NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

# What the Vatican's welcome of Anglicans means

John L. Allen Jr. | Oct. 23, 2009

Episcopal Bishop Katharine Jefferts Schori and Episcopal Auxiliary Bishop Nerva Cot, the first woman bishop named by the Episcopal Church in a developing nation, during Cot's ordination in Havana, Cuba, in 2007. Ordaining women is one of the issues causing a split in the Anglican Communion.

This week's big Vatican story is obviously the decision to create special structures, called "personal ordinariates", to welcome Anglicans seeking to join the Catholic church. In some reports, the move was touted as a bold gambit to end the schism that began with the English Reformation in the 16th century -- a dubious bit of spin, given that the actual number of Anglicans likely to sign up for one of these ordinariates will almost certainly be quite small.

When the dust settles, the centuries-long breach between Rome and Canterbury will remain intact.

More in the realm of reality, the move was styled as Rome rolling out a welcome mat for "disaffected Anglicans," meaning conservatives unhappy with the ordination of women as priests and bishops, the blessing of same-sex unions, and the ordination of openly gay clergy. That's indeed likely to be the constituency most disposed to take up Rome's offer, but in principle these new structures will be open to all Anglicans, whatever their position on the culture wars.

(In the United States, the primary branch of the global Anglican Communion is the Episcopal Church, "Episcopalians" for short. Worldwide there are about 77 million Anglicans, including 2.2 million American Episcopalians.)

The announcement came in a Vatican briefing on Tuesday with two Americans: Cardinal William Levada, Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith; and Archbishop Augustine Di Noia, Secretary of the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, formerly the number three official at the CDF. Their appearance was accompanied by a joint statement from the Anglican Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, along with the Catholic Archbishop of Westminster, Vincent Nichols.

The gloss from those sources boils down to three basic points:

- This move is a natural response to requests from some Anglicans to join the Catholic church, rather than a case of the Vatican going fishing for new converts. (That's why many Catholic leaders have winced at headlines using the term "lure" to describe what's going on; their line is, 'We didn't go looking for them, they came to us.')
- By allowing these folks to bring a fair bit of their spiritual heritage into the Catholic church, the decision is a gesture of respect for the Anglican tradition. (The statement from Williams and Nichols actually said this move would not have been possible without forty years of Anglican/Catholic dialogue.)
- The decision will not disrupt official ecumenical relations between the Anglican Communion and the Catholic Church.

A bit of background: A "personal ordinariate" is like a non-geographical diocese, with its own ordinary (usually a bishop), priests and laity. On an individual basis, Anglicans have always been able to join the Catholic church, but what's new is that whole groups of Anglicans can now come into communion while preserving much of their spiritual heritage ? how they pray and worship, and even their tradition of a married priesthood. (More on that in a moment.)

While the analogy isn't exact, one can think of these structures by comparison to the twenty-two Eastern Rite churches in communion with Rome, such as the Maronite Church in Lebanon or the Ukranian Greek Catholic Church. Those churches preserve a great deal of Orthodox spirituality, and they too have married priests.

Before going too far down this road, however, a major caution is in order: While the Vatican has announced that a papal document creating the basis for these ordinariates is coming (called an "apostolic constitution," the device popes use to amend canon law), it hasn't yet been published. Many of the details thus remain up in the air. Right now, things are a bit reminiscent of when Obama first started promoting health care reform, without actually offering a bill -- it could mean almost anything, depending on who's talking.

* * *

On the record, most Anglican leaders have reacted with calm to Tuesday's announcement, seeking to play down impressions of yet another ecumenical crisis. Privately, however, sources involved in Anglican/Catholic relations say that at least some Anglicans have voiced disappointment and anxiety, wondering if this move will further call into question the whole point of official dialogue.

That reaction has an undeniable logic. During the early 1990s, the Catholic church, as part of its dialogue with the Eastern Orthodox churches, affirmed that it "rejects uniatism ... [which] can no longer be accepted, either as a method to be followed nor as a model of the unity our churches are seeking." The term "uniatism" refers to the creation of several Eastern rite churches in the 16th century, partly as a result of Jesuit missionary activity, which have been viewed ever since by many Orthodox as embodying a "divide and conquer" strategy. (The statement added that rejection of uniatism as a method should not call into question the present right of those churches to exist and to care for their faithful.)

It will probably be tough for some Anglicans to look at these new "personal ordinariates" and not feel that they're tantamount to a revival of the uniatism which Rome has supposedly disavowed.

Before concluding that this is inevitably a setback for ecumenism, however, there are two points worth bringing into focus.

First, the Vatican has not gone looking for these Anglicans. In this case, Rome didn't dispatch Jesuit missionaries into the hinterlands of Great Britain or the United States looking to set up splinter churches. Instead, these Anglicans have been knocking on the door of the Catholic church for some time.

