

Antioch comes to Britain – The Tenth Anniversary

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Until comparatively recently the Patriarchate of Antioch has not been present in the British Isles. It first came to these shores over twenty years ago, when as a result of the Lebanese civil war and other pressures in the Middle East, a growing number of immigrants settled here. There are around 15 million Arab Christians in the world, and a number of Orthodox from Palestine, Lebanon and Syria decided there should be a Church in London at which they could worship. St George's Cathedral was leased and services have been held there, largely in Arabic, for over twenty years. The present Priest, Father Samir Gholam, is Lebanese.

But in 1995 a Deanery was created in this country of English speaking communities. All this took two years or so to come to fruition. The process began in early 1993 when the Pilgrimage to Orthodoxy was set up by a small group of Anglicans, who had decided to leave the Church of England and seek to become Orthodox. I was invited to be the President of this group, and our initial contacts and support came from Metropolitan Philip of the Antiochian Archdiocese of North America. Some of us visited him in New Jersey towards the end of 1993. He commissioned a Priest, Father Michael Keiser, to come over to this country regularly in order to catechise us, and help us to set up a Deanery.

Our Patriarch, His Beatitude Ignatius IV, placed us under his protection, and linked us with Bishop Gabriel, who lived in Paris and was then the Vicar-General for the Antiochian Church in Western Europe. It has since become a Diocese and he is now our Archbishop. In a historic moment in September 1994, a group of us went to Paris to meet our Patriarch in our Bishop's apartment, and he held out his arms to us and welcomed us "home". Many of us wept with joy.

It took another six months before the Deanery was launched. In March 1995 my wife and I were received into the Orthodox Church. Three days later we went to Paris and I was ordained Deacon by Bishop Gabriel in the Greek Cathedral. Two weeks later we were to return, and on April 1st I was ordained Priest, and appointed the first Dean. I was ordained on April Fools' Day, and it has been a comfort ever since to know that the Orthodox do have a place for fools for Christ. We now have about

twelve parishes all over England, and new ones are being set up all the time. Last year we also set up parishes in Belfast, Northern Ireland, and Dublin, in the Republic of Ireland. This year we celebrate our tenth anniversary.

The policy of the Deanery has been straight-forward from the first – we are whole-heartedly committed to being a Church in which English people can feel at home, with our services in English, and our goals to help to bring our country back to God and its ancient Christian heritage. Equally we welcome all Orthodox as true partners with us in this task. We do not believe that culture or ethnicity should ever divide Christians. But if we are to have a Christian influence to our fellow countrymen, the language has to be English.

We have also from day one sought to work as closely as possible with all Orthodox. It was to me symbolic that at my ordination in Paris, a Greek Bishop was present. The Deanery has also played a full part in the setting up of the Institute for Orthodox Christian Studies in Cambridge University, which is part of the Cambridge Theological Federation. Cambridge now has the largest concentration of theological education in Europe, and we are part of this. Our Chairman is Bishop Kallistos of Diokleia. I was myself present at all the early meetings, and the Patriarchate and Deanery have been amongst the most generous donors.

This has also been true of the new course put out by the Institute : “The Way”. Its Director is Professor David Frost, an Antiochian, and I am his deputy. Last winter the course was launched in the Greek Cathedral in London, Singapore and Sydney, Australia. This autumn it is being held in the Russian Cathedral in London. There are several Antiochians on the committee and six of us are amongst the speakers. Many of us were present at the Pan-Orthodox conference at Swanwick last summer, when the goal of having one Orthodox jurisdiction in this country was made clear. We are committed to that goal.

For Antiochians a favourite text is Acts 11:26, “it was in Antioch that the disciples were first called Christians.” The Patriarchate has become very cosmopolitan in the last hundred years,- as it was in the very beginning. It was from Antioch that Paul and Barnabas began their missionary journeys, which were to spread eventually to Rome itself. As we thank God for the blessings of the first ten years of the Deanery , we are rediscovering in this country our missionary heritage.

Before concluding - one must mention another Antiochian who landed on our shores on 27th May 669. He was St Theodore of Tarsus. He had been chosen by the Pope to be the Archbishop of Canterbury. He was to serve (from the age of 67!) for twenty years, and he is rated one of the most influential Archbishops of Canterbury of all time. It was he who united the Church in this country, and the Diocesan and Parish structures, which have lasted to this day, were largely set up by him, as well as educational facilities which had barely existed before. The great historian Bede describes the years he was in this country as “the happiest time of the English people since they came to Britain”. But now Antioch is back in this country and Ireland, and “happiness” is an apt word to describe what we are experiencing, thanks be to God!

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