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

Yes, Virginia, there is a future for Anglican/Catholic ties

John L. Allen Jr. | Nov. 23, 2009 NCR Today

tPope Benedict XVI and the Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, held a brief tête-à-tête in Rome on Saturday, amid the latest in a seemingly endless series of crises in relations between the Catholic church and the Anglican Communion. This time, the issue was the Vatican?s decision to create special structures for traditionalist Anglicans wishing to become Catholics.

tIn the main, both Benedict and Williams reaffirmed their commitment to good ties, even if Williams did gently chide the pontiff for what Williams saw as a failure to consult Anglican leaders more thoroughly in advance of the recent move. (In an address at the Jesuit-run Gregorian University, Williams also defended the ordination of women and suggested that differences over such matters ?may not be as fundamentally church-dividing as our Roman Catholic friends generally assume.?)

This weekend?s encounter provides an opportunity to step back and contemplate the state of things between Anglicans and Catholics. To be sure, Catholicism isn?t General Motors or Microsoft ? but if it were, a bean-counter in Rome might put down his eyeshade to ask: Why do we bother?

Forget theology for a moment, and just run the numbers. Today there are 1.1 billion Catholics in the world and just 77 million Anglicans. If half the Anglicans on the planet were to wake up tomorrow and decide to join the Catholic church (to be sure, a wildly improbable scenario), all 38.5 million of them together wouldn?t even represent one of the ten largest Catholic nations on earth. Outside the United Kingdom, Anglicanism isn?t really an important culture-shaping force in many places ? and even in the U.K., that?s debatable. A recent study by the University of Manchester found that in a British household in which both parents are actively religious, the odds that a child will be religious are roughly 47 percent. If only one parent is active, it?s 24 percent; if neither are active, it?s 3 percent. Religiosity in the U.K. these days, in other words, has a half-life of one generation.

By way of contrast, there are an estimated 380 million Pentecostals of various stripes around the world, and Pentecostalism is the most important competitor facing Catholicism in regions such as Latin America and Africa. One study in Latin America in the late 1990s found that 8,000 people were leaving the Catholic church every day, most for some form of Pentecostalism. In many societies in the global South, Pentecostals play a key role in setting the cultural and political tone.

Despite its relatively small numbers, Anglicanism has an outsize capacity for generating headaches. Absent a clear mechanism for resolving disputes, it?s often difficult to know precisely where Anglicanism stands on issues such as gay marriage or women bishops ? a frustration not just for Catholics, to be sure, but for Anglicans themselves. On the Catholic side, this sometimes leads to the suspicion that negotiating ecumenical agreements with Anglicans is a fruitless exercise, since there?s no way to be sure that the entire Communion will stand behind the results.

Facing this one-two punch of low numbers and big difficulties, a Catholic version of ?total quality management? might suggest a reallocation of ecumenical resources away from Anglicanism (and Orthodoxy, for that matter) and toward the Pentecostals.

Yet no one, least of all Benedict XVI, is seriously suggesting putting Anglican/Catholic relations on a back-burner. Ask Catholic veterans of the ecumenical enterprise why, and aside from the obvious Biblical and theological imperative (Christ?s last prayer on earth was that we may all be one), they generally cite three reasons:

?tThere is an undeniable historic appeal to healing a rift that began with the English Reformation in the 16th century, especially given that in most external respects (prayer and worship styles, sacramental life) the Catholic church has more in common with Anglicanism than other churches of the Reformation;
?tWhatever the sociological footprint of Anglicanism, it looms large in the imagination of the English-speaking world, including the media. Given that English has become the world?s default second language, developments in Anglican-Catholic relations inevitably have global implications;
?tSince the Second Vatican Council (1962-65), the dialogue between Rome and Canterbury has long been considered a model for every other ecumenical relationship: gentlemanly, substantive, academically and theologically rigorous, and productive.

To that list, I would suggest adding a fourth consideration. Simply put, the future of Anglican/Catholic relations may well lie more in Africa than in Rome or Canterbury ? and if so, the prospects in many ways look far more promising.

Today, Africa is home to almost 40 million Anglicans, more than half the global total. Given the stark difference in birth rates between the global north and the south, the African share of the Anglican population is certain to grow. Meanwhile, the Catholic population of sub-Saharan Africa exploded from 1.9 million in 1900 to 139 million in 2000, a growth rate of almost 7,000 percent. As a result, Africa will play a steadily more important role in setting the tone for the Catholic Church in the 21st century.

In Africa, Anglicans and Catholics aren?t divided over matters such as homosexuality or women priests and bishops, since both churches share a deeply conservative outlook. (As an aside, this is the primary reason that Anglicans in Africa have expressed precious little interest in Rome?s overture. In Africa, the traditionalists aren?t a beleaguered minority but the overwhelming majority. They?re not looking to abandon the Anglican Communion; they?re looking to take it over.)

Catholics and Anglicans in many African societies often perceive themselves to be facing the same challenges, especially Islam and Christian Pentecostalism. In religion, as in politics and war, there?s nothing like a common enemy to bring people together. Kenya offers a clear example at the moment, where Catholic and Anglican leaders are standing shoulder-to-shoulder to oppose recognition of the so-called ?Kadhi Courts,? meaning tribunals based on Islamic law, in the country?s new constitution.

In addition, the flavor of Christianity in Africa is more *ad extra* than *ad intra*, more concerned with broad social, political and cultural issues than internal church debates. As a result, Catholics and Anglicans both see matters such as fighting poverty and corruption as better uses of their time than defining the precise nature of papal authority, or debating the fine points of liturgical practice. On those outward-looking social questions, Anglicans and Catholics in Africa generally share the same values and aims.

Finally, Anglican and Catholic leaders in Africa often aren?t as invested in the defining aim of the ecumenical movement in Europe and North America ? full, visible, structural reunion. Instead, their ecumenism is often of a more practical stamp, focused on what the separate churches can do together right now on political and cultural matters. In that sense, the template for the ecumenical future may not be the new ?personal ordinariates? decreed by Rome, but rather something like the ?Christian Association of Nigeria,? a self-defense league formed in the late 1970s to defend Christians when Islamic militia began spreading around the countryside. It?s become an important player in Nigerian politics, with wings for both women and youth.

All of this suggests that new impulses arising from Africa could reshape the global relationship between Catholics and Anglicans, supplying new energy and avoiding the current dead-end over sexual morality.

In other words: Yes, Virginia, there is a future for Anglican/Catholic relations ? but it may live closer to the South Pole than the North.

Source URL (retrieved on *12/09/2013 - 06:47*): http://ncronline.org/blogs/ncr-today/yes-virginia-there-future-anglicancatholic-ties