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Celibacy a deal-breaker for some Anglicans

Francis X. Rocca Religion News Service | Oct. 22, 2009

VATICAN CITY -- While Pope Benedict XVI hopes to encourage conversions by allowing disaffected Anglicans to continue to use traditional forms of worship, the Catholic tradition of celibate clergy may be an insurmountable obstacle for some potential converts.

The Vatican announced Tuesday (Oct. 20) that it will create new national dioceses tailored to Anglicans upset with their church's growing acceptance of homosexuality and female clergy. The dioceses will feature not only distinctively Anglican music and prayers, but also the trait that till now has most conspicuously distinguished Anglicanism from Roman Catholicism: married priests.

But the provision for married clergy, which the Catholic church has made on a limited basis since at least the 1980s, remains a qualified one. Only unmarried men will be eligible to serve as bishops in the new dioceses, the Vatican said, consistent with a "long historical tradition? in both the Catholic and Orthodox churches.

Other details of the new rules remain unclear pending their still-unscheduled publication, but Cardinal William Levada, head of the Vatican's doctrinal office, suggested on Tuesday that the new dioceses will not ordain married men unless they have already started their preparation in Anglican seminaries, or permit unmarried priests to take wives after ordination.

For some potential converts, those qualifications are a deal breaker.

"I find the lack of a permanent provision for a married priesthood to be a serious obstacle to unity,? said Anglican Bishop Jack Iker of Fort Worth, Texas, who has considered joining the Catholic church in the past.

Whether or not it manages to entice many Anglicans, however, the pope's limited easing of the celibacy requirement is sure to exacerbate controversy over the issue among Catholics, Levada acknowledged.

"I think for some people it seems to be a problem," the cardinal said Tuesday, "because as you know there have been many Catholic priests who have left the priesthood to get married, and the question arises, `well, if these former Anglicans can be married priests, what about us?'"

Levada emphasized the difference between married Anglican men who heard a "call to the service of their church" before converting, and "Catholic men who knowingly commit to a celibate priesthood and then decide for whatever reasons ... that they want to leave the priesthood in order to have a married life."

The Vatican's announcement has already encouraged some commentators who argue for married clergy as a solution to many of the Catholic church's most grievous problems, including clerical sexual abuse of children and a severe shortage of priests in Europe, the United States and Latin America.

Yet one informed observer believes that any changes in that direction will come only gradually, and not as a

consequence of an Anglican influx.

"If there's to be a broader change on celibacy, it won't come from ideological pressure groups in the West," said John L. Allen, Jr., senior correspondent for the National Catholic Reporter and author of the forthcoming book, "The Future Church."

More likely, said Allen, is that bishops in underdeveloped countries with underserved flocks will ask the Vatican for permission to resume an ancient Catholic tradition by ordaining married laymen of proven character.

Allen noted, however, that experience with a married priesthood does not necessarily favor the practice. Bishops in the Eastern Rite Catholic churches, whose parish priests are typically married, "are among the biggest fans of celibacy," he said.

"If they've got a guy who's a disaster and they want to yank him out of his assignment, they also have to worry about his wife's job and their kids' schools," Allen said. "Bishops with a celibate (priesthood) don't face those headaches."

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