

ABC NEWS

## Pope Francis 'deeply pained' by Turkey's decision to reopen Hagia Sophia museum as a mosque

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Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has declared the Hagia Sophia open for Muslim worship. (AP: Emrah Gurel)

Pope Francis says he is "deeply pained" over the decision by Turkey to change the status of Hagia Sophia — which was originally built in Istanbul as a Christian cathedral — from a museum to a mosque.

In a very brief, improvised remark, the Pope, speaking from his studio window overlooking St Peter's Square, noted the Catholic Church marked Sunday as International Day of the Sea.

"And the sea brings me a little far away with my thought: to Istanbul," the pontiff said.

"I am thinking of St Sophia and I am deeply pained."

Pope Francis said no more but was clearly referring to the move by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan to formally convert the monumental building back into a mosque.

The colossal Santa Sophia cathedral was turned into a mosque after the Ottomans conquered the city in 1453.

### Key points:

- The Pope made the comments during an address from the Vatican
- Hagia Sophia was originally a cathedral but was converted to a mosque in 1453
- The World Council of Churches also voiced its "grief and dismay" over the decision



Pope Francis added his voice to objections by other religious leaders from around the world. (Reuters: Remo Casilli)

The Turkish secular government in 1934 decided to make it a museum.

It is one of Turkey's most popular museums, attracting more than 3.7 million visitors in 2019, and has been seen by many as a place that brings faiths together.

The Pope, who heads the Roman Catholic church, is adding his voice to strong objections a day earlier by the head of the Geneva-based World Council of Churches.

That organisation described its "grief and dismay" in noting Hagia Sophia had been "a place of openness, encounter and inspiration for people from all nations".

The council's membership comprises Protestant, Orthodox and Anglican churches.

Mr Erdogan declared the monument open for Muslim worship after a high court annulled the 1934 government decision.

His declaration was also criticised by US and Orthodox Christian leaders, political leaders in Greece, Cyprus and Russia, and the United Nations cultural body UNESCO.

**AP/ABC**