

IF THESE WALLS COULD SPEAK: HAGIA SOPHIA—A CULTURAL CROSSROADS

To fans of early “007” films, **Hagia Sophia** is a familiar site, due to a classic scene shot within its magnificent walls in the 1963 film (a great year!) “From Russia with Love.” It is a Hitchcock-like scene, with shadowy SPECTRE operatives lurking behind stone columns, and Bond wearing his sunglasses in an almost deserted (and dark!) interior. The Church was commissioned by **Emperor Justinian I** in 537 A.D., making it amongst the oldest still standing proud in 2020. The film also included a scene filmed in a former underground water reservoir (**Basilica Cistern**) that provided a filtration system for the Great Palace of Constantinople. The royals would enter the Hagia Sophia directly in a procession from the palace, using a special entrance. In the film, James Bond (Sean Connery) and his friend Kerim access a “secret” staircase leading to the ancient waterway. From underground, they spy on the Russian consulate. That structure was **also commissioned** by Justinian, and not Constantine, as Bond’s friend mistakenly indicates.

Hollywood references aside, Hagia Sophia is in danger—**serious danger**—of a political kind. In a **brazen** powerplay by President Erdoğan, it is being turned into a **mosque**. This is a **monumental loss** for all of humanity. Sadly, the church was the site of an infamous day in Church history, when from 1054 until 1453, when Constantinople was conquered by the Ottoman Empire, it served as an Eastern Orthodox cathedral and was the seat of the Patriarch of Constantinople. It had remained the world's largest cathedral for nearly a thousand years until it was surpassed in 1520 by the Cathedral in Seville (Spain). That church would be surpassed in just a century by St. Peter’s in Rome. Hagia Sophia represents the apex of **Byzantine culture** and architectural ingenuity. As historian Hans-Georg Beck notes, Hagia Sophia is significant because the “mystical unity of God’s Kingdom, Church, and Empire was expressed at one time” within its walls.

Its exterior walls form a 233 x 252 ft. rectangle, and its **central dome** boasting a **106-foot diameter** reaches 184 feet above ground level. Our Cathedral’s dimensions: 306 x 216 ft. with a 96 ft. diameter dome, the ceiling reaches 186 ft. Situated near the banks of the Bosphorus River— the gateway to the Mediterranean Sea— Hagia Sophia’s **81,000 sq. ft.** surface area contributes to its imposing place in the modern Istanbul skyline. That the church was constructed in **just six years** is utterly amazing. After the Ottoman Turks conquered Constantinople in 1453 A.D., the four minarets were added and the church continued its life as a mosque. A more secular government designated the structure as a **museum in 1934**, both to defray high maintenance costs and as a nod to its origin as a Christian church.

Several Christian masterpieces are visible in Hagia Sophia, including two mosaics of Christ, one flanked by saints, the other by figures from the Byzantine Imperial Court. Tragically, those mosaics will be covered (destroyed?), and I suspect without delay. The Deesis Mosaic (19.5 ft. by 13 feet) is one of the **world’s finest** examples of medieval artistry. Scholars speculate the mosaic was fashioned either right before or immediately after the Crusader period—in the late-12th or mid-13th century, when it served as a Latin-rite (Roman) Cathedral. Christ as **Pantocrator** sits enthroned in heaven (center), flanked by the Blessed Virgin Mary and John the Baptist, each looking towards Jesus with heads bowed. The tiny **tesserae** (1-2 mm each) used for the faces and hands, make possible the tremendous range of vibrant colors and hues that add realism to the image. That will likely all soon be **covered over**, wiped out as the President seeks to consolidate political power by appealing to his base. In no way is this move necessary.

According to Google maps, **The Blue Mosque**—itself a monumental structure— is just **300 meters away**, a 4-minute walk from Hagia Sophia. The Byzantine era of the Church is at once complicated and fascinating. The **Monophysite** heresy was prevalent in the east, the mistaken belief that Jesus Christ had **only one nature**, divine. That was rejected by Emperor Justinian I, who desired strong relations with Rome. In later years Justinian became more sympathetic to the view, trying to **thread the needle** with respect to disparate views. Tensions between East and West ebbed and flowed, culminating in an ill-advised excommunication of the Patriarch of Constantinople by a papal legate. Sadly, that happened right in Hagia Sophia, **in 1054 A.D.**, and the split was as devastating as it was unnecessary. Communion with Rome was severed, and the rift persists to this day, despite genuine ecumenical overtures to our Orthodox brothers and sisters.

But on the subject of Hagia Sophia, **Christians are united**. Turkey’s fading hopes of being accepted into the European Union are now crushed. UNESCO responded: “It is regrettable that the Turkish decision was made

without any form of dialogue or prior notice. UNESCO calls upon the Turkish authorities to initiate dialogue without delay...” After extending Sunday Angelus greetings to those who work in sea vessels on an international day dedicated to them, Pope Francis added: “And the sea carries me a little farther away in my thoughts: to Istanbul. I think of Hagia Sophia, and I am very saddened.” The U.S. Bishops called upon President Erdoğan to “reverse this unnecessary and painful decision and restore Hagia Sophia as a place of prayer and reflection for all peoples.” I doubt he’ll listen. The building’s own history of religious pluralism argues for its status as a museum, allowing equal access to all.

- The patience of Job. Congratulations to our **amazingly patient** RCIA-elect, who finally received the Easter sacraments of initiation at a special Mass held on the Feast of St. Mary Magdalene. We have been praying for our Catechumens since the first Sunday of Lent. While not the quite same as being baptized by the Archbishop at the Easter Vigil, the sacraments are equally grace-filled.
- Minneapolis has a park problem, a big park problem. The overnight **encampments** that have been allowed in both the City of Lakes and the Capitol city are increasingly dangerous, both to those who utilize them and citizens at large. Crime is on the rise in the Twin Cities— this is blatantly obvious.
- I read that juror names from a **high-profile** officer involved murder case last year are being released to the public. While transparency is certainly of value, there are other goods to consider, including the **privacy of citizens** who, having been randomly selected for jury duty, ended up serving in this capacity for the better part of a month. Why release their names now, more than 15 months later?
- Play Ball! No, it’s not a misprint. The **Minnesota Twins** home opener is this Tuesday, July 28 against the Saint Louis Cardinals. Will the players remove their caps and wave to the cameras during team intros? They surely won’t be waving to any fans. It is the latest event in a surreal spring and summer. I’m trying to decide if I’ll even watch— frankly, I’d rather read a good book.
- Since, face coverings are now mandatory in public spaces, we will accede to these requirements here and ask your cooperation. We are blessed with a large church, in which people feel safe and healthy.

Sincerely in Christ,

Fr. John L. Ubel,
Rector



Above:
Hagia Sophia
(Holy Wisdom)
Opened- 537 A.D.

Right:
Deesis Mosaic
Christ, Pantocrator
Early to mid-13th century

