

Dear friends in Christ,

As bishops charged with responsibility to uphold the unity of God's church on earth we are painfully aware of the divisions that still impair the unity that Christ longs for and for which he shed his blood. This is not just a unity within the church – though we long for this to be revealed – but a unity for all God's people and between the families of the nations.

The church has a specific vocation to witness to this unity and it is always a cause for concern if it is threatened or damaged. Some have intimated that the introduction of the Apostolic Constitution Anglicanorum Coetibus (Personal Ordinariate in England and Wales) may present just such a challenge. We do not see it this way. We recognise that in both our communities there have been times when individuals and groups have felt it right to move from one community to another.

At the moment there are some priests and people in the Church of England who for reasons of conscience believe that their Christian journey can best continue within the Roman Catholic Community. We give thanks for their contribution to the life of the Church of England, and we pray for the new life they will have and the gifts they will bring to the Catholic Church. But the setting up of the Ordinariate does not in any way deter us from the ultimate goal of that visible unity within the church that is Christ's prayer and which is shared by all Christian people. Nor do we think it will be helpful if in the setting up of the Ordinariate there is confusion between the different identities of the worshipping communities. We therefore expect congregations within the Ordinariate to meet and worship in the context of their local Roman Catholic Church and form a distinct new part of that community's witness. The worship and witness of the Church of England in the parish they have left will also continue.

Ultimately we hope that these developments will draw us closer together. During his visit to the United Kingdom in September, His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI was keen to stress that the Ordinariate "...should be seen as a prophetic gesture that can contribute positively to the developing relations between Anglicans and Catholics. It helps us to set our sights on the ultimate goal of all ecumenical activity: the restoration of full ecclesial communion in the context of which the mutual exchange of gifts from our respective spiritual patrimonies serves as an enrichment to us all." The Archbishop of Canterbury has also indicated his support for close co-operation between the Church of England and the Roman Catholic Church as the Ordinariate comes into being.

We therefore also take this opportunity to re-commit ourselves to working together for the cause of the gospel in Essex and East London, and we urge priests and people within the Church of England who are considering joining the Ordinariate - and we think there may be five or six such groups - to make contact with us so that during this time of transition nothing could be seen to impede our friendship, unity and mission.

Rt Revd Stephen Cottrell, Bishop of Chelmsford

Rt Revd Thomas McMahon, Bishop of Brentwood