Given that Catholicism is in the business of making converts, turning these people away was never a serious option. In that context, allowing them to preserve a great deal of their heritage could actually be seen as a rather remarkable gesture of respect for Anglicanism. As I put it in a brief commentary for *The New York Times*, if some percentage of the world's Anglicans were going to swim the Tiber anyway, the Vatican has at least tried to bring them ashore in the most ecumenically sensitive fashion possible.

Second, traffic between Catholics and Anglicans is a two-way street. It's not just that some Anglicans are becoming Catholics, but there are also a number of Catholics who in the past few decades have chosen to become Anglicans (in the States, Episcopalians). In equal-and-opposite fashion, these tend to be more liberal Catholics who support all the measures that traditionalist Anglicans oppose -- gay marriage, women priests and bishops, and so on.

For whatever reason, few people seem to accuse Anglicans of being anti-ecumenical for receiving these disaffected Catholics, even though everybody knows that it goes on. Since there are more Catholics to begin with, there are probably more Catholics entering into communion with Canterbury than the other way around.

Of course, one key difference is that Catholicism is so much bigger than the Anglican Communion -- 1.2 billion faithful worldwide to roughly 77 million -- that no Catholic is seriously worried about being swallowed up by Canterbury. Some Anglicans, meanwhile, have precisely that fear about Rome. That, however, is about politics and demographics, not theology.

Here's how Cardinal Walter Kasper, the Vatican's top official for ecumenism, put things during a news conference in Rome last week -- obviously before the decision was announced, but with some inkling it was coming:

"We are not fishing in the Anglican lake," Kasper said. "Proselytism is not a policy of the Catholic church."

"But if, in conscience, some [Anglicans] want to become Catholics, we cannot shut the door," Kasper said. "We must respect freedom of conscience and of religion. There are also some Catholics who want to become Anglicans, and we have to respect that too."

* * *

One curious twist is why the Vatican decided to make its announcement before the apostolic constitution was ready for release, seemingly a cart-before-the-horse maneuver.

Sources tell *NCR* that the constitution, the result of almost three years of work, still needs some canonical fine-tuning. Nevertheless, the Vatican could have waited to make its splash until the document was complete, so the question still looms: Why do it this way?

I don't know the answer, but I can at least point to two (possibly unintended) consequences of the delay.

First, it gives Vatican officials a chance to gauge public reaction and to get a sense of the questions people will be asking, flagging potential misinterpretations and indentifying gaps in the new rules. That way, it's possible that some of the holes can be plugged before the document appears.

Second, the way things have worked out actually amounts to something of a PR masterstroke.

In the past, the Vatican has sometimes dumped documents or decisions onto an unsuspecting world, without much explanation. When Vatican officials finally did try to put things in perspective, their reassurances were a day late and a dollar short. (The lifting the excommunication of a Holocaust-denying bishop, and authorizing

wider celebration of the old Latin liturgy, including a Good Friday prayer for the conversion of Jews, come to mind.)

In those cases, the external parties likely to be affected were caught off guard, so their initial comments were often resentful and negative. This time, the Vatican got the Archbishop of Canterbury on board right away. (I actually can't recall another case in which a major Vatican announcement was bundled with an approving statement from a non-Catholic religious leader.)

In other words, the Vatican reversed its normal sequence: It's offered the explanation first, with the details to come later.

Whether Rome's soothing spin will hold up over time -- especially once the apostolic constitution appears -- is anyone's guess. For once, however, the Vatican doesn't find itself trying to defuse a bomb after it's already gone off.

* * *

Before singing the praises of the Vatican's PR savvy too lustily, however, it's worth noting that Tuesday's briefing was still marked by a sort of "church-speak" that's tough for the outside world to grasp.

I did a radio talk show Wednesday morning with Bishop George Langberg of the Anglican Church of America. The host began with a clip of Levada from Tuesday's briefing, which went something like this: "The Holy Father has approved an apostolic constitution, which creates a canonical provision facilitating a kind of corporate reunion of Anglican groups."

The host's toss to me after the clip was the following: "John, can you tell us what the hell that means?"

The vignette makes the point that even when church leaders are trying to be sensitive to communications dynamics, their language still sometimes requires a bit of decoding.

* * *

Naturally, observers are anxious to know precisely how these new "personal ordinariates" are going to work. Alas, until the apostolic constitution is published, most of those details are impossible to fill in. For now, all we can do is list six questions (in truth, more like families of questions) that are obviously looming.

