

Impressions of a Visit, Part One

By Metropolitan Saba (Isper)

The recently established Antiochian Archdiocese of the British Isles and Ireland includes one Arabic-speaking parish, with about 450 registered families, along with fifteen English-speaking parishes and four missions made up primarily of people of British origin.

The largest parish is in London, whose church—spacious and beautiful— was rented from the Anglican Church under a twenty-year renewable lease. The church was restored to the Anglican church two years ago, while the community is seeking a permanent home to serve as its own church.

Those serving the large Arabic-speaking parish explain that many families—both long-settled and newly arrived in the United Kingdom—are not officially registered with the parish. Reaching and caring for them requires continuous pastoral effort to nurture their relationship with the Church.

As for the other parishes, whose members are mainly of local British background, they joined the Antiochian Orthodox Church in the 1990s, which numbered nine parishes at the time. Fr. Michael Harper, who led the first group, has written the fascinating story of how they entered Orthodoxy.

The main reason they discovered the authenticity of the Orthodox Church was the radical transformations that took place in their former church—the Anglican Church—over the past forty years. Winds of change began to blow there in the 1970s, and soon the snowball began to roll and grow rapidly. Within a single decade, the Anglican Church began ordaining women to the priesthood and accepting homosexual clergy, alongside other developments too numerous to mention here.

Many of its faithful and clergy rejected these changes and did all they could to resist the growing influence of secular and worldly thought. When they realized they could not stop it, they left their church and searched for one with deep, authentic roots. Some discovered the Orthodox Church, which at that time was little known in Britain except among immigrant communities from traditionally Orthodox countries—communities that often functioned as ethnic enclaves.

Why did the Anglican Church become so deeply affected by secular culture? The reason lies mainly in two factors.

First, its decisions—even matters of faith—are made by vote, according to a democratic process. This means that truth is determined by the majority of voices rather than by the presence of the Holy Spirit in the Church or by a rooted tradition of right belief and knowledge of God.

The second reason is the loss of the early Christian roots and, consequently, the loss of the sacred tradition that guards right faith from deviation. A solid theological heritage helps preserve sound understanding and enables the Church to face contemporary challenges with discernment—knowing what in faith is unchanging and what can be expressed in new ways.

Anglicanism once prided itself on being “neither Eastern nor Western,” claiming to unite both. Yet its rapid decline before the waves of modernity—and now post-modernity—is very sad. Britain today is among the most secular countries in the West. European secularization, though varying from one country to another, has in most places separated religion entirely from public life. God has been pushed out of society and reduced to a private matter for individuals. Thus, man himself has become the only reference of values, morals, and laws.

In the 1990s, Pope John Paul II and Archbishop Christodoulos of Greece tried to insert the phrase “*The cultural roots of the European Union are Judeo-Christian*” into the European Union’s Constitution, but failed. When God is excluded from social order, humanity loses its only stable reference point for moral and human values. If man alone is the source of truth and law, then nothing is fixed and relativism reigns.

In our theological language, we say that humanity is in a fallen state, and Christ became man to raise us up and restore us to our original life in Paradise. When people exclude God from their lives, they exclude life itself. The disintegration of the family and the confusion about its meaning in the Western world is just one example of what happens when God is absent from society.

During a conversation with a professor of theology at an Anglican seminary—who happens to be the wife of the Anglican Bishop of London (their bishops may marry)—she told me that their faith is “protected” by the seven Ecumenical Councils. Yet, she admitted that the freedom of interpretation and belief within Anglicanism has created such a wide range of views that some even deny the core doctrines of Christianity. It is possible, for instance, to find an Anglican bishop who does not believe in the bodily Resurrection of Christ!

I was struck by her humility when she asked me, as we spoke about the challenges facing their youth: “What would you advise us to do to recover the sense of spirituality our young people are searching for, to help them face the challenges of modern life?”

A young Anglican bishop also told me that the controversy over women’s ordination is still unresolved, and that a schism of the African Anglican churches—with their millions of adherents—is a real possibility.

The current state of the Anglican Church raises pressing questions about the relationship between faith and culture:

- To what extent can culture influence or change faith and its interpretation?
- Where are the boundaries of legitimate theological reflection?
- What is God’s role in shaping the expression of faith within a deeply secular environment?
- How does the living presence of God in the Church protect it from deviation and give it strength to face the spiritual suffocation of modern secular society that is spreading across the world?
- Can religion exist independently of the surrounding culture?
- Does a closed culture produce a closed, defensive, and distorted religiosity?
- And does an open culture risk bending religion to its own desires, emptying it of its substance and spirituality?

Faith in the modern West has become like a branch of philosophy, with man as its only reference point. This shift began with the Great Schism and the growing exaltation of human reason at the expense of the Holy Spirit, who enlightens and sanctifies the mind to understand divine truth. Man became the final authority, and the spiritual and theological heritage that illuminated it grew weak. As a result, the living action of God has largely faded from view.

In the East, however, God remains the Alpha and Omega, ever-present in His Church through the Holy Spirit. Decisions of Church councils are still made in the spirit of the Apostolic phrase: “It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us” (Acts 15:28). Of course, practice does not always reach the level of the teaching. A council may err, since its members are human and not necessarily illumined. But faith itself remains preserved by the steadfast holy tradition and by the saints, who correct deviations. Only God, acting in His saints who are enlightened by the Holy Spirit, preserves the Church’s integrity.

When the imperial envoy said to St. Maximus the Confessor in the seventh century, “Hundreds of bishops and three patriarchs have signed the imperial decree. Orthodoxy has fallen—what are you waiting for?” the saint replied, “I am Orthodoxy.” And so it proved. The imperial doctrine of “one will” in Christ disappeared forever, while the Orthodox teaching of two wills—divine and human—prevailed in most Christian churches in the East and West. St. Maximus suffered the cutting of his right hand and tongue for this confession when he was eighty years old.

In the face of the spiritual emptiness produced by the dominance of today’s Western culture, the responsibility—and the judgment—of the Orthodox East are far greater than we may imagine.