

Pope Francis lends friendly support to Anglican Church in North America

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(RNS) Pope Francis stepped slightly outside of ecumenical protocol when he sent his support and congratulations to the new leader of a breakaway group of conservative Anglicans.

The pope's message came during the October 9 installation service for Foley Beach, the new archbishop of the Anglican Church in North America, which broke away from the Episcopal Church and the Anglican Church of Canada over theological differences on salvation and sexuality.

The Anglican bishop of Argentina, Gregory Venables, is a supporter of ACNA and had a long-standing friendship with Pope Francis, whom he knew as Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio, during their time in Buenos Aires.

The pope sent no formal, written message to Foley's installation in Atlanta, but he offered his personal greetings, according to Thomas Rosica, a Vatican spokesman.

During the installation service, Venables recalled recovering from a severe illness—"lying there wondering if I ever wanted to be alive again"—earlier this year when the phone rang. The pope has a habit of calling people out of the blue, and the voice on the other end of the line introduced himself as Francis.

"'Francis who?' Venables recalled saying. 'No, it's Father Jorge.'"

Venables, the former Anglican leader for Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Paraguay, Peru, and Uruguay, described his role as a messenger from Pope Francis.

"He asked me this evening, in fact he wrote to me just a few days ago and said, 'When you go to the United States please, in my name, give my personal congratulations and greetings to Archbishop Foley. And assure him of my prayers

and support at this moment and in the future as he leads the church at this very important moment of revival and mission.””

Asking Foley to step forward for a traditional Argentine blessing, Venables kissed him twice on the forehead before hugging him.

“This is a celebration of true Anglicanism,” Venables said. “This evening meeting in this place is the majority of the Anglican Communion, this evening here the majority of the Anglican Communion is represented because the vast majority in the Anglican Communion believe that the word of God is true, believe that Jesus Christ is the son of God, and believe that he is our only hope as we move forward.”

The Vatican has no formal relations with ACNA; the recognized Anglican leader is the Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, and the churches he recognizes as part of the worldwide Anglican Communion, including the Episcopal Church in the United States. Neither Welby nor the Episcopal Church formally recognizes ACNA.

In an interview earlier this month, Welby said breakaway groups are not part of the communion. “ACNA is a separate church. It’s not part of the Anglican Communion,” Welby said in an October 3 interview with *The Church of Ireland Gazette*. He called ACNA “an ecumenical partner.”

It’s not the first time the breakaway conservatives have received support from the Vatican. In a 2003 organizing meeting outside Dallas, delegates received a supportive message from Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, then the Vatican’s doctrinal czar, who in 2005 was elected as Pope Benedict XVI.

ACNA, which was formally launched in 2009, reports a membership of about 97,000. The Episcopal Church, in membership figures released earlier this month, counts 1.86 million members, a 1.4 percent drop from the previous year. Critics say those losses likely don’t include a large exodus of Episcopalians in South Carolina, which remains the subject of a contentious legal battle.