Archpastoral Letter on the Anniversary of the Fall of Constantinople
May 29, 2025

By the mercy of God,

Stephen, Archbishop and Primate of the Italo-Greek Byzantine Orthodox Catholic Church, to the venerable clergy, devout monastics, and faithful children of the Holy Orthodox Catholic Church: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ (Philippians 1:2).

Beloved in Christ,

Today, we pause in solemn remembrance of a day forever etched in the memory of the Orthodox Catholic Church: the fall of the Great and Holy City of Constantinople, the Queen of Cities, on May 29th, in the year of Our Lord 1453.

This day, which brought to a close more than a thousand years of Christian imperial history, remains one of profound sorrow, but also of deep theological insight. It is a day written in tears and remembered in sighs, as the earthly center of Orthodox civilization was engulfed by conquest, and the Church entered a new and painful era.

For more than a millennium, Constantinople—New Rome—was not merely a city, It was the beacon of Orthodox Christianity, the earthly image of the Heavenly Jerusalem, and the seat of a Christian empire that, despite all its flaws and struggles, sought to embody the harmony of faith and governance under Christ our King.

In her mighty churches, chief among them Hagia Sophia, the Great Church of Holy Wisdom, countless prayers and hymns of praise and thanksgiving rose to the throne of God. The liturgy resounded, saints were raised, and the sacred traditions of the Church were cultivated with diligence and love.

The fall of the city did not merely bring down walls and thrones. It signaled the end of an era in which the Orthodox Christian vision of society was visibly enthroned at the heart of a civilization. It was, for many, an apocalypse: the veil was torn from worldly glory, and the faithful were cast into new and brutal realities: oppression, persecution, degradation, humiliation, and the fight for survival.

On the eve of the city's fall, in the Great Church of Hagia Sophia, it is said that the Divine Liturgy was offered for the last time, and as the walls crumbled and the armies of the Ottoman Sultan approached, the words of the Cherubic Hymn ascended:

"Let us lay aside all earthly care,
That we may receive the King of all,
Who comes invisibly upborne by the angelic hosts…"

Thus, even at the threshold of catastrophe, the Church bore witness to her unwavering hope in the Risen Lord.

On May 29, the city fell. Emperor Constantine XI Palaiologos laid down his crown and died with his soldiers, the last Roman Emperor. The churches were desecrated, the faithful were slain or enslaved, and the Holy Icons trampled underfoot. It seemed, to many, that the light of Orthodoxy had been extinguished.

The lament of the Prophet Jeremiah, mourning the fall of Jerusalem, finds new echo in our remembrance: "How lonely sits the city that was full of people! She who was great among the nations has become like a widow…" (Lamentations 1:1)

Yet, dearly beloved, the truer Church of Christ cannot fall, for she is founded

Indeed, the fall of Constantinople was not merely a military or political loss, it was a *katastrophe,* a shattering of the Orthodox Christian imagination, a descent into exile. Yet, even in this tragedy, God did not abandon His Church. For the Church, as the fathers teach, is not bound by walls of stone or by thrones of men, but by the confession of the faith of the apostles.

Even in the ashes, the Church did not perish. For she is not built of stone and wood or guarded by armies but founded upon the rock of Peter's confession and the blood of the martyrs. As our Lord said: "The gates of Hades shall not prevail against it" (Matthew 16:18).

Sir Steven Runciman called the fall of Constantinople "the greatest tragedy in the history of Christianity." Others have seen it as the severing of East from West, the loss of a shared Christian memory. Yet the Church endured.

The Russian theologian Fr. Georges Florovsky saw in the fall of Constantinople the moment the Orthodox East lost its voice in the councils of the world. Yet, the voice of Orthodoxy was not silenced; it was transfigured. In the dark centuries that followed, the Orthodox Catholic Church bore witness through martyrdom, monastic endurance, and quiet perseverance.

The new confessors of the Faith, under the crescent, joined the cloud of witnesses (Hebrews 12:1), showing that the true strength of the Church lies not in political dominion but in kenosis, the self-emptying love of Christ on the Cross. And it is that

very Cross that will shatter the crescent and make Constantinople once again a center of Orthodox Christian faith and worship.

The fall of Constantinople reminds us that the earthly glory of the Church may fade, but the Church herself is indestructible. As St. John Chrysostom wrote: "The Church is wounded, but she does not fall; she is shaken, but she is not destroyed."

Let us not look backward with bitterness, but forward with faith. The true restoration of the Church lies not in political revival, but in holiness, repentance, and love. In our time, when many speak of decline, and the Christian voice seems ever more ignored, we are called not to despair, but to the Cross, and through the Cross, to the Resurrection.

Let the Fall of Constantinople stir in us a spirit of renewed fidelity, vigilance, and spiritual courage. Let it remind us that, in the words of the Apostle Paul: "We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed…" (2 Corinthians 4:8–9)

The centuries following 1453 were marked by martyrdom, resilience, and quiet heroism. Our ancestors preserved the faith in crypts and caves, in whispered prayers and icon corners. The Church passed through fire and sword, yet the Holy Spirit did not depart from her.

As we remember the fall of the City, we do not call for hatred or worldly vengeance, but for remembrance and repentance. We offer the Trisagion and Panikhida for the souls of the departed:

"With the saints give rest, O Christ,
to the souls of Thy servants,
where there is neither pain nor sorrow nor sighing,
but life everlasting."

Let us also pray for the healing of ancient wounds, for the softening of hearts hardened by history, and for the peace of Christ to reign where war once dwelt. Let us not idolize the past but draw strength from it to live more faithfully in the present.

As we stand today in the glory of the Feast of the Ascension of Our Lord, God, and Savior Jesus Christ, we are reminded that the power of the Church is not of this world. It is not in gold domes or imperial courts, but in the fire of the Holy Spirit and the unbreakable bond of love in Christ.

The true restoration of Orthodoxy lies not in recovering empires, but in becoming saints. In a world ever more alien to the Gospel, we are called to live as "foreigners and

exiles" (1 Peter 2:11), building the Kingdom of God within hearts, families, and parishes.

The Fall of Constantinople was a crucifixion. But as the Church teaches, every crucifixion that is endured in Christ leads to resurrection. Let us not weep as those who have no hope (cf. 1 Thessalonians 4:13), but press forward with the strength of those who know that Christ is risen, trampling down death by death.

Let us therefore commemorate this day with prayer, for the response of those who perished defending the city; for those who suffered under the yoke of oppression and persecution; and for all those who, even in exile, kept the flame of Orthodoxy alive. Let us also pray for peace, for reconciliation, and for the healing of ancient wounds, knowing that only Christ can transform tragedy into resurrection.

May the memory of the righteous Emperor Constantine XI, of the bishops and monks, soldiers and citizens who perished in the defense of the City, be eternal. May we honor their sacrifice not only with memory, but by living lives worthy of the faith they died for.

And may the Light of Christ, which shone in Constantinople and shines now in every Holy Altar, never be extinguished in our hearts.

With paternal love and unshaken hope in the Crucified, Risen, and Ascended Lord,

+Archbishop Stephen
Primate of the Italo-Greek Byzantine Orthodox Catholic Church
May 29, 2025
Feast of the Ascension of Our Lord Jesus Christ and the Commemoration of the Fall of the City of Constantinople