**1. What's the deal on married priests?**

The Vatican announcement on Tuesday clearly ruled in current Anglican ministers who are married and who wish to become Catholic priests, and clearly ruled out married bishops. It's still vague, however, what the situation will be going forward. During the briefing, Levada appeared to suggest that married Anglican seminarians could also be ordained Catholic priests -- but will that be a transitional allowance, or a permanent exception to the discipline of celibacy? In other words, will be the personal ordinariates be like the Eastern churches, able to ordain married priests in perpetuity?

Jesuit Fr. Tom Reese has raised two related questions along these lines:

- Could a married Catholic man join the Anglicans, enter an Anglican seminary and then return to the Catholic Church?
- Could married Catholic men from the traditional dioceses join the Anglican ordinariate and become seminarians and priests?

Obviously, the question becomes what impact such allowances might have on the broader debate over priestly celibacy. Whatever happens, it seems likely that the Vatican will be concerned that the opening to Anglicans not evolve into a massive loophole that ends up eroding the discipline of celibacy on a wider basis.

**2. What happens to the Pastoral Provision?**

Back in 1980, the Vatican approved something called the "Pastoral Provision" for ministers and laity of the Episcopal Church who wanted to become Catholics. It authorized the ordination of married Episcopal ministers as Catholic priests, as well as the creation of "personal parishes" for former Episcopalians that retain some elements of Anglican liturgical practice. Over thirty years, around one hundred former Episcopal ministers have become Catholic priests under the Pastoral Provision, and seven personal parishes or worship communities have been created. (Four are in Texas, one in Massachusetts, one in Pennsylvania, and one in Missouri).

So, what's to become of those folks?

For example, will the personal parishes be folded into a new personal ordinariate? If so, how will property questions be resolved? Currently, those parishes belong to the dioceses in which they're located. Will the diocese have to cede ownership, or at least rights of use, to a new ordinariate? What happens if the local congregation doesn't want to be absorbed -- if they're perfectly happy, for example, being part of the Archdiocese of San Antonio or Boston?

Likewise, will the priests ordained under the Pastoral Provision be incardinated into a new ordinariate? If so, will local bishops in those dioceses necessarily be willing to lose a priest in an era of shortages? Or, what happens if the priest himself doesn't want to make the move? Such a priest might reasonably think, for example, that his salary, pension, and health care are more secure in his current diocese than they might be in a new ordinariate, which will likely be fairly cash-starved at the beginning.

Understandably, nobody's more anxious to get their hands on the forthcoming apostolic constitution than the people in the Pastoral Provision, so they can begin to get some sense of their fate.

**3. What's the relationship between an ordinariate and a local church?**

The Vatican announcement said that ordinariates will be created "in consultation with local conferences of bishops," and that "their structure will be similar in some ways to that of the military ordinariates which have been established in most countries." That seems to suggest that the ordinariates will be set up along national or regional lines -- perhaps one for the United States, where there are lots of Episcopalians, but maybe just one for all of Latin America, where the Anglican Communion doesn't have a large sociological footprint.

If so, this would be the major difference between a "personal ordinariate" and a "personal prelature," a canonical category currently occupied only by Opus Dei. A personal prelature, by definition, is global, whereas these ordinariates will seemingly have some sort of tie to a local church.

That prospect raises several questions. First of all, what exactly does "in consultation with" local bishops mean? What if, for example, a given bishops' conference doesn't actually want an ordinariate in its territory, feeling that it would rather integrate former Anglicans into existing pastoral structures?

Once they're in business, will the "ordinary" of these new structures, in most cases a bishop, become a member of the national conference of bishops? How would that work if there's only one ordinariate for a whole region? For example, would the ordinary become a member of CELAM, the Latin American bishops' conference, without belonging to the conference of any Latin American country?

For that matter, how will the ball start rolling? Will it be the case, for example, that whichever group of Anglicans in a given country or region crosses the finish line first, putting in its formal request for an ordinariate, will be in a position to dominate the ordinariate in that area, setting the tone for whoever might follow? (If so, are we in for an ecclesiastical equivalent of the Oklahoma land rush, with various groups scrambling to stake their claims first?)

**4. Who gets to join?**

The target audience, so to speak, for the new ordinariates is obviously Anglicans (and former Anglicans) wishing to become Catholic. Let's suppose, however, that once these structures are up and running, some current Catholics find they prefer the liturgical style in the Anglican ordinariate, and decide that they want to join -- not a completely improbable scenario, since "high church" Anglican liturgies have long held a strong appeal for some Catholics.

Or, suppose a given Catholic gets to know Fr. Geoff of the Anglican ordinariate, or becomes friends with Jim and Suzy who worship in the ordinariate, and decides that he or she would like to become part of their community -- again, hardly a long-shot prospect, given the way Catholic sociology often works.

