

Your Royal Highnesses, Your Serene Highness, Your Excellencies, dear friends,

As Head of the Syriac Orthodox Church in the United Kingdom, it is my great honour to welcome you all here today on this very special occasion for me and for my congregation.

In particular I would like to warmly welcome the Grand Magistral Delegate for Inter-Religious Relations of the Sacred Military Constantinian Order of St George, His Excellency Mr Anthony Bailey, and his wife Her Serene Highness Princess Marie-Therese from Austria for their presence today.

I would also like to welcome members of the Constantinian Order in Great Britain and Ireland and especially welcome Their Royal Highnesses Princess Helen of Romania and Princess Katarina of Yugoslavia – both coming from two important Orthodox dynasties and countries. May I also extend through you, Princess Helen, the greetings to your husband, Alexander, who is here today and whom I know has a keen interest in the affairs of our Church. May I also ask that you extend to your father, His Majesty King Michael the first, my best wishes and blessings on the occasion of his recent 90th birthday.

I am delighted also that the Ambassador of the Republic of Iraq, Sir David and Lady Durie who in recent times served as the Queen's Governor and Commander-in-Chief of Gibraltar, our Member of Parliament Stephen Pound, and other religious, state and civic representatives are with us today.

Dear friends,

As many of you are aware the Syriac Orthodox Church was originally founded in the year 37AD in Antioch by the Apostle Saint Peter. We consider Saint Peter to be the first Patriarch holding the See of Antioch. The Roman Catholic Church also celebrates on 22nd January of each year the occasion of Saint Peter establishing the See at Antioch.

Our Church was properly established in the United Kingdom during the 1980's. Our numbers have increased due to the religious, ethnic and economic persecutions in Iraq. Our people were obliged to emigrate to the West, some of whom came to settle in the UK.

Therefore, in order to preserve and protect our existence and heritage we were determined to establish a church and a centre representing a second homeland for us here in the UK. With a lot of hard work and effort we found this land and we built up on it this church and centre where we are all now seated.

You cannot imagine how very difficult it was for us to obtain the necessary planning approvals and follow the procedures required by the national and local authorities to enable us to build this church and also to secure the financial funds to obtain the materials and labour to complete this holy place.

Our church in the United Kingdom continues to struggle financially and our congregation whilst small, continues to grow in numbers with the growing uncertainty in the Middle East. On the other hand, we are rich in faith, culture and history. It is enough that we are blessed with our Syriac language, the language spoken by our Lord Jesus Christ. We have always believed and continue to do so in our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Our ancestors and forefathers died defending our faith and we too shall continue to maintain this faith.

Looking to the future and having completed the construction of this Church we are currently looking outside of London to buy and convert into a monastery so that our youth will use it during the summer months as a centre to learn our faith, the Syriac language and to bring them closer to their Church and each other. God who helped us build this Church will help us build the monastery.

His Holiness our Patriarch Mor Ignatius Zakka I was Patriarch of Antioch and all of the East signed an agreement and declaration with His late Holiness Pope John Paul II concerning both of our Churches and communities. At the time, the late Pope said about our Patriarch that he was the religious leader for Christian unity and our Patriarch said of His late Holiness the Pope that he was the Saint of the 20th Century. Both had a very close and amicable relationship.

Here in Britain too I have had a very close relationship with the Catholic community and I was delighted to receive on today's special occasion warm messages of congratulations from the Cardinal Cormac Murphy-O'Connor, Archbishop Vincent Nichols of Westminster and the Apostolic Nuncio to Great Britain – all of whom are members of the Constantinian Order.

I would also like to send to Rome in a special way my prayers and good wishes to the Constantinian Order's Grand Master, His Royal Highness Prince Carlo of Bourbon Two Sicilies, Duke of Castro, and to the Grand Prior, His Eminence Cardinal Renato Raffaele Martino, for bestowing on me this high honour. I much enjoyed having the pleasure and honour to meet them in October at Westminster Cathedral and I accept this distinction with great humility in my name, and in the name of my Patriarch and my community.

But in addition to the clergy I would like to express my profound appreciation for the friendship I have for many years with His Excellency Anthony Bailey who today on behalf of his community honours my community and me.

The close and brotherly relationship between us grew stronger especially during the very difficult and exhausting period that our community went through in order to find a place and build this small Church in size but which is part of my much greater and historically famous Church.

You are a well-respected inter-faith campaigner and together with your noble Order I wish to assure you of the continued commitment of my community to the vitally important work you do to foster greater cooperation and respect among faith communities in this country and abroad.

I also remember so well attending your beautiful wedding to Her Serene Highness Princess Marie-Therese in Salzburg in Austria and thank God for the blessing of your son Maximilian.

To conclude, may I say that our relationship with the Catholic Church and the Catholic community is very strong and there is much in common concerning our faith and customs. It is sufficient that Jesus unites us all. We pray for His Holiness the Pope Benedict the 16th and pray that he may enjoy long life, good health and success in his service for the Catholic Church and Christianity.

His Holiness our Patriarch Mor Ignatius Zakka First Iwas Patriarch of Antioch and all of the East has asked me to send you all his blessings and warm greetings on this special occasion.

Thank you and God bless you.