28, for the Religious Freedom for the Ecumenical Patriarchate.

The Ecumenical Patriarchate is located in Constantinople, which is modern day Istanbul, Turkey. Ever since the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923, the Turkish government has embarked on a series of maneuvers to rid the country of persons of Greek ethnicity, which is considered "ethnic cleansing". The treaty provided for the independence of the Republic of Turkey but also for the protection of the Greek Orthodox Christian minority and the mainly ethnically Turkish Muslim minority in the Thrace region of Greece. However, most of the Christian population of Turkey and the Muslim population of Greece had already been deported under the earlier exchange of populations between Greece and Turkey agreement which was signed by Greece and Turkey. Only the Greeks of Constantinople, the islands of Imvros and Tenedos were excluded (about 270,000 at that time), and the Turkish population of Western Thrace. Today only 2,000 to 3,000 Greek Orthodox citizens remain in Istanbul.

The Turkish State still does not recognize the "Ecumenical" title and status of the Patriarch and Patriarchate. This title was given to the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople by the undivided Christian Church in the 6th century, and is purely an ecclesiastical title. The mission and jurisdiction of the Ecumenical Patriarchate has always been and always will be purely spiritual. Unfortunately, this title has been the source of much debate by the Turkish State, even though it is recognized and used by the rest of the world. The majority of the faithful under the immediate jurisdiction of the Ecumenical Patriarchate is outside of Turkey and encircles the globe, including more than 1.5 million Greek Orthodox faithful in the United States. The Ecumenical Patriarchate is also the First Church of the Orthodox Church worldwide, responsible for coordinating the Pan Orthodox affairs of the Orthodox Church. It is the spiritual center of 300 million Orthodox Christians worldwide.

More recently, the European Union (to which Turkey aspires to become a member of) under the 2003 EU-Turkey Accession Partnership, instructed the Turkish government to conform to European standards with respect to religious freedom and the protection of minorities. The Turkish State continues to violate the Lausanne Treaty by not legally recognizing the Ecumenical Patriarchate, and it has not made any progress towards the EU-Turkey 2003 Accession Partnership. Not having a legal identity is a major source of many other problems of the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Turkey, this includes no property rights.

Current government policies threaten the viability of the Patriarch's presence in Istanbul, and appear targeted to bring about the eventual exodus of the Greek Orthodox from Turkey entirely. The Turkish Authorities do not allow the Ecumenical Patriarchate to have any property rights in Turkey. Through various methods, the Turkish Authorities have confiscated thousands of properties including homes, apartment buildings, schools and land from Ecumenical Patriarchate and its community over the years. The most glaring property issue surrounds the Orthodox Theological School of Halki which was seized in 1971, when the Turkish Government nationalized all institutions of higher education.

The Theological School of Halki is the only institution of the Ecumenical Patriarchate for the training of its clergy. One cannot underestimate its importance for the survival of the Ecumenical Patriarchate. It's a "Catch 22" of sorts in the fact that in 1923 and again in 1970, the Governor of Istanbul illegally issued decrees imposing restrictions on the election of the Ecumenical Patriarch and the Metropolitans (Bishops) who elect him. These decrees stated that the Ecumenical Patriarch, and the hierarchs (Metropolitans and Archbishops) that vote for him, must be Turkish citizens! This would be akin to the country of Italy where the Vatican is located, decreeing that only Italian citizens can be elected Pope and that only Roman Catholic hierarchs who are Italian citizens can vote for someone to become Pope! It's ludicrous!!

Currently there are only 15 hierarchs in Turkey with Turkish citizenship. If the Halki Theological School is not allowed to reopen, then there can be no clergy trained. Without clergy, there will eventually be no one ascending to be hierarchs, and ultimately, there will be no one of Turkish citizenship left that can be elected as Patriarch....thus, Catch-22. In spite of numerous petitions and appeals to the Turkish government, including personal appeals by Presidents George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton, the government of Turkey still refuses to allow the school to reopen. Consequently, if the school remains closed, it will be a case of institutional genocide, as it will assure the governmental extinction of the Ecumenical Patriarchate.

