

Vatican opens doors to dissident Anglicans: Far-reaching ecumenical implications

News in the [November 17, 2009](#) issue

In a move with far-reaching ecumenical implications, the Vatican has announced plans to open its doors to Anglicans upset with their church's growing acceptance of homosexuality and women clergy.

Citing "many requests" from Anglicans around the world, the Vatican said that Pope Benedict XVI would permit the establishment of new national dioceses in which former Anglicans can join the Catholic Church while retaining many of their traditional forms of worship.

The move represents a major shift in Catholic-Anglican relations after more than four decades of ecumenical dialogue aimed at restoring "full and visible unity" between the two churches, separated since the 16th century.

Cardinal William Levada, a former archbishop of San Francisco who now heads the Vatican's doctrinal office, said the prospect of Catholic-Anglican unity had "seemed to recede" in recent years. Efforts by some Anglicans to "accommodate current cultural values" by ordaining women and "practicing homosexuals" as priests and bishops are "not consonant with apostolic tradition," he said.

The 77-million-member Anglican Communion has been deeply divided by a growing acceptance of homosexuality in its North American branches—including the consecration of a gay bishop in New Hampshire and the blessing of same-sex unions in some dioceses.

Meanwhile, more than 1,300 Anglican priests have threatened to leave the Church of England—the mother church of the worldwide communion—if it begins to ordain women bishops.

On the day of the announcement, October 20, Catholic and Anglican leaders insisted that the Vatican's move would not harm relations between the churches.

"We are determined that our ongoing mutual commitment and consultation on these and other matters should continue to be strengthened," said Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams, spiritual leader of the worldwide Anglican Communion, in a joint statement with Archbishop Vincent G. Nichols of Westminster, the leader of Catholics in England and Wales.

Williams attempted to assure Anglicans of Rome's good intentions.

"This new possibility is in no sense at all intended to undermine existing relations between our two communions or to be an act of proselytism or aggression," Williams wrote in an open letter to bishops of the Church of England and the primates of other Anglican provinces.

In a statement, the Episcopal Church, the U.S. branch of the Anglican Communion, said the Vatican's move "reflects what the Roman Catholic Church, through its acceptance of Anglican rite parishes, has been doing for some years more informally." The statement also said Episcopalians "will continue to explore the full implications of this in our ecumenical relations."

The new Catholic dioceses, called "personal ordinariates," will be set up by national bishops conferences in response to local demand, following guidelines the Vatican plans to release within weeks.

Each diocese will be headed by a former Anglican clergyman, who will exercise an administrative and leadership role equivalent to that of a bishop. Unmarried men in such positions will also be eligible for ordination as Catholic bishops, giving them the power to ordain new priests.

"There's no structure like it in the modern history of the Catholic Church," said William H. Stetson, a monsignor who has personally supervised the conversion of approximately 100 Episcopal priests since the early 1980s. "This is a historic moment."

Anglican clergy who are already married will be eligible for ordination as Catholic priests (but not bishops) within the new structures. The new provision does not allow for the perpetuation of a married priesthood, which some Anglicans have called a

condition of their conversion to Rome.

Members of the new dioceses will be able to preserve much of the Anglican liturgy and devotional traditions developed over the more than 450 years since the Church of England split from Rome.

Cardinal Walter Kasper, head of the Vatican's ecumenical council, has repeatedly and publicly discouraged the en masse conversion of Anglicans to the Catholic Church. "We are not fishing in the Anglican lake," Kasper told a Vatican press conference earlier in October. *-Francis X. Rocca, Religion News Service*