Will such Catholics, without any connection to the Anglican tradition, still be able to join? In other words, will prospective members of the ordinariate be required to establish some sort of Anglican bona fides, or will they eventually be opened up to all comers?

A related question: At present, when a given Anglican (or Episcopalian) wishes to become Catholic, he or she generally goes through some sort of catechetical process, which among other things is designed to assess readiness for entry into full communion. Will the Anglicans who form the nucleus of these new ordinariates be asked to go through a similar sort of one-on-one scrutiny, or will their preparation be established on a more collective basis?

**5. Which Vatican office will be in charge?**

When the Pastoral Provision was created, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith was placed in charge, appointing a delegate in the United States to run the show (currently, it's Archbishop John Myers of Newark.) The CDF is also the office that's prepared the new apostolic constitution.

Typically, however, dioceses and other ecclesiastical jurisdictions (such as apostolic administrations, or, for that matter, Opus Dei as a personal prelature) report to the Congregation for Bishops. At this stage, the safe bet seems that the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith will be in charge, but again it's not clear whether that will be styled as a transitional measure until the ordinariates are "normalized," or whether they'll always remain an exception to the usual lines of authority.

**6. Will the ordinaries become a kind of bishops' conference?**

Let's assume, for the sake of argument, that what the dust finally settles, ten personal ordinariates for former Anglicans are established around the world, and that each has a bishop. Will those ten prelates come to think of themselves as forming a bishops' conference? Would they be recognized as such by the Vatican, doing at least some of the things that bishops' conferences usually do -- such as approving translations of liturgical texts, or hammering out policies on sexual abuse and child protection?

Should things develop in that direction, such a conference could become an important force in English-speaking Catholicism -- perhaps especially on liturgical questions, which tends to be a particular preoccupation of

Anglicans who come into communion with the Catholic church.

* * *

Alas, perhaps the biggest question of all won't be answered, because it can't be answered, by the pope's apostolic constitution: How many Anglicans are actually going to sign up?

The Traditional Anglican Communion, the largest and most visible group seeking communion with Rome, claims a global following of 400,000, including some 5,000 in the United States. (The TAC is essentially a federation of heterogeneous groups, with the bulk of its following apparently concentrated in the global south, especially Africa and India.) How many of those folk will actually decide to make the jump isn't yet clear, nor is there any way of knowing how many other Anglicans might come out of the woodwork.

During the Tuesday briefing, Levada said that 20 to 30 Anglican bishops have made overtures to Rome, but there's a difference between putting out feelers and actually signing on the dotted line. During my radio bit on Wednesday with Langberg, he said that "the devil is in the details," and that most of his colleagues are waiting to see what's actually in the apostolic constitution.

At least three variables will likely come into play:

- The extent to which Anglicans, or former Anglicans, will feel that the apostolic constitution offers sufficient guarantees that their distinctive spiritual heritage will be protected. Some Anglicans might fear that the provision for "consultation" with local bishops will mean, in practice, that where a local bishop is lukewarm to the whole idea, their autonomy will be honored more in the breach than the observance. Similarly, if the provision for married priests is merely transitional or temporary, that might turn off some potential takers.
- How many conservative Anglicans, who might have been attracted to becoming Catholic two or three years ago, have lost interest by now? In the United States and Canada, several traditionalist congregations have in the meantime formed the Anglican Church in North America, and much of their energy is now devoted to building up that structure. Yesterday, the group issued a statement welcoming the Vatican's decision, but predicting that "this provision will not be utilized by the great majority of the Anglican Church in North America's bishops, priests, dioceses and congregations."
- What will happen inside the Anglican Communion between now and when these new structures are actually created, which will probably be at least a year or so down the road? If the Anglicans are able to assure those traditionalists still on board that they have a future, it might hold down the numbers inclined to jump ship. (If so, one great irony might be that Rome's opening to the Anglicans, which some fear will contribute to the dissolution of the Anglican Communion, might actually end up helping it stick together.)

On all these questions, the only thing one can say for sure is: "Stay tuned."

* * *

The Synod for Africa comes to a close on Sunday, and as this column went to process work was still continuing on its final conclusions. I'll cover the final stages on the "NCR Today" blog, and I'll have a final wrap-up next week. An index of all my stories from the synod is here: **NCRonline.org/synodforafrica** [2].

The Next Step FORWARD [3]

DONATE NOW [3]

Enjoy this article?
Help support more like it by **donating today!** [3]

---

**Source URL (retrieved on *05/03/2015 - 11:36*):** http://ncronline.org/news/what-vaticans-welcome-anglicans-means

**Links:**
[1] http://ncrnews.org/webathon/donate/in-content
[2] http://ncronline.org/synodforafrica
[3] http://ncrnews.org/webathon/donate/article-end