Recently, the European Commission for Democracy has made a ruling urging Turkey to recognize the status of the Ecumenical Patriarchate and its historical role as it was already defined in the 6th Century. It also calls for the reopening of the Theological School of Halki, and also to change the rule by which the Metropolitans and other hierarchs must be Orthodox Christians of Turkish nationality in order to be elected as Patriarch.

In spite of numerous attempts by His All Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew to start a dialogue with the Turkish Authorities regarding all of the above mentioned issues, there have been very few meetings. Additionally, the Ecumenical Patriarchate has written and sent over 30 letters to the Prime Minister and other Ministers and authorities in Ankara about the problems of the Ecumenical Patriarchate and its community, but there has never been even one reply to any of these letters. Without the resolution of many of these problems, Turkey will not be demonstrating the religious freedom necessary to enter the European Union.

In closing, I urge the committee to join 25 other states that have passed similar resolutions and vote in favor of this resolution. Thank you for your time.

Vasilios L. Copadis

MY PERSONAL EXPERIENCE AT THE ECUMENICAL PATRIARCHATE

When I was serving as a priest in Greece, I was given the opportunity to serve as the "on duty" priest at the monastery of the Holy Trinity at the well known theological school on the island of Halki, (which has been closed since 1971), a half-hour ferry ride from the city of Constantinople. It was my privilege to serve there for seven weeks. I arrived during Bright week (the week after Easter) and left at Pentecost (50 days later), thus it was my blessing to serve the *Pentecostarion* (time between Easter and Pentecost) there.

Before I left for Halki, I was advised that I should dress in "street clothes," i.e., not in clerical clothing. The country of Turkey does not allow clerics, foreign or otherwise, to dress as clerics in public. For me, that meant no cassock or rasso. Way back then I still had a business suit tucked in a closet at home, why I am not sure, but it came in handy for the trip and I made sure I was wearing it when I arrived in Turkey. After ordination, I had no use for the suit any longer, but inertia being what it is, I still had it. It was a good looking suit and it fit well. I will admit, though, that after two-plus years as a presbyter, it felt very strange to be in a suit again and I looked rather odd wearing it with my very long hair and long beard.

The locals on the island of Halki made sure I was aware that obedience to the country's laws not be taken lightly. That is, if I were to be arrested for whatever reason, I could disappear and never be heard from again. There's no *habeas corpus* there.

I learned I could relax the suit idea and instead wear simple black trousers and matching black long sleeved t-shirt with my black *kondo* (vest). I gave the suit to a grateful young Armenian man who was employed at the defunct theological school at Halki. He related to me how he couldn't keep a job in the city once his employers found out that he was a Christian. Sadly, this problem was not just his.

Once I shed the suit, I ended up looking the part of an eccentric hippy instead of an uncomfortable, out-of-place presbyter. A researcher I met at Halki suggested I looked akin to a 19th century Russian peasant.

His All-Holiness, Bartholomew, would visit the school regularly, often with guests. I had the privilege to meet with his All-Holiness several times. I found him personable and easy to communicate with. He was very warm and kind to me during my stay.

All during my stay, I learned of the plight of the Patriarch, the Ecumenical Patriarchate and the Orthodox Church in Turkey from those who had lived there all their lives. I learned of property confiscations, vandalism, personal threats and riots against Christians. It was disheartening and shocking to learn that just a few Christians live in Constantinople these days—Constantinople, the great Byzantine city. Countless numbers of Christians have been forced from their lives there.

The librarian on Halki, George, befriended me. He was a former tour guide and exceptional musician, although I cannot now remember the name of the mandolin-like instrument that was his favorite—it may have been the *Oud*. George received a blessing to take me on a tour of Constantinople. Our first stop, of course, was the Church of Holy Wisdom—*Agia Sophia*. The scale of this church is immense and, once more, the personal experience is what communicates

FLS

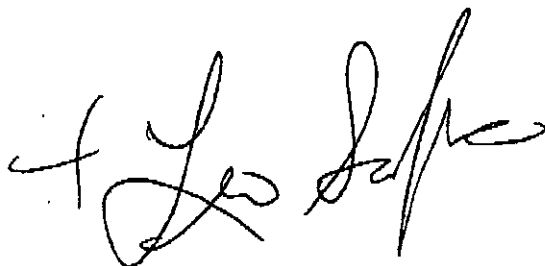
the grandeur, not to mention all the history and suffering that has taken place there since the fall of the city in 1453.

