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Vatican welcomes Anglicans: React story No. 2

Dennis Coday | Oct. 22, 2009

Archbishop Rowan Williams of Canterbury, head of the Anglican Communion, presents a gift to Pope Benedict XVI during their meeting at the Vatican Nov. 23, 2006. The Vatican announced Oct. 20 that the pope has established a special structure for Anglican s who want to be united with the Roman Catholic Church. (CNS file photo/L'Osservatore Romano)

Subdued reflection seemed to be the most common reaction from Catholics and Anglicans to the Vatican's plans to more easily welcome Anglicans into the Roman Catholic fold.

Seeming to welcome the announcement was Msgr. William H. Stetson, an Opus Dei priest from the Washington, D.C., area, who since the 1980s has personally supervised the conversion of approximately 100 Episcopal priests.

He told Religion News Service, "There's no structure like it in the modern history of the Catholic church. This is a historic moment."

Meanwhile Andrew Brown, a columnist for the U.K.-based Guardian newspaper called this "the end of the Anglican Communion."

"One of the things that this development means is that the Roman Catholic church is no longer even pretending to take seriously the existence of the Anglican Communion as a coherent body," Brown wrote. "Instead there are various sections of 'the Anglican tradition' (not 'church' or 'communion'), some of which are still properly Christian and so able to become Roman Catholic."

Brown writes that Pope Benedict XVI's message to Rowan Williams, the archbishop of Canterbury and the head of the worldwide Anglican Communion, is "So long and thanks for the priests."

But just how many Anglicans will take advantage of this offer remains to be seen. Making the announcement at the Oct. 20 news conference, Cardinal William Levada said that in establishing the new jurisdictions, Benedict was responding to "many requests" submitted by individual Anglicans and by Anglican groups ? including "20 to 30 bishops" ? asking to enter into full communion with the Catholic church.

The main group seems to be the Traditional Anglican Communion, a network claiming to represent some

400,000 Anglicans worldwide.

The traditional Anglican group in England, Forward in Faith, seemed enthusiastic: "It has been the frequently expressed hope and fervent desire of Anglican Catholics to be enabled by some means to enter into full communion with the see of Peter whilst retaining in its integrity every aspect of their Anglican inheritance which is not at variance with the teaching of the Catholic church.

"We rejoice that the Holy Father intends now to set up structures within the church which respond to this heartfelt longing. Forward in Faith has always been committed to seeking unity in truth and so warmly welcomes these initiatives as a decisive moment in the history of the Catholic movement in the Church of England."

But traditionalists in the United States were more circumspect.

Robert Duncan, who as bishop of Pittsburgh led his diocese out of the Episcopal church and is now archbishop and primate of the Anglican Church in North America, issued a statement on the Web site Standfirminfaith.com.

"We rejoice that the Holy See has opened this doorway," he wrote, but "we believe that this provision will not be utilized by the great majority of the Anglican Church in North America's bishops, priests, dioceses and congregations."

They still have problems with the Roman church, Duncan points out, namely: "historic differences over church governance, dogmas regarding the Blessed Virgin Mary and the nature of Holy Orders."

Also taking a wait and see attitude was the Anglo-Catholic bishop of Fort Worth, Texas, Jack Leo Iker. Writing on Virtueonline.org, which bills itself as "the voice for global orthodox Anglicanism," Ikers said he read "with great interest" the news accounts of the Oct. 20 Vatican announcement.

"Many Anglo-Catholics will welcome this development as a very generous and welcoming offer. ... Other Anglicans who desire full communion with the see of Peter would prefer some sort of recognition of the validity of Anglican orders and the provision for intercommunion between Roman Catholics and Anglicans. ?

"But of course, not all Anglo-Catholics can accept certain teachings of the Roman Catholic church, nor do they believe that they must first convert to Rome in order to be truly catholic Christians."

Iker's statement mentions the tensions between the Anglicans seceding from U.S. Episcopalians, particularly legal battles over church property, that are certain to become more frequent if groups of Anglicans make the move together.

"This option to choose different paths comes at a difficult time for us as together we face the challenges of the litigation brought against us by the Protestant Episcopal church in the United States of America. Rather than making hasty decisions or quick resolutions, we will continue to work and pray together for the unity of Christ's holy catholic church throughout the world," Iker wrote.

According to Stuart Laidlaw, faith and ethics reporter for The Star of Toronto, conservative Anglicans in Canada showed no interest joining "the pope's new church."

"This is not just a matter of wearing different clothes or having a few more rules," Bishop Don Harvey of the Anglican Network in Canada told Laidlaw.

Harvey said while conservative Anglicans share many theological beliefs with Catholics ? both oppose same-sex marriage and gay clergy, for instance ? there are still many differences between the two.

