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MEDIA RELEASE

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AHC (NSW) TO TURKEY:

Respect Rights of Christian Minorities

For the first time in 87 years, the Monastery of the Our Lady of Mount Mela (Panayia Soumela in Hellenic) echoed to the chants of the Orthodox Divine Liturgy on Sunday. It was more than a service for the Dormition of Our Lady – one of Orthodox Christianity’s high feast days.

This was a historic reminder that the indigenous Christian peoples of Anatolia keep the holy places their ancestors built close to their hearts. In many ways it marked the spiritual return of Orthodox Christianity to one of its ancestral homes.

Last June, the Turkish Directorate for Religious Affairs granted permission to the Oecumenical Patriarch, His All-Holiness Vartholomeos I, to celebrate the Divine Liturgy in the 4th-century Monastery on 15 August each year. Last weekend, tens of thousands of pilgrims followed in the footsteps of their ancestors and paid homage to the Virgin Mary at the UNESCO World Heritage-listed monastery.

In correspondence with the Directorate, the Australian Hellenic Council (NSW) congratulates the authorities in Ankara on its decision and expresses the sincere hope that this will mark a turning point for Christian-Muslim relations in Turkey.

“The AHC (NSW) hopes that a decision to re-open the Orthodox Theological School on Halke will soon be forthcoming, as well as similar decisions in favour of the Armenian and Assyrian communities being permitted their own seminaries.

“Removing all administrative and legal restrictions on the operations the tiny remaining indigenous Christian populations of Anatolia are the only way to ensure their survival”, stated the NSW Hellenic community’s peak public affairs body. “For example, the Syriac Orthodox Monastery of Mor Gabriel should be permitted to operate as a theological school for the few thousand Assyrians who still live in the strategic south-east of Anatolia. Such a measure would discourage further emigration”.

The sights and sounds of the Christian pilgrimage briefly recalled the days when Anatolia was a vibrant multicultural society, where Christian, Muslim, Jew, Yezidi all lived and worshipped alongside each other for centuries following the Turkish conquest of the region between the 1000s and the 1400s.

Built around a cave high up a cliff face in the Pontic Mountains that stretch parallel to the Black Sea Coast, the Monastery of Panayia Soumela was in continual operation from its founding in 386CE until the expulsion of the last

monks in 1923. For sixteen centuries, it was the paramount ecclesiastic centre of the Orthodox Hellenes of Pontos (the Black Sea littoral). After decades of neglect from the 1920s until the 1990s, the United Nations funded and supervised a restoration project that saved the historic sacred site from collapse.