If you are traveling to Istanbul (Constantinople), *The Ecumenical Patriarchate Today: Sacred Greek Orthodox Sites of Istanbul* must be in your suitcase. This is an indispensible book for anyone wanting to explore the roots of the Christian faith and the sacred sites associated with it. What is the Ecumenical Patriarchate and its relation to St. Constantine, the founder of Constantinople and first Christian emperor? What is the source of the holy oil for the Sacrament of Chrismation in the Orthodox Church? Where and when did the Church Fathers agree on the dual nature of Christ? This handsome book will answer such questions and inspire you to add more days to your itinerary to see holy and sacred sites that will open your heart to the Christian history and fortitude in the now predominately Muslim country of Turkey.

The book itself invites you to Istanbul with its exquisite color and black and white photos of glorious icons, stunning church interiors and exteriors, maps, patriarchs and today’s dwindling Christian minority attending services. This could have been an oversized “coffee table” book, but the publisher wisely made it compact enough to take with you while sightseeing.

The well-written, insightful text by The Very Reverend Dr. John Chryssavgis, Archdeacon of the Ecumenical Throne, also invites with explanations of the theology and spirituality of the Orthodox Church, the Ecumenical Patriarchate, and ten specific sites under the steadfast and courageous custodianship of His All Holiness Bartholomew, the present Ecumenical Patriarch: 1) The buildings of the Ecumenical Patriarchate in the Phanar, including the Patriarchal Church of St George; 2) Church and Shrine of the “Life-Giving Spring” (Zoodochos Peghe) at Balikli, 3) Church of the Virgin Mary
Vlachernitissa (Panaghia Vlacherna) in the Fatih district; 4) Holy Trinity Church in Taksim Square; 5) Shrine of the Virgin Vefa (“First-of-the-Month Church) in the Unkapani district; 6) Church of St. Euphemia the Great Martyr in ancient Chalcedon (today Kadikoy); 7) Holy Trinity Cathedral in ancient Chalcedon (Kadikoy); 8) Holy Trinity Monastery and the Orthodox Theological School on the Princes’ Island of Halki; 9) Monastery of St. George Koudouna on the Princes’ Island of Prinkipos; and 10) The Greek Orphanage on Prinkipos.

The book becomes your eloquent tour guide describing each site with rich detail, history and photos. For example, in a less-visited church such St. Euphemia the Great Martyr in Chalcedon we learn that the Fourth Ecumenical Council (the “largest and most influential... council in church history”) convened at a church dedicated to St. Euphemia near the present one. (The original church was destroyed.) “At a critical moment of the council’s deliberation, when the disputing parties were unable to reach a consensus [on the dual nature of Christ], two drafts of the confession were placed in the tomb of St. Euphemia and sealed. . . . After three days of prayer and fasting, the tomb was reopened and the orthodox confession [Christ was human and divine] lay in the right hand of the saint.” The confession that Christ was divine only was at her feet. St. Euphemia’s relics are not in the church in Chalcedon, but now rest at the Patriarchal Church of St. George at the Phanar along with the relics of the revered St. John Chrysostom and St. Gregory the Theologian. The text for the St. George site recounts the remarkable story of the recent return of St. John and St. Gregory’s relics in 2004 by the Vatican in Rome where the relics were taken during the Fourth Crusade eight hundred years earlier in 1204. The return was “a significant step in the process of reconciliation” between the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches begun after Vatican II in 1964.

Two sites are dedicated to the Theotokos and miracles coming from holy springs. The more widely known is the Church of the Life-Giving Spring (Zoodochos Peghe), which I have visited in honor of my granddaughter named Zoe. The lesser known site, the Shrine of the Virgin Vefa (“First-of-the-Month-Church”) is visited on the first day of the month by both Christians and Muslims who line up to get holy water to drink and sprinkle at homes and shops. Muslims recognize Mary as the mother of Jesus who they consider a prophet. “It is remarkable example of the many instances of Christian–Muslim symbiosis
throughout the Middle East and a powerful witness that civilizations do not inevitably clash.” Two sites of special interest on the islands of Halki and Prinkipos may be visited by boat from Istanbul. The renowned theological school near the Monastery of St. George on Halki was closed by the Turkish government in 1971, and the reopening of the school has become a rallying cry around the world for religious freedom. The Turkish government did return the Prinkopos Island Greek Orthodox Orphanage, said to be the world’s second largest wooden structure, to the patriarchate in 2010.

Sadly, eight of the most important former Orthodox sites to see, such as Hagia Sophia, St. Savior in Chora, and the Monastery of Pantokrator (“the second largest Byzantine structure in Istanbul after Hagia Sophia”) are only mentioned with short descriptions at the end of the book because they are no longer sacred Christian sites; three are now museums managed by the state, and five have been turned into mosques. These chilling two pages of descriptions serve as a reminder of the shrinking Christian heritage in Istanbul and the importance of preserving it.

If you are not planning to go to Istanbul, Sacred Sites must be in your library—after a poignant read. These few remaining Christian sites in their isolated beauty are reminders of what is happening to Christians all over the Middle East today: a dwindling Christian presence in the birthplaces of Christianity: the Holy Land, Syria, Egypt, and Turkey. In Turkey alone, all seven of the ecumenical councils that helped define the Christian faith were convened here from 325 to 787. The great Byzantine Empire (325 to its defeat by the Muslims in 1453) with its elevated theology, icons, and architecture was centered in Constantinople. The sites in this book are windows into the glory of that Christian era and a wake-up call to the importance of preserving the history, presence and practice of Christianity in the Middle East. Even if you hadn’t planned to go to Istanbul, I hope that after reading the book and His All Holiness Bartholomew’s letter of encouragement “to visit these historic and holy places,” you will be inspired to go on a pilgrimage to pay homage to some of the Orthodox faith’s most important saints and sites and to show spiritual support for the declining Greek Orthodox community in Istanbul that numbers an estimated three thousand people only.

It is a blessing to all of Christianity that the Ecumenical Patriarchate and its stalwart supporters, The Order of St. Andrew the Apostle Archons, have been prayerfully
fighting both financially and politically to preserve the patriarchate and Orthodox institutions in Turkey. This book, in fact, was made possible by the support of the archons, and we are grateful for this beautiful publication and all that it represents.

The book may be ordered in the United States through ACC Distribution www.accdistribution.com. After you receive your book and before going to Turkey, you may want to get exact addresses of the sites, as the book gives general locations. Specific addressees and phone numbers may be found only at www.patriarchate.org, in the sections entitled “Eparchies & Institutions: Archbishopric of Constantinople and Holy Metropolises in Turkey.”

Marilyn Rouvelas, author of A Guide to Greek Traditions and Customs in America, has served on the councils of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America and Churches for Middle East Peace, and visited Istanbul twice.