



## Archon Delegation Embarks On Religious Freedom Mission To Paris, Brussels, and Istanbul

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A delegation of Archons received strong support for the Ecumenical Patriarchate from European leaders in Paris and Brussels, but still continue to receive vague promises from Turkish officials.

The six-member delegation traveled to Paris, Brussels, and Istanbul on a religious freedom mission during the week of Nov. 30-Dec. 6. France holds the European Union presidency for the current six month term ending December 31st. Brussels, Belgium is the headquarters of the EU.

In Paris, Pierre Menant, France's Director of European Cooperation, assured the delegation that France supported religious freedom of the Ecumenical Patriarchate. In Brussels, the Archons were told by EU officials religious freedom is a key issue facing Turkey in its effort to gain entrance to the European Union.

National Commander Anthony J. Limberakis, M.D., led the delegation and was accompanied by National Secretary John Halecky, Jr.; National Treasurer James C. Fountas; Legal Counsel Christopher Stratakis, Esq.; Litigation Committee Chairman George C. Rockas; Esq., and Legal Defense Fund Chairman John Zavitsanos, Esq.

In Paris and Brussels, the delegation was also led by His Eminence, Metropolitan Emmanuel of France, Director of the Liaison Office of the Ecumenical Patriarchate to the European Union. The Order of St. Andrew expressed its appreciation to Metropolitan Emmanuel for his excellent preparation and assistance on the religious freedom mission.

Upon arrival in Paris on Nov. 30, the Feastday of St. Andrew the First Called Apostle, the delegation proceeded to the Cathedral of St. Stephen, where Metropolitan Emmanuel presided over Divine Liturgy. At the end of the liturgy, Dr. Limberakis made a presentation before the congregation on the religious freedom issues confronting the Ecumenical Patriarchate. Dimitrios Paraskevopoulos, Ambassador of Greece to France, was in attendance.

Over the next two days in Paris, the delegation met with diplomats and members of the clergy, including Andrew R. Young, Counsel of Political Affairs, U.S. Embassy to France; five individuals from the French



During their visit to Paris, the Archon delegation met with His Excellency Osman Koroturk, the Turkish Ambassador to France to discuss religious freedom rights for the Ecumenical Patriarchate.



Metropolitan Emmanuel of France, Director of Liaison Office of the Ecumenical Patriarchate to the European Union, with the Archon delegation in front of the European Commission building, Brussels. (Photo by A. Limberakis)

Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs and the Ministry of the Interior, including Director Menat and Stephane Chmelwsky, Counselor for Religious Affairs. The delegation also met with His Eminence Cardinal Andre, Archbishop of Paris; Osman F. Koruturk, Ambassador of Turkey to France, and Ambassador Paraskevopoulos.

At the beginning of each meeting, Dr. Limberakis made a presentation focusing on the major religious freedom and human rights facing the Ecumenical Patriarchate and on the activities of the Archons in this area. Highlights from the Paris meeting include the following:

The meeting at the French Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs was enlightening because President Sarkozy of France, who has expressed skepticism about Turkey's accession into European Union, was in the process of completing his country's six month term as president of that body. France has been particularly vocal about Turkey's prospects of gaining entrance into the EU.

Director Menent stated that one of the utmost conditions for Turkey's entrance into the EU was freedom in general and freedom of religion. "You can count on France. ... In France we respect all religions. ... We respect your fight. .... We support you." He went on to say that the Archon's request for religious freedom of the Ecumenical Patriarchate is the European Union's request, as well and that France will continue to support this principle after its EU Presidency concludes.

Ambassador Koruturk stated that "legal documents control Turkey's treatment of the Ecumenical Patriarchate;" that "the Ecumenical Patriarchate is a respected institution in Turkey;" that "the Turkish government will not interfere in the election of the next Ecumenical Patriarch as long as he is a Turkish citizen" and that he "cannot imagine a vacant throne."

On the issue of the Patriarchal Orphanage confiscation case decided in July 2008 by the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR), he stated that decisions of the ECHR are always implemented by the Government of Turkey. The Ecumenical Patriarchate and the Government have until April 2009 to reach a settlement agreement, or the ECHR will enter an award for the Ecumenical Patriarchate, which will be either money damages or return of the property.

