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No earthquake from overture to Anglicans

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ANALYSIS

LONDON -- From time to time in the church, developments come down the pike that stir up enormous reaction at first, but that, over time, never quite seem to produce the earthquakes that breathless commentary predicted.

Pope Benedict XVI?s 2007 decision to revive the Latin Mass is arguably one such case, as is a 2005 Vatican document barring homosexuals from seminaries. Both became an instant cause célèbre, yet, at least so far, most people would say that neither liturgical practice nor seminary formation has been truly turned on its head.

In the U.K., some observers believe a similar point might be made about the recent creation of a new structure, called an ordinariate, to welcome groups of former Anglicans into the Catholic fold.

When it was unveiled two years ago, supporters hailed the ordinariate as a way to end the ecumenical logjam between Rome and Canterbury. Critics predicted it would corrode relations with Anglicans, and that it would drive Catholicism to the right by embracing Anglicanism?s most determined opponents of women clergy and homosexuality.

Today, the ordinariate has been established in England and Wales, with some 1,000 laity and 64 clergy scattered across 27 different communities. Whatever one makes of it, there?s scant evidence of a revolution.

Observers say that a freeze in Anglican/Catholic relations hasn?t materialized, and the membership of the ordinariate is less ideologically defined than some feared (or, perhaps, hoped).

?The perception was that this would create a lot of division, and frankly I think some people wanted it to be a form of division,? said Fr. Marcus Stock, general secretary of the Catholic bishops? conference of England and Wales. ?I don?t think it?s created the acrimony that people were anticipating.?

Despite some early skirmishes with Anglicans -- could ordinariate groups, for instance, worship at their former Anglican churches? -- Stock says that for the most part, things are calm.

Observers likewise dispute the notion that the ordinariate is composed largely of right-wing ideologues.

?People might be surprised to find that we?re depressingly middle of the road,? said Fr. Mark Elliott-Smith, who pastors a small ordinariate group in central London. He said there?s a wide range of opinion, from staunch traditionalists to fairly progressive ?Vatican II? types, with most people in the center.

In any event, Elliott-Smith said, members are not coming into the Catholic church to pick a fight, having had their fill of conflict in Anglicanism.

?We?re not battle-hardened,? he said. ?We?re battle-weary.?

Observers also say the ordinariate does not seem poised for immediate significant growth beyond its present size, which represents roughly .02 percent of the 5 million Catholics in England and Wales. If anything, some contraction may be in the cards, as several clergy are already beyond retirement age.

Some predict a ?second wave? of entrances in 2012 if, as expected, a synod of the Church of England confirms a decision in favor of women bishops. Yet that influx too seems likely, in percentage terms, to be relatively small.

?The second wave will probably be half again [the number of laity], and half the number of clergy,? said Diana Morphew, a lay member of the ordinariate in London. She predicted the crop in 2012 will be ?more like a dozen clergy, and maybe 500 people.?

In the meantime, the ordinariate faces steep logistical challenges, including paying clergy stipends and finding stable places of worship. At the moment grants from the bishops? conference, foundations and private individuals are filling the gap, but over time it will have to become self-sustaining.

None of this, however, is to suggest that the ordinariate can?t become an important part of the Catholic landscape.

Fr. Mark Woodruff, a former Anglican and an advisor to the ordinariate, believes it can help the Catholic church enhance its ?engagement with the state and with civil society,? which has always been part of Anglicanism?s heritage in England.

Contrary to those who say the ordinariate is a blow to Anglican/Catholic relations, Woodruff also insists that it has an ecumenical vocation of keeping alive the dream of full unity between Rome and Canterbury.

?If it forgets that, it must fail,? Woodruff said. ?I?ve stressed time and time again to these friends of mine that I do not want you to come in and pull the ladder up.?

?Otherwise,? Woodruff said, ?it?s just going to be an ecclesiastical granny flat, and we don?t want that.?

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