I stood in awe of the beauty and could only imagine what it must have been like when the Emperor of Rome was present before the Ottomans stormed the city on May 29, 1453. Imagine the Patriarch, a dozen visiting bishops, a small army of priests, seven or so deacons and two full choirs, perhaps two dozen or more in each, choir members with top-notch skills, adding to this the Emperor with all his retinue; billowing clouds of incense and bells. We have a description of what the envoys from Vladimir, Prince of Kiev, saw when visiting Agia Sophia, their report noted that the worship struck them as though they didn't know if they were in heaven or on earth. Even considering the current state of the Great Church, now held as a state museum, I could, in my mind's eye, envision their wonderment. George commented to me that it was against the law to pray in *Agia Sophia*. Only God knows how many silent, fervent prayers are offered there routinely.

I saw many beautiful and amazing sites in the city, but *Agia Sophia* always remains at the forefront of my mind. After the tour, George and I walked by the many shops that had been taken from Christians during some horrible uprisings against the Orthodox.

It is because of these firsthand experiences that I do not hesitate for a moment to testify for the adoption of the Alaska Senate Joint Resolution 28 this Friday, March 26, at 1:30PM. I encourage as many who feel sympathy and concord with the Patriarchate as I do, to follow suit. You can read more details of human and religious rights violations against the Ecumenical Patriarchate at <http://archons.org/>. The situation of the Patriarchate in Constantinople actually requires more than our sympathy, it requires our action as the continued existence of the Patriarchate is at stake. It is a sacred duty to speak in support of the Ecumenical Patriarchate. The Turkish government insists that it must approve of any new Patriarch and that candidate must be a Turkish citizen having served in the Turkish army. This cuts the field of candidates very thin indeed. How many unmarried Orthodox clergy can boast Turkish citizenship and military service?

As an aside, as I was leaving Constantinople by bus, I came across a twenty-something American couple who were leisurely traveling around the world. When I met them and we began to chat, I was attired in my "Russian peasant garb" and dark sunglasses. However, as soon as we crossed the Greek-Turkish border, I reached into my bag and pulled out my cassock and quickly attired myself properly. As is often the case with world travelers, we exchanged email addresses. Later, to my surprise, I read on their website that they had met a man who looked like a member of ZZ TOP and was suddenly transformed into an Orthodox priest before their very eyes. Now, I wonder who that might have been? +Fr. Leo



3/29/10

Cindy Smith

From: Diane Primis [dianeprimis@hotmail.com]
Sent: Sunday, March 28, 2010 9:43 PM
To: Sen. Hollis French
Subject: Resolution SJR 28 Relating to the Ecumenical Patriarchate and religious rights.

Dear Senator French,

I am a member of Holy Transfiguration Greek Orthodox Church in Anchorage and I strongly urge you to support the above Resolution. The continued existence of the Ecumenical Patriarchate is at stake, and what is decided here in Alaska has implications for Orthodox Christians in Alaska and worldwide.

Thank you.

Diane Primis

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These state Religious Freedom resolutions are just one component of a multi faceted effort actively being undertaken by Orthodox Christians to preserve the existence of the Ecumenical Patriarchate.

In addition to this state initiative, active engagement is also taking place with the Office of the President, the United States Senate, the United States House of Representatives, the State Department, the European Union and the European Court of Human Justice. Every President since Jimmy Carter has called on the Turkish government to extend full religious freedom to the Ecumenical Patriarchate. Just last April, President Obama, in his address to the Turkish parliament, urged the government to re-open the Orthodox Christian Theological School of Halki, which the government closed in 1971.

These resolutions are an important part of our overall governmental and public affairs strategy. These resolutions represent the will of the citizens of our nation in all of these states and are a powerful statement to the Turkish government of the importance we place on religious freedom.