Mr. Paraskevopoulos, Greece's Ambassador to France, expressed Greece's strong support for the Ecumenical Patriarchate. He stated that His All Holiness Ecumenical Patriarchate Bartholomew is the most popular individual in Greece and that he is a great leader when leaders are scarce. The delegation discussed with the Ambassador working with the Greek Government in 2009 to advance religious freedom initiatives,



Archon delegation with Prof. Dr. Antonios Trakatellis (3rd from left), Vice President of the European Parliament and Member of the Bureau of the Group of the European Peoples' Party (Christian Democrats) and European Democrats.

perhaps during Greece's presidency of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). Ambassador Paraskevopoulos enthusiastically received this possibility.

On Dec. 3, the delegation had a full day of meetings in Brussels:



Archon delegation with Consul General of the United States of America in Istanbul Sharon Anderholm Wiener.

Union with Ambassador Kristen Silverberg, United States Ambassador to the European Union, and Christopher R. Davis, Minister Counselor for Political Affairs.

Dr. Limberakis again made presentations focusing on the human rights and religious freedom issues facing the Ecumenical Patriarchate and the activities of the Archons. All people with whom the delegation met expressed awareness of the issues facing the Ecumenical Patriarchate, and more importantly, they expressed strong support. For example, Dr. Grabbe stated that in order to gain entrance into the EU, Turkey must comply with the Copenhagen Criteria and that compliance with the European Convention on Human Rights is not negotiable. Adviser Das Neves stated that if Turkey makes no progress on religious freedom, then it will make no progress in gaining entrance into EU. Finally, Ambassador Silverberg stated that she appreciated the Archons work and that she would work with the Archons on religious freedom issues. She asked the delegation to submit to her concrete proposals to further the religious freedom agenda in Turkey. The Archon Legal Committee intends to comply with this request during the first quarter of 2009.

After Brussels, the delegation traveled to Istanbul. On Dec. 4, they met Fikret Kasapoglu, Deputy Governor of Istanbul for Religious Affairs and Minorities. Dr. Limberakis expressed frustration over the lack of progress concerning the religious freedom issues facing the Ecumenical Patriarchate. In response, Mr. Kasapoglu said that there were "good developments on religious freedom." When asked what those developments were, the Deputy Governor had no concrete answers.

He did say, however, that the Government will implement the ECHR decision in the Orphanage case and that the Ecumenical Patriarchate will receive the property back indirectly through a foundation. It should be noted that any attempt to give the property back indirectly through a foundation will be opposed. The property should be returned directly to the Ecumenical Patriarchate. At the end of the meeting, the Deputy Governor invited direct input and suggestions from the Archons to move religious freedom issues forward. It is the intention of the Archon Legal Committee to take the Deputy Governor up on his offer and to make concrete suggestions to improve religious freedom for the Ecumenical Patriarchate.

The first session was held at the European Commission with Dr. Heather Grabbe, a member of the cabinet of Olli Rehn, the European Commissioner for Enlargement and Christos Makridis, Principal Administrator, Enlargement Directorate. The delegation then met with Jorge Cesar Das Neves, of the Bureau of European Policy Advisers, which maintains an ongoing dialogue with religious organizations, churches and communities of conviction.

The next session was at the Council of the European Union with Christos Katharios, head of the Division Responsible for Enlargement. This was followed by a meeting at the European Parliament with Parliamentarians Margaristas Schinas and Professor Antonios Trakatellis, M.D., PhD, the former Vice President of the European Parliament. The final meeting was at the United States Mission to the European



Archons host a reception in honor of His All Holiness at the conclusion of their religious freedom mission to Europe. (Photo by N. Manginas)



The delegation also met with U.S. Consul General, Sharon Wiener and Harold F. Bonacquist, Senior Political Officer at the U.S. Consulate in Istanbul. They stated that the religious freedom of the Ecumenical Patriarchate is a "major element of the U.S. Mission in Istanbul."

At the conclusion of the trip, the delegation had an audience with Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew and reported to him about the Paris, Brussels, and Istanbul meetings. As a result of that meeting, the Archon Legal Committee will be reviewing issues associated with the Orphanage case, including the return of the property directly to the Ecumenical Patriarchate.

During the first quarter of 2009, the Archon Legal Committee intends to follow-up on the meetings, including opening lines of communication directly with Ambassador Silverberg and Deputy Governor Kasapoglu. In addition, it intends to assist the Ecumenical Patriarchate obtain a proper and just resolution of the Orphanage case.

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