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Father of eight gives up job to become Catholic

Simon Caldwell Catholic News Service | Apr. 21, 2011

LONDON -- It's a brave decision for the Ian Hellyer to give up his job when he has to provide for eight children and his wife is pregnant with the couple's ninth child.

But Hellyer is losing no sleep over his decision. He believes he is answering God's call to become a Catholic priest in the newly created Personal Ordinariate of Our Lady of Walsingham.

On Palm Sunday, he formally gave up his 20,000-pound ($33,000) yearly salary as rector of four Church of England parishes in the Dartmoor area of southwest England.

On Holy Thursday, during the Mass of the Lord's Supper at the Benedictine Buckfast Abbey in Devon, he was to be confirmed by Abbot David Charlesworth. His wife, Margaret, and children, who are already Catholic, were his sponsors.

Hellyer then will make his first Communion as a Catholic, joined by 12 members of the ordinariate group he will lead after his ordination to the Catholic priesthood June 17. The small faith community will be based at the abbey.

"I truly feel that this is God's call, and there has been nothing to make me think that it isn't," he told Catholic News Service April 20.

"It has been a wonderful, wonderful journey," he said. "There are some practical issues that haven't been resolved, but I don't worry that they are not going to be resolved."

With two of his oldest children preparing for final high school and college entrance exams and a baby due at the end of May, the first issue to address might be finding a home.

In the meantime, the Church of England has come to the rescue. The Number 1 Trust, a charity established in the days of the Blessed John Henry Newman's Oxford Movement to further the teaching and practice of the Catholic faith within the Church of England, has allowed the family to live rent free at their present residence -- St. John's Vicarage in Bovey Tracey -- until the end of August.

Then there is the question of income. Because of its size, the family is eligible to receive cash benefits from the government and tax credits.

But Hellyer, 45, is preparing to change his status as an employee to one who is, in effect, self-employed, and he knows the challenges that it will present.

It means that instead of a receiving a salary he will be supported by contributions of members of the ordinariate as well payments he may derive from work he undertakes for the Catholic Diocese of Plymouth. He said he is relaxed about the situation.

"We are not absolutely desperate," he explained. "We have financial resources we can draw on and people have been generous and given us large sums of money.

"The parish I left behind had a large collection and gave us a very large gift, and other people have been very generous toward us," he added. "We are not too worried about making ends meet with paying bills and putting food on the table."

Msgr. Keith Newton, who heads the ordinariate, has assured Anglican clergy entering the Catholic Church with the intention of being ordained that funds would be available for anyone in need.

Some of the funds come from the initial 250,000 pounds given to the ordinariate by the Catholic bishops of England and Wales. An additional 100,000 pounds was donated April 15 by the St. Barnabas Society, a Catholic charity established to support clergy entering the Catholic Church from non-Catholic Christian denominations.

Such clergy "are making great sacrifices," Msgr. Newton said a statement welcoming the gift. "It is a relief to know that the St. Barnabas Society is so willing to help in cases of financial need."

A native of Plymouth, England, Hellyer was ordained an Anglican minister in 1995. He told CNS that, at that time, his college was accepting female applicants to the priesthood and he was comfortable with it.

His opinions on women's ordination evolved in 2001 as he began to question the catholicity of the Church of England in the light of the traditions of the Roman Catholic Church. From that point, he explained, he understood that he was "on a journey to greater communion with the Catholic Church."

In November 2009 when Pope Benedict XVI released his apostolic constitution "Anglicanorum coetibus," which allows the group reception of former Anglicans into the Catholic Church, he said, "it seemed to me quite clear that that's where God wanted me to go."

Hellyer said the reaction to his decision to join the Catholic Church has not met with "any animosity at all" from members of his Anglican congregations.

"People have questions and are interested to know why, and I have been able to explain that, but there has been no negativity to me at all, which I am very grateful for," he said.

He said that he had been greatly moved by the warmth of ordinary Catholics who had sent him many messages of support.

"My hope for the future is that the ordinariate really becomes part of the new evangelization of this country," he said. "That is something that really excites me."

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