Later this year, sometime in the Fall, we will hand deliver all of the adopted resolutions to Secretary of State Clinton, who is also on record as calling on the Turkish government to extend religious freedom to the Ecumenical Patriarchate. In a separate trip in the Fall, we will hand deliver copies of the adopted resolutions to the Turkish Foreign Minister in Ankara.

The good news is that all of these efforts, especially including the adoption of these state resolutions, are beginning to produce positive results. The Turkish government has recently indicated that it will return a large orphanage to the Ecumenical Patriarchate which it confiscated a number of years ago. Also, there are positive signs that the government will soon allow the reopening of the Halki Theological School, which will enable the training of young men for the Priesthood in Turkey.

These resolutions are both a constant reminder and incentive to the Turkish government to fulfill its obligations for all of its citizens, so that they, as well as Orthodox Christians around the world, including Alaska, can enjoy full religious freedom. These resolutions are having a positive impact, and we hope to continue to secure their adoption until every state has done so.

Respectfully submitted,

Stephen Georgeson
National Coordinator
State Religious Freedom Resolutions Project
Greek Orthodox Church of America

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SENATOR KEVIN MEYER
SENATE DISTRICT O

SPONSOR STATEMENT FOR SJR 28

Relating to the Ecumenical Patriarchate and religious rights.

SJR 28 would urge the United States, the European Union, and the United Nations to encourage the government of Turkey to end its discrimination against the Ecumenical Patriarchate, one of the oldest Christian institutions in the world.

Just as the Pope is the spiritual leader of Roman Catholics worldwide, the Ecumenical Patriarch is the spiritual leader of Orthodox Christians. The Turkish government has expropriated Church property (including an orphanage the Church has held since 1902), closed the Orthodox Theological School of Halki, and prevented the Orthodox Christian Church from selecting any canonically eligible bishop throughout the world from becoming the Ecumenical Patriarch by requiring Turkish citizenship.

The Ecumenical Patriarchate is the spiritual home to approximately six million Orthodox Christians in the United States and 300 million worldwide. Alaskan Orthodox Christians have a strong relationship with the Ecumenical Patriarchate through their bishops. Russian Orthodoxy arrived in Alaska in 1794. There are currently 95 Russian Orthodox churches in the state with approximately 20,000 members. The Greek Orthodox Church in Anchorage was established in 1958 and currently has 200 members. There are three Antiochian Orthodox Churches located in Homer, Eagle River and Wasilla with a total of 440 members.

SJR 28 would ask that the Alaska State Legislature call on the government of Turkey to pledge to uphold the safeguard religious rights without compromise. To date, 25 State Legislatures have adopted similar resolutions.

U.S. State Resolution Status And Primary Sponsors

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Alabama

SJR 73 - Read the resolution [PDF]

Adopted by House and Senate on 5/2007
Sen. Jabo Wagoner



Alaska

SJR 28 - Introduced on 2/18/2010

Senator Kevin Meyer
Rep. Bob Lynn
Rep. John Harris



Arizona

HCM 2009 - Read the resolution [PDF]

Introduced on 1/17/2008
Adopted by House 3/18/2008
Adopted by Senate 5/22/2008
Rep. Mark Anderson



Arkansas

SCR 3 - Read the resolution [PDF]

Introduced on 1/22/2009
Adopted by Senate on 2/18/09
Adopted by House 3/12/2009
Senator David Johnson



California

SJR 17 - Read the resolution [PDF]

Introduced on 9/10/2007
Adopted by Senate 2/28/2008
Sen. Elaine Kontominas Alquist
Adopted by Assembly 8/30/2008



Colorado

No resolution has been introduced at this time.



Connecticut

No resolution has been introduced at this time.



Delaware

HR 9 - Introduced on 3/10/2009
Adopted on 3/19/2009
Rep. Nick Manolakos



District of Columbia

No resolution has been introduced at this time.