Anglicans, he said, would chafe at any notion of the infallibility of the pope, and do not accept Catholic teachings about Mary's immaculate conception, her assumption body and soul into heaven, or the transfiguration of Christ.

The announcement left Roman Catholics, too, thinking about what this means for their church.

British Catholics are worried, according to Ruth Gledhill, religion correspondent for The Times of London. She wrote: "In the [Vatican] curia itself and in particular in the College of Cardinals, there were ? and there remain ? deep divisions about the appropriate response to Anglicans and former Anglicans seeking some form of corporate unity.

"The liberals, among them Cardinal Cormac Murphy-O'Connor, who at the time was archbishop of Westminster, were reluctant to open the door wide to the traditionalists, partly because of their 'more Roman than the Romans' style of churchmanship, but also for fear of upsetting Anglicans and the Church of England in particular."

She notes that worldwide the number of conservative Anglicans who would take up the Vatican's offer would be miniscule compared to the number of Catholics. But in Great Britain, the proportions are reversed, with 25 million baptized Anglicans but 4 million Catholics.

Gledhill writes, "Not only would a big influx of traditionalist ex-Anglicans undermine ecumenical harmony, it could challenge the identity of the Catholic community itself. Set against this, however, is the more confident American-style Catholicism that this initiative represents."

On America magazine's blog, "In All Things," Michael Sean Winters wrote, "I am sure that many of those who are now motivated to seek communion with Rome do so now primarily because the fractured nature of their own communion has become so manifest.

"But, I worry, too, that some of these newcomers will also be nostalgists, anti-feminists and anti-gay bigots. The ordaining of an openly gay bishop in New Hampshire is not something I would have advised, but after all these centuries of schism, I am not sure why that should have been the straw that broke the camel's back."

Writing online for The Washington Post, Jesuit Fr. Thomas Reese said, "Catholic liberals, especially Catholic feminists, fear that an influx of conservative Anglicans will further discourage reform in the Catholic church."

In this regard, though, he suggested, "Someone should warn these Anglicans that two out of three U.S. Catholics support the ordination of women. They will not find in Catholicism a controversy-free zone."

Reese continued: "But if the new procedures are used by large numbers of Anglicans, the result will be a more liberal Anglican church and a more conservative Catholic church, especially if liberal Catholics decide to go in the other direction."

Picking up on this theme was NCR senior correspondent John Allen, writing for The New York Times: "There's also nothing preventing the Anglican Communion from creating similar structures to welcome aggrieved Catholics who support all the measures these disaffected Anglicans oppose. Certainly, after today, the Vatican would have no basis to condemn such a move as an ecumenical low blow."

According to Reese, this exchange of believers may point to a deeper issue. He wrote: "These procedures may be an admission that leaders in all churches have lost control of the ecumenical movement and people are simply voting with their feet."

M. Cathleen Kaveny, a professor of law and theology at the University of Notre Dame sees hopeful signs in the Vatican's move. For The New York Times, she wrote: "It is worth noting that the flexible, unity-in-difference that Rome has in mind is in fact an arrangement that is made possible only by the 'modernizing' Second Vatican Council, and the new Code of Canon Law produced in its wake."

The same could be done with other groups, she said, that have "distinctive needs to preserve their identities while remaining in communion with the universal church."

She also offers a caution: "It can seem that the attraction of some Anglicans to the Roman Catholic church is largely negative. Rome doesn't ordain women and Rome doesn't ordain practicing homosexuals.

"As Pope Benedict XVI himself recognized, however, the church is in danger of becoming known for what it opposes, rather than the 'good news' it offers to humanity.

"No negative norm, however important (or controversial) can be the whole story. What do we stand for? What does the message of Jesus Christ offer? Unless we are all careful, this development will further entrench the image of Catholicism as the Church of 'No.' "

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The end of clerical celibacy?

The Vatican's embrace of Anglican priests and their wives may just signal the end of Roman Catholicism's clerical celibacy, according to many commentators.

Jesuit Fr. Thomas Reese wrote, "Despite all the Vatican attempts to downplay the acceptance of married Anglican priests, many people will ask, why not married priests for other Catholics?"

Ruth Gledhill, religion correspondent for The Times of London, noted the same in Great Britain: "While the shortage of Catholic priests would be alleviated by the influx of so many Anglicans, the acceptance of married clergy with families would inevitably shift the focus to a questioning of the insistence that cradle-Catholic priests be celibate."

Andrew Brown of the U.K.-based Guardian newspaper was emphatic: "This establishes a tradition of married Roman Catholic clergy in the West."

He wrote: "It is ironic that Anglican efforts to deal honestly with the problem of sexuality should have provided the Catholics with the excuse they needed to strike this decisive blow. God always did move in mysterious ways."

?Dennis Coday

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