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The National Herald Staff Writer

BOSTON - The Ecumenical Patriarchate – in an official letter recently sent to the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America and its local Metropolises - requested the official transfer of the ownership of at least one real estate property belonging to each metropolis to the Patriarchate. Archbishop Demetrios of America and the metropolitans have yet to notify the parishes of the Archdiocese of the request of the Ecumenical Patriarchate. The same request was made to all other eparchies (ecclesiastical provinces) outside of Turkey that belong to the ecclesiastical and spiritual jurisdiction of the Patriarchate, that they “register at least one real estate property irreversibly in the name of the Patriarchate.”

By taking this action, the Patriarchate is trying to secure its legal position vis-a-vis the Turkish government. The Turkish government does not recognize Ecumenical Patriarchate as a legal entity or its ecumenical nature and mission, and has treated the institution with disrespect since the creation of the Turkish Republic in 1923. The interference and abuses of Turkish officials have been reported in the international media for decades and occasionally elicit protests from U.S. and other government officials and agencies.

Patriarch Bartholomew in his letter (protocol number 861) stated that “The (Turkish) authorities refuse to recognize the legal status of our most sacred institution.” Ankara considers it to be a Turkish institution in the Phanar district of Constantinople under the administrative jurisdiction of the district’s prefect.

The issues that pertained to the property request were discussed at the Holy Synod in Constantinople and the Patriarch stated in his letter that, “We were led to the decision to urge, through this Patriarchal letter, the hierarchs of the Eparchies abroad to register in the Registry of Deeds in the country in which their Eparchy is located, at least one real estate property, community or parish in the legal name of the Ecumenical Patriarchate as follows: “Ecumenical Patriarch, instituted according to the International Law whose See is in Constantinople (Istanbul).”

The Patriarchal letter appeals to the good faith and respect of the hierarchs, reminding them that it was the Patriarchate that elevated them to the rank of metropolitans and archbishops. The Patriarch requests that the hierarchs send “all the signed documents of their transactions of the recording of the real estate property to the Patriarchate in order to be placed in their file.”

It was not clear if this request included the Metropolises of the so-called New Lands (sees whose administration was delegated to the Church of Greece in 1928 but are spiritually under the Ecumenical Patriarchate), or the Metropolises of the Dodecanese or the semi-autonomous Church of Crete, which fall into the ecclesiastical, canonical and spiritual jurisdiction of the Ecumenical Patriarchate.

The prefect of the Phanar often gets involved in issues that have to do with the life and operation of the Ecumenical Patriarchate and there is concern that any transferred properties and parishes would be exposed to interference from Turkish authorities.

Prefects have been aggressive to the point that they the Patriarch into their office to give explanations and clarifications. *The National Herald* is in a position to know of many instances when the Ecumenical Patriarch was called into the prefecture of the Phanar. The most revealing and egregious case of this kind took place in August, 1990 and involved the late Ecumenical Patriarch Dimitrios. After his return to Constantinople from a month-long, historic visit to the United States. The Patriarch was summoned to the prefecture and was put through an exhausting examination by the authorities. It has been said by his close associates that Patriarch Dimitrios became so upset that - a few weeks later - he suffered a stroke which led to his death.

There is some speculation as to whether the letter about the properties is related to other recent developments regarding the relations of hierarchs outside of Turkey with the Patriarchate. *The National Herald* exclusively revealed, on November 12, that “The government of Turkey seems to be willing to grant Turkish citizenship to all those hierarchs of the Ecumenical Patriarchate who serve outside of Turkey. Turkish citizenship will allow them to freely participate in all the administrative activities of the Patriarchate including the right to be candidates for the Ecumenical Throne when a vacancy arises. It was made clear by the Ecumenical Patriarch himself that ‘they will have the right to elect and to be elected.’ Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew broke the news to Archbishop Demetrios of America and to the hierarchs of the Archdiocese during his recent visit to the U.S. at the luncheon that has held at the Carlyle Hotel after the Patriarchal Liturgy at the Archdiocesan Cathedral of the Holy Trinity in New York on Sunday, November 1.”

This newspaper also reported that “Prime Minister Erdogan told Patriarch Bartholomew that his request will be satisfied and asked him to send the appropriate information with names of the hierarchs and other details to the government of Turkey.” To this day the Archdiocese has not officially notified the Greek Orthodox people and the community in general about which and how many metropolitans will become Turkish citizens, including Archbishop Demetrios himself.

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