Florida

HM 1417 - Introduced on 3/2/2009
Rep. Peter Nehr



Georgia

HR 415 - Read the resolution [PDF]

Adopted by House 4/2007
Rep. Mike Cheokas
SR 1038 - Read the resolution [PDF]
Introduced on 2/27/2008
Adopted by Senate 3/6/2008
Sen. David Adelman



Hawaii

No resolution has been introduced at this time.



Idaho

No resolution has been introduced at this time.



Illinois

HR 666 - Read the resolution [PDF]
Gubernatorial Resolution [PDF]
Introduced on 8/10/2007

Adopted on 10/4/2007

Rep. Sandra Pihos
 Rep. Elizabeth Coulson
 SR 100 - Introduced on 2/25/2009
 Senator Antonio Munoz

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**Indiana**

SR 5/SR 11 - Introduced on 1/8/2009
 Senator Lonnie Randolph

**Iowa**

HR 27 - Introduced on 3/12/2009
 Adopted on 3/23/2009
 Rep. Wayne Ford
 Rep. Pat Murphy

**Kansas**

SR 1835 - Introduced on 2/27/2009
 Sen. Tim Owens

**Kentucky**

HR 244 - Read the resolution [PDF]
 Adopted on 3/26/2008
 Rep. Mary Lou Marzian

**Louisiana**

SR 109 - Read the resolution [PDF]
 Adopted by Senate 6/2007
 Sen. Edwin Murray

**Maine**

HP 924 - Read the resolution [PDF]
 Introduced on 3/25/2009
 Adopted by House 3/31/2009
 Adopted by Senate 4/2/2009
 Rep. Linda Valentino
 Senator Margaret Craven
 Senator Barry Hobbins

**Maryland**

HJR 5 - Introduced on 3/14/2008
 Delegate Theodore Sophocleus

**Massachusetts**

Read the resolution [PDF]
 Adopted on 4/16/2008
 Senator Gale Candaras

**Michigan**

SCR 6 - Read the resolution [PDF]
 Introduced on 3/19/2009
 Adopted by House 3/19/2009
 Adopted by Senate 3/25/2009
 Senator John Pappageorge
 Senator John Gleason
 Senator Roger Kahn

**Minnesota**

SR 178 - Introduced on 4/2/2008
 Sen. Yvonne Prettner Solon
 Sen. Sandra Pappas

**Mississippi**

HCR 67 - Read the resolution [PDF]
 Introduced on 3/19/2008
 Adopted by House 3/31/2008
 Adopted by Senate 4/16/2008
 Rep. Alyce Clarke

**Missouri**

No resolution has been introduced at this time.

**Montana**

No resolution has been introduced at this time.

**Nebraska**

LR 273 - Read the resolution [PDF]
Introduced 1/6/2010
Sen. Gwen Howard

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**Nevada**

ACR 31 - Read the resolution [PDF]
Adopted by Assembly and Senate on 5/6/2009
Assemblyman James Ohrenschall
Sen. William Raggio

**New Hampshire**

No resolution has been introduced at this time.

**New Jersey**

SJR 11 - Read the resolution [PDF]
Adopted by Senate and House 6/2006
Sen. Bob Smith
Sen. Joseph Kyrillos, Jr.

**New Mexico**

HM 39 - Read the resolution [PDF]
Introduced on 2/2/2010
Adopted by House 2/13/2010
Rep. Al Park

**New York**

No resolution has been introduced at this time.

**North Carolina**

No resolution has been introduced at this time.

**North Dakota**

No resolution has been introduced at this time.

**Ohio**

SCR 14 - Read the resolution
Introduced on 5/14/2009
Senator Joe Schiavoni
HCR 29 - Read the resolution
Introduced on 9/15/2009
Rep. Tom Letson

**Oklahoma**

SR 54 - Read the resolution [PDF]
Introduced on 2/19/2008
Adopted on 3/24/2008

**Oregon**

SJR 16 - Read the resolution [PDF]
Introduced on 5/4/2009
Adopted by Senate on 5/6/2009
Adopted by House on 6/1/2009
Sen. Rod Monroe, Sen. Bruce Starr, and Sen. Richard Devlin

