

16 Σεπτεμβρίου 2013

## **By His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew During His Encounter With His Excellency President Sauli Niinistö of Finland (September 13, 2013)**

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Your Excellency Mr. President,

This visit to your beautiful, progressive and prosperous country is a particular blessing and pleasure for the Ecumenical Patriarchate and personally, just as it is a genuine experience for us to ascertain the advancement and witness of the Autonomous Orthodox Church in Finland, which is serving the spiritual needs of the pious Orthodox faithful, the “small remnant” of our Lord’s grace here, with the cooperation both of the State and the majority Lutheran Church in the land, but also of all its citizens. For the Orthodox Church itself, contributes to the progress, welfare and benefit of the Finnish citizens, both as individuals and as institution.

Our encounter today with Your Excellency constitutes a source of great emotion, but especially of inspiration and appreciation for the truly admirable work accomplished here on a daily basis for the sake of the people and the land.

First of all, we observe that our most precious daughter Orthodox Church of Finland is the second Church recognized by the State and the people. Indeed, under the leadership of the most reverend Archbishop Leo of Karelia and All Finland, its presence and blessed ministry are also secured in a very nurturing, progressive and successful manner by the democratic legislation of the State, which is fully consonant the principles of law promoted by the European Union and, consequently, the most affluent legal civilization on the planet.

In addition to this, we must emphasize that this activity and presence has already been realized for ninety years, in peaceful coexistence and cooperation with other Christian Churches and Confessions, as well as other spiritual institutions and religious organizations in this land, which is yet another reason why the collaboration and witness of the Finnish Orthodox Church, in meeting the spiritual needs of Finland’s citizens. is recognized by the progressive and productive Finnish nation in its entirety.

Your Excellency, we are particularly moved by the anniversary celebrating the completion of ninety years since the proclamation of the autonomy of the Orthodox Church here – upon the request of the then Orthodox clergy and laity in Finland, as well as the governing officials of Finland at the time – by the Ecumenical Patriarchate, which acted in accordance with its rightful ecclesiastical authority. We are further delighted and moved that we are among you, in order to concelebrate this historical event with the Orthodox faithful of Finland, because, over the last ninety years, the Autonomous Orthodox Church here, without any intervention by third parties and adhering to the mind of its Mother Church of Constantinople, has proved itself as protector of its faithful, living as an ecclesiastical salvific entity, and provided a universal ministry and witness, always for the benefit and welfare of all

Finnish people. Therefore, we rejoice with Your Excellency and with all Fins in the local Orthodox Church, which is characterized and adorned by a spirit of authentic service, and catholicity, a mind and ethos of unity for all its faithful, and an attitude of reconciliation and love for all people.

Thus, our close exchange once again with the historically heroic and highly cultured Finnish nation, both Orthodox and non-Orthodox (because the latter are also celebrating this occasion), marks for us personally an opportunity and moment of profound inspiration. After all, the courage of the Fins is crystallized in the musical creativity of Finlandia by the Finnish composer Sibelius.

Furthermore, we are obliged to underline that the spiritual standing of the Finnish people is founded on the admirable and constantly revitalized educational system, which has been successfully applied for many years in your country and in numerous universities of the highest level of science and learning.

In addressing at this time your land of a thousand lakes, scenic and dense forests, and ecologically sustainable development, we particularly draw your attention to the pioneering and global efforts over the last 25 years of the Mother Church of Constantinople for the protection of and respect toward the natural environment. Accordingly, we note the fact that Finland comprises a model country for all, with regard to the order of nature, which was created “very good” by God, and the regard for human values by a nation that functions and develops spiritually, economically, and culturally. We know and believe that the undulating sensitivity of the noble Finnish people, as these are expressed iconically and allegorically by the liquid element of the “many waters” of the surrounding lakes, together with the hope that is symbolized by the green of the forests, and the plentiful light of the sun that does not set, and the snow that covers the countryside – all of these (the waters, hope and light) comprise the principal reason for the preservation of the spiritual and cultural identity of Finland. Finally, the bravery, demonstrated by Finland in difficult historical circumstances and its abundant productivity has rendered it not only a leader among nations in Europe with regard to its economy, but also highly esteemed among powerful and vulnerable alike.

Your Excellency,

Our classical predecessors, the ancient Greeks, used to say that “ruling means foreseeing” (Alkiviades) and that “as true art, politics must not be concerned with the individual benefit, but with the common. For the common benefit unites, while

the individual divides.” (Plato) Our Orthodox Church regards and recognizes the world’s rulers generally as “co-administrators” with Christ and advises: “You are an image of God and you are holding God’s image in your hands, which you must administer and refer to another life. . . So honor your common nature, and respect the archetype. Work with God and not with the ruler of this world.” (Gregory the Theologian, Homily XVII, PG35. 976-981)

We discern these features in your person and in your long political career, dear Mr. President, and we congratulate you wholeheartedly for the celebration of the anniversary of today’s thriving Autonomous Orthodox Church in your land. We convey to you the best wishes of the Ecumenical Patriarchate and bless your devout people paternally, praying for your health and prosperity, so that Finland may blossom and grow through its spiritual leaders on the stable principles of society: family, nation, and education. Amen.

*Text No. 7*