



# CATHOLIC BISHOPS' CONFERENCE

## Catholic-Oriental Orthodox Vespers

*Homily: Archbishop Kevin McDonald*

6 DECEMBER 2012, ST JAMES' CATHOLIC CHURCH, SPANISH PLACE, LONDON

**We come together this evening united by our baptism and by the Word of God. St Paul proclaims to us the Good News that that the barriers have been brought down and we are one because we are all sons and daughters of God. We hear that word in faith, in hope and in love. We put our faith in its message and we hope for its complete fulfilment.**

Like any liturgy, this evening's Vespers are a moment on a journey but I think that it is especially true of this evening's liturgy and so I want to say something about the context, the background, and the bigger picture of which this Vespers is a part. It is a celebration of Catholic Vespers, and a very beautiful one, but its immediate background is the work of the Catholic-Oriental Orthodox Commission of which Bishop Angaelos and I are the co-chairmen. The Commission is a forum for Catholic and Oriental Orthodox bishops and priests which has been meeting for several years now in a spirit of friendship and of openness to fuller communion. We have reflected together on the story of the relationship between the Churches we represent.

There is, of course, an international body which is tasked with addressing the theological and doctrinal issues that face our Churches after sixteen hundred years of separation. That work goes forward but always in the knowledge that it is only God who can ultimately bestow the gift of ecclesial communion. When that day dawns we will meet not only to celebrate Vespers together but to concelebrate the Eucharist. That day may seem rather distant but it is nonetheless a goal and a blessing to which we must remain firmly open and receptive. So this Vespers is a moment in that journey and not an insignificant one.

That is, if you like, the theological context for this Service, but there is more to the bigger picture of which I spoke and there is a variety of narratives in which we are players and it is good to allude to them.

We come together at a very particular time. We are celebrating in the Catholic Church the 50th anniversary of the Second Vatican Council and we give thanks for the fact that during those fifty years the Pope, the bishop of Rome, and the leaders of several of the Oriental Orthodox Churches have publicly proclaimed their faith in Jesus Christ together in a new moment of common proclamation of the central truths of the Christian religion. This is without precedent in the long history of our separation and we should not underestimate the significance of this clear and compelling sign of growing communion which is precisely also an invitation to fuller communion.

Christianity does not live and pray in a vacuum, so what else about the wider context of this celebration? Recently we have shared the sorrow of the Coptic Church at the death of Pope Shenouda as well as their joy at the election of Pope Tawadros II. But those events took place against the background of change and uncertainty over much of the region which is the heartland of the Oriental Orthodox Churches. We need only think of the Christian communities in Egypt, in Syria and the Palestinian territories. Not long ago we were speaking of the Arab Spring, of the new developments sweeping North Africa and the Middle East with hopes of new beginnings, new freedoms, new fellowship between people of different religions. That hope is still in our hearts but there is anxiety about how things are developing and people have had to live with the spectre of violence, mutual hostility and mutual suspicion. A particular sadness that we very much share has been the renewed tension in the Holy Land, the place we look to together as the place of the birth, death and resurrection of Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

But let me open up the context a little wider. and adopt a slightly different perspective. The Churches with who we share our worship this evening trace their history back to the very earliest days of the Christian era.

The Coptic Church, for example, has been present for all that time in Africa where today the heartbeat of the Church is pulsating more loudly and more insistently than in the West. We could say the same of South America and of Asia. This situation is full of hope. I remember attending a Service of prayer for Egypt at a Church in London at which many of our brothers and sisters in the Oriental Orthodox churches were present. I was surprised and rather moved that our prayer was not only expressed in the strains of the ancient chants of the Coptic church but also in the charismatic songs of Christian Solidarity Worldwide. Those songs reverberate through the African continent and it spoke to me of the richness and complexity of the workings of the Holy Spirit among Christians today. We are being invited to expect the unexpected, to be open to new friendships, new sensibilities and new vision. The purposes of God are much greater than anything we are able to come up with ourselves. We need to be able to grasp the grace of the present moment and to read the signs of the times together.

The important thing is that we are together this evening and it is only by drawing closer together that the gifts bestowed in time of separation can be at the service of the whole Body. We must be faithful to the promptings of the Holy Spirit to go forward together without doubting and without cynicism.

On that journey I suggest we have one very clear shared reference point, namely the figure of Mary, the mother of Jesus. She has pointed the way for all of us. I believe that the story of the annunciation together with the image of Mary at the foot of the cross tell us all we need to know if we are to be faithful to Christ and faithful to the hope that has been planted in our hearts. I think it is a sign of the times that when Pope John Paul wrote his encyclical on Our Lady, *Redemptoris Mater*, he referred quite specifically to the fact that love for Mary is shared by Christians of the East as well as the West. It was at the Council of Ephesus in 431 that our forebears in the apostolic succession proclaimed together that she is theotokos, bearer of God, and we have a shared heritage of poetry and hymnody to Our Lady from Eastern writers like St Ephrem and St Gregory of Narek. Let me end by reading a passage from St Ephrem.

**+Kevin McDonald**

*Emeritus Archbishop of Southwark*