**Pennsylvania**

HR 876 - Read the resolution [PDF]
Adopted by House 11/2006
Rep. Timothy Solobay
SR 188 - Read the resolution [PDF]
Introduced on 10/24/2007
Adopted by Senate 3/10/2008

**Rhode Island**

SR 895 - Read the resolution [PDF]
Adopted by Senate 3/2007
Sen. Lou Raptakis

Sen. Barry Stout

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South Carolina

HR 4727 - Read the resolution [PDF]

Introduced on 2/20/2008

Adopted by House 02/23/2008

Rep. Leonidas Stavrinakis

SR 735 - Read the resolution [PDF]

Adopted by Senate 5/2007

Sen. Phil Leventis



South Dakota

No resolution has been introduced at this time.



Tennessee

SJR 535 - Read the resolution [PDF]

Adopted by Senate 6/2007

Adopted by House on 4/17/2008

Sen. Roy Herron



Texas

HCR 193 - Introduced on 4/23/2009

Rep. Dennis Bonnen

SCR 70 - Introduced on 5/4/2009

Senator Joan Huffman



Utah

SR 1 - Read the resolution [PDF]

Introduced on 1/23/2009

Adopted on 2/5/2009

Senator Patricia Jones

HR 2 - Read the resolution [PDF]

Introduced on 2/3/2009

Adopted on 2/19/2009

Rep. Gregory Hughes



Vermont

JRS 47 - Introduced on 2/9/2010

Senator Richard Sears

Senator Robert Hartwell



Virginia

HJ 126 - Introduced on 1/9/2008

Delegate Johnny Joannou

Delegate Manoli Loupassi



Washington

HJM 4003 - Introduced on 1/15/2009

Rep. Deb Wallace

Rep. Bill Hinkle



West Virginia

HCR 37 - Read the resolution [PDF]

Introduced on 2/11/2008

Adopted by House 3/3/2008

Adopted by Senate 3/8/2008

Delegate Samuel Cann

Sen. Joseph Minard



Wisconsin

SR 30 - Introduced on 3/13/2008

Sen. Ted Kanavas



Wyoming

No resolution has been introduced at this time.

Deseret News

Utah senators support Greek Orthodox Church leader

By Lisa Riley Roche

Deseret News

Published: Thursday, Feb. 5, 2009 11:46 a.m. MST

The Senate approved a resolution Wednesday urging the government of Turkey to recognize the spiritual leader of the Greek Orthodox Church.

The sponsor of SR1, Senate Minority Leader Pat Jones, D-Holladay, said she was asked to carry the resolution by the Greek Orthodox Church of Greater Salt Lake City because of the "repressive actions of the Turkish government that restrict religious freedom around the world" including Utah.

Jones said the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew serves as the spiritual leader to the 300 million members of the Greek Orthodox Church just as Pope Benedict does to Catholics and LDS Church President Thomas S. Monson does to Mormons.

Her resolution, which passed unanimously, will be sent to President Obama, leaders of Congress and members of Utah's Congressional delegation, the U.S. ambassador to Turkey and Turkey's ambassador to the United States.

Rep. Greg Hughes, R-Draper, is carrying a similar resolution in the House.

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<http://archives.chicagotribune.com/2006/nov/26/news/chi-0611260336nov26>
Sunday, November 26, 2006
Chicago Tribune

John Kass

Ancient faith faces an uncertain future

Published November 26, 2006

Imagine the Vatican surrounded in a fiercely secular yet very Muslim Italy.

The Christian community there has dwindled to only a few thousand after decades of ethnic cleansing. Much of the church's property has been seized. The government has closed the only seminary and refuses to reopen it.

A law has been passed: Any future Roman Catholic pope must be born on Italian soil, even though there is no seminary to train the young priests, even as the Christian community shrinks to a handful. A cold shadow falls on the Western church.

I asked you to imagine this because it's going on, right now, but not in Rome.

It is happening in Istanbul, where Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I, patriarch of Constantinople and spiritual leader of the world's Orthodox Church, is facing extreme pressure by the Turkish government.

