

ANGLICANS AS CATHOLICS

The Holy See announced recently that our Holy Father has approved a new “church structure” to accommodate members of the Anglican Church who are not able to accept certain developments in the discipline of their church. The Apostolic Constitution of Pope Benedict XVI seeks to respond to a number of requests on the part of those Anglican faith communities. The public press has accused the Pope of proselytizing. Others are concerned about what effect this will have on the ecumenical movement. To me, it appears like a liberal move on the part of a pope who, as a cardinal, was considered conservative. Actually, it is what a pope should do.

First of all, it needs to be recognized that the Holy Father has not made this provision in order to “snatch” Anglicans, as some reporters have suggested. Reporters all too often do not portray the truth of a matter. Or, at the very least, they do not know what they are writing about because they do not do their homework. (Such sloppy reporting would not fly in the world of sports.) As recently as July, 2008, Pope Benedict XVI sent a message to the Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, on the occasion of the Lambeth Conference, boycotted by 230 of 880 Anglican Bishops. In his message, the Holy Father actually urged the participants to find a “mature” way to avoid a “schism” within their ranks.

In commenting on the Apostolic Constitution that welcomes estranged Anglicans into the Catholic Church, Archbishop Rowan Williams of Canterbury said that he does not see the move as “an act of aggression,” but as part of a routine relationship between the two churches. Both Anglicans and Catholics are well aware of the fact that they both once accepted the Pope as head of the Church. In the 16th Century, it was King Henry VIII who decided to separate due to his multiple marriages. Therefore, the Anglican Church came into existence, primarily, due to a personal vendetta on the part of a monarch.

The Apostolic Constitution strives to make it as easy as possible for Anglicans wishing to become a part of the Roman Catholic Church to do so. It requires a balance between recognizing and allowing Anglican rites and traditions, while insisting upon certain non-negotiable principles. As Cardinal William Levada of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith explained, unity of the Church does not require a uniformity that ignores cultural diversity, as the history of Christianity shows.

Consequently, the Constitution allows the establishment of “personal ordinariates,” with their own bishops, somewhat on the model of military ordinariates, which exist as a diocese within a diocese. The bishops of the Anglican ordinariates would come from the ranks of the Anglican priests, but would have to be celibate, as has been the long tradition for bishops in the East as well as in the West. Due to the issue of apostolic succession, ordinations would need to take place. Those who are married could remain married, as is already the case with Catholics within our Eastern traditions.

This appears to be a very catholic resolution to a very delicate situation, despite the sensationalism of secular reporting. Priests will not be allowed to marry. Rather married men will be ordained, as is already the case in some rites of the Catholic Church. As for the Holy Father “carving out a special church within a church,” the Catholic Church has had within it a number of such “special churches” for some centuries. As is often the case with our Church that spans the ages, even the “new” is “nothing new.”