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Anglican leader, in Rome, optimistic

by Francis X. Rocca by Religion News Service

VATICAN CITY -- Speaking in Rome a month after the Vatican unveiled plans to facilitate the conversion of conservative Anglicans to Catholicism, the spiritual leader of the worldwide Anglican Communion offered a moderately hopeful assessment of ecumenical relations between the two churches.

The "ecumenical glass is genuinely half-full," Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams said Thursday (Nov. 19), at the conclusion of a 30-minute lecture at the Pontifical Gregorian University.

Williams spoke during a conference on ecumenism sponsored by the Vatican's Pontifical Council for the Promotion of Christian Unity.

In his talk, Williams stressed the "theological convergence" on major doctrinal questions accomplished by Anglican-Catholic dialogue during the last four decades. He characterized areas of continued controversy, including disagreements over the ordination of women, as "second-order issues."

The archbishop nonetheless acknowledged strong feelings surrounding the question of women priests, noting that "for many Anglicans, not ordaining women (as priests or bishops) has a possible unwelcome implication about the difference between baptized men and baptized women."

Williams made only one reference to what he acknowledged as the "elephant in the room," the Vatican's plan to establish special Catholic dioceses in which former Anglicans can retain many of their traditional forms of worship and governance, and a limited married priesthood.

The move was explicitly designed to facilitate the conversion of Anglicans upset by their churches' growing acceptance of homosexuality and women priests.

Williams downplayed the significance of the Vatican plan, which he called an "imaginative pastoral

response to the needs of some" that "does not break any fresh ecclesiological ground."

A new Catholic diocese for former Anglicans, he suggested, is more likely to resemble a mere "chaplaincy" than a full-fledged "church gathered around a bishop."

Williams will meet with Pope Benedict XVI at the Vatican on Saturday (Nov. 21), on the second-to-last day of a five-day visit to Rome, which has included meetings with various Vatican officials.

Apart from Thursday's lecture, the archbishop's only scheduled public appearance here will be at an interdenominational prayer service at a Rome church on Friday (Nov. 20), at which Williams will be the designated preacher.

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