This week, Pope Benedict XVI will travel to Turkey and pray with Bartholomew, and witness the liturgy in the Church of St. George.

The focus will be on the pope relying on the patriarch to help make inroads with Muslims, after comments the pope made this year about violence and Islam.

But I hope his visit will also draw attention to the desperate plight of the Orthodox Church, which has been largely ignored. There are an estimated 250,000 Orthodox Christians in the Chicago area, enough, you might think, for attention to be paid, especially now.

The pope will hear the liturgy as it was sung more than a thousand years ago, when there was only one church, before the split into East and West.

"They will exchange the kiss of peace, and they will bless the people, and they will recite together the 'Our Father' in Greek, the original [scriptural] language," said Archbishop Demetrios, leader of the Greek Orthodox Church in America, who will lead the American delegation.

"Then the two of them will go out to the elevated balcony, if you remember it, and bless the people who will be gathered in the courtyard," the archbishop told me.

I do remember. I was there, at St. George, at the patriarchate this past summer, watching the baptism of my nephew. We had the honor of visiting with Bartholomew, who said with a smile that he reads the Chicago Tribune online.

Obviously, I have strong, personal and religious feelings about this and can't pretend otherwise, yet I mean no disrespect to Turkey or to Islam.

The streets in that quarter of Istanbul are narrow. The bus stops at the bottom of the hill. You

walk past a few shops, on up, and eventually, through the gates of the compound.

Once there, you begin to realize how central the patriarchate has been to Christianity, dating from about A.D. 300, when the Gospels of the New Testament were being selected, and later, when the Nicene Creed, a statement of faith recited by Catholics, Orthodox and other Christians, was created before the schism.

That the media ignores the patriarch's plight is astounding and hurtful to me. As is the realization that all that history could be gone if things don't change in Istanbul, in what was once called Constantinople, the heart of the Byzantine Empire.

At the patriarchate, one of the exterior doors is never opened. It has remained closed since 1821, when Greece fought for its independence from the Ottoman sultans, and the patriarch then was dragged out and hanged from that very doorway.

Today, Turkey is a fascinating, wonderful place, worthy of American tourism, worthy of American respect.

The people are friendly and hospitable, and the history is astounding. The Blue Mosque, the Topkapi Palace, the ancient covered market, still thriving. That it has remained a nation is testament to the intense will of Kemal Ataturk, founder of the modern secular Turkish state, which now must deal with growing Islamic fundamentalism.

All of this is important for Americans to grasp, as the West realizes, finally, that ignoring Islam is impossible.

For me, it was especially important to visit Hagia Sophia, literally, the Church of Divine Wisdom, the ancient domed structure that was turned into a mosque when the Turks took Constantinople in 1453.

It is an immense structure, larger even than its copy, St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, and is nearly 1,500 years old.

There, I thought of the worshipers fearfully singing the liturgy as the city walls were breached, as the slaughter began, as a Christian empire that had stood for more than 1,000 years perished.

Most icons were destroyed, but you can see the Virgin Mary on the wall near what had been the altar. A sign prohibits religious observance, but the guards don't stop you from praying.

Pope Benedict is also scheduled to visit Hagia Sophia, now tersely referred to as a museum.

As he visits there, the news images may be sent around the world to remind us of what was, and how what little is left is slipping away.

jskass@tribune.com

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Senator Kevin Meyer
Senate District O

TO: Senator Hollis French, Chair
Senate Judiciary Committee

FROM: Senator Kevin Meyer 

DATE: March 11, 2010

RE: Senate Judiciary Committee Hearing Request for SJR 28

This is a request for a Senate Judiciary Committee hearing for SJR 28, "Relating to the Ecumenical Patriarchate and religious rights."

The following documents are attached and will be sent electronically:

- Current version of the bill
- Sponsor Statement
- Back up information
- Staff member assigned to the bill: Christine R. Marasigan, 465-6876

This bill would encourage the government of Turkey to eliminate all forms of discrimination based on religion and to immediately grant the Ecumenical Patriarchate appropriate international recognition and the right to train clergy of all nationalities.

Please contact Christine if you have any questions regarding this legislation.