

HOLY SEE OF CILICIA REPRESENTATIVE VANNA KITSINIAN DER OHANESSIAN PARTICIPATES IN MEETING OF WORLD COUNCIL OF CHURCHES IN ALBANIA

On October 3-8, 2010, Holy See of Cilicia representative, Vanna Kitsinian Der Ohanessian, Esq. participated in the 50th meeting of the Commission of Churches on International Affairs (“CCIA”), a commission under the umbrella of the World Council of Churches (“WCC”). The WCC is the broadest organization of the world-wide ecumenical movement and a fellowship of more than 350 churches in over 120 countries whose overall goal is to achieve Christian Unity. The CCIA deals primarily with advising the WCC on public policy and advocacy, counseling WCC leaders on programmatic directions, including issues that underlie injustice and social transformation, promoting a peaceful and reconciling role of religion in conflicts and prompting inter-religious dialogue.

This year’s CCIA meeting took place in Durres, Albania and was hosted by the Orthodox Autocephalous Church of Albania. The Church in Albania is unique considering it has re-emerged as a faith community for the past several decades after communist rule. The country was completely isolated from 1944 and consequently the constitutional declaration of Albania as an atheist state in 1967 denied the right to religious liberty and prohibited all religious activities until the fall of communism in 1991. The church seen today in Albania is a testament to the moving story of its rebirth. In no other country in the world, with the exception of China, has a church come back to prominence following virtual extinction by the brutal suppression of its religious activities. It is in this context that one can appreciate the relevance of the CCIA’s meeting in Albania. As an Armenian commissioner, Mrs. Der Ohanessian brought a personal dimension to the meeting. Like Albania, Armenia is another example of a country which despite religious suppression caused by communist rule was ultimately able to maintain its historic religious identity and again rise to religious prominence following its independence from the communist USSR. Hope in the Resurrection, even in the midst of persecution and destruction, became a driving source of inspiration for the Commission’s work in Albania.

The theme of the CCIA’s meeting was “Emerging Trends in International Relations.” Various aspects of this theme were addressed in the reports of the Moderator of the CCIA, former Prime Minister of Norway, Rev. Kjell Magne Bondevik, CCIA’s Director, Mathews George, and the General Secretary of the WCC, Rev. Dr. Olav Fykse Tveit. Similar topics of discussion were addressed by a former United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and the WCC liaison to the United Nations. In responding to the needs of its member churches, the CCIA decided to refocus its priorities, establishing four thematic working groups to guide their work through the next General Assembly scheduled for 2013. Those working groups include Peace and Security, Dignity and Rights of Migrants and Migrant Workers, Freedom of Religion, and Peace in the Community.

The agenda for the meeting was comprised of program highlights set forth by the WCC staff, including establishing a conceptual basis for ecumenical peace initiatives beyond the “Decade to Overcome Violence,” which was a program run from 2001 through 2010, the International Ecumenical Peace Convocation (IEPC) set to take place in Jamaica next year, nuclear disarmament, global advocacy, human rights, issues related to the Israel/Palestine conflict, poverty, wealth, and ecology, and inter-religious relations in emerging geo-political contexts. Additionally, the commissioners carried out their work in more specialized small

working groups which consisted of regional group meetings focused on identifying priorities and accompanying churches in responding to conflict situations.

Mrs. Der Ohanessian drafted and presented the report to the Commission on the regional group for North America and Canada. The four themes highlighted by the commissioners advancing the concerns for these regions included 1) inter-religious dialogue (which deals with issues of gender inequality and immigration) 2) the churches' struggle with strengthening an ethical and Christian approach to economics (in contrast to consumerism and materialism), 3) responsible use of power and national sovereignty, and 4) reconciliation with indigenous peoples. The need for inter-religious dialogue, for example, is all the more pressing as North America and Canada's commitment to freedom of religion is tested with complexities related to Christian/Muslim dialogue. Despite these realities, the commissioners concluded that the solution to violence must be to identify common and mutual values between respective religions because all religions have similar tenants that promote human rights, love, peace, etc.

Inter-religious dialogue and cooperation is one of the main areas of focus for the WCC in general and the CCIA in particular. The commissioners working on inter-religious dialogue and cooperation identified a few priorities emerging within the current geo-political context. Those priorities include overcoming politicization of religion and religious extremism, strengthening inter-religious trust and respect, and enhancing Christian self-understanding amid many religions. In her capacity as a member of the working group for inter-religious dialogue, Ms. Der Ohanessian authored and presented the report on the challenges of inter-religious dialogue to her fellow commissioners. Rev. Kjell Magne Bondevik stressed that freedom of religion must be recognized as a basic human right and that protection of holy sites needs to be considered together with and a part of promoting peace among religions. In drawing on her people's own experience dealing with the issue of freedom of religion, Mrs. Der Ohanessian stressed that preservation of holy sites should not only be limited to situations where holy sites are physically destroyed, but also to situations where holy sites are used as a tool for leaders and nations to serve their own political agendas. Mrs. Der Ohanessian raised the example of the case of the 10th century "Holy Cross" church located on the island of Akhtamar in ancient Armenia/modern day Turkey. Mrs. Der Ohanessian pointed out that Turkey had recently attempted to gain much needed publicity by promoting religious freedom in its country when it made international declarations that it would allow the Armenian Orthodox community access to this ancient church so that they may conduct a religious service there. Turkey also stated that it would erect a cross atop its dome in time for its re-opening. However, once it garnered points in the international arena as a state which fosters religious tolerance, Turkey recanted on its promises and instead turned the church into a museum without erecting a cross on its dome (until some time after the grand re-opening of the church) and prevented anyone from using it as a regular place of worship. The commissioners concluded that destruction of holy sites, be it physical or otherwise, is tantamount to historical genocide and hence deserves the utmost protection as such sites are part of the world's shared cultural heritage. Further, establishing a universal code on preservation of holy sites was also discussed.

Mrs. Der Ohanessian also served as rapporteur for the group responsible for addressing boycotts, divestments, and sanctions, which focuses on non-violent means to resolve conflicts in the world. The meeting was also an opportunity to reaffirm the WCC's policies on boycotting products produced in areas of illegal settlements and confirming the WCC's stance on "morally responsible investments," which calls for corporations to choose wisely where they invest their money by taking into consideration a state's position on issues of human rights.

Concluding the meeting, the Commission made several recommendations to the Program Committee, which included a program for ecumenical accompaniment in Iraq and Colombia, support for the preparation of a study document on freedom of religion, and encouraging ecumenical and inter-religious dialogue and cooperation in all its programs and initiatives. Until the next CCIA meeting which is expected to take place in China, the commissioners will work to put into effect the programs and initiatives set forth at the meeting in Albania.

The Holy See of Cilicia has been actively involved in the world-wide ecumenical movement for the past several decades and specifically in the WCC since 1962. Catholicos of the Holy See of Cilicia, His Holiness Aram I, served as moderator of the WCC from 1991 through 2005, providing a powerful voice to bring mutual understanding to people of different denominations of Christianity, as well as people of different religious faiths.

The CCIA is comprised of 38 people nominated by their respective churches and regional ecumenical organizations to advise the WCC on various topics. The commissioners are professionals, politicians, academics, and church leaders from around the world with experience relevant to the Commission's goals. Vanna Kitsinian Der Ohanessian is an attorney who meets with her fellow commissioners approximately every 18 months and strategizes on policy decisions with the commissioners between meetings. For further information on The Holy See of Cilicia's involvement in the ecumenical movement, please visit www.armenianorthodoxchurch.org.