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Vatican welcomes Anglicans: React story No. 1

by Carol Zimmermann by Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON -- Parishioners at Our Lady of the Atonement in San Antonio, the largest Anglican-use Catholic parish in the U.S., have plenty to talk about these days.

"Everyone is excited, but they have lots of questions," said the pastor, Father Christopher Phillips, about the Vatican's Oct. 20 announcement of a special structure for Anglicans who want to be in full communion with the Catholic Church.

Father Phillips -- once an Episcopal priest and now a Catholic priest who founded Our Lady of the Atonement 26 years ago -- doesn't have detailed answers yet for the parish's 500 families. He said more details will be known once the pope's apostolic constitution and norms for implementing it are revised and published, which was to take a few weeks.

In the meantime, he told Catholic News Service he couldn't be more pleased.

The priest has been telling parishioners that they should view the new provisions "as a confirmation that what we've been doing has been found worthy."

The Anglican province in the United States is the Episcopal Church.

Other Anglican-use Catholic parishes are located in Houston and Arlington, Texas, and in Columbia, S.C. In addition there are Anglican-use congregations sharing the facilities of regular Catholic parishes in Corpus Christi, Texas; Scranton, Pa.; Kansas City, Mo.; Boston and Phoenix.

These communities began forming after the Vatican approved a pastoral provision for the United States in 1980 allowing the retention of some elements of Anglican identity in liturgy when a number of Episcopalians from the same congregation or area entered full Catholic communion. That provision also

allowed a special procedure to admit former Episcopal priests who had become Catholic into the Catholic priesthood.

The new Vatican provisions will make the permission granted in the United States universal.

Anglican priests who are married may be ordained Catholic priests, but married Anglican bishops will not be able to function as Catholic bishops in keeping with the long-standing Catholic and Orthodox tradition of ordaining only unmarried clergy as bishops.

The new provisions also will establish new church jurisdictions called "personal ordinariates" --similar to dioceses -- to oversee the pastoral care of those who want to bring elements of their Anglican identity into the Catholic Church.

Father Phillips was thrilled with the concept of ordinariates but also felt bittersweet about not being as connected with the San Antonio Archdiocese that he loves.

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Ultimately, he sees these new jurisdictions as beneficial for all Anglicans who have joined the Catholic Church or wish to do so, saying it "gives them a bridge to walk across."

Or put another way, he compares it to going from "living in an apartment to owning a house," because previously Anglicans who wished to join Catholic parishes while retaining elements of the Anglican liturgy could only do so if the bishop of the Catholic diocese had approved of such congregations. Some did; others did not. Also, some of these Anglican-use parishes ceased to exist once their pastor went elsewhere.

"Now we have our own house and we're responsible for it -- a house within the big house of the Catholic Church," Father Phillips said.

The personal ordinariates will be led by former Anglican bishops or priests and also could include houses of formation to train future priests.

Joseph Blake, president of the Anglican Use Society, called the Vatican's announcement a "long-expected and prayed-for moment" stemming from the requests of Anglicans who have requested full communion with the Catholic Church.

Recent changes within many Anglican provinces, including the ordination of women priests and bishops and the acceptance of homosexuality in some areas, have prompted members who disagree with the changes to join the Catholic Church.

Blake, based in Bethlehem, Pa., said he had been an Episcopalian until the late 1970s but left for a variety of reasons including the Episcopal Church's stance on abortion and women's ordination.

He told CNS the new provisions will "hopefully make the process (to join the Catholic Church) less difficult," noting that to date it has been complicated and subject to the decision of the local bishop.

Blake, like Father Phillips, is waiting to see the Vatican document in its final form, but said that, "given all the issues the church had to balance -- the Catholic Church tradition and needs of Anglicans -- it couldn't get much better than this."

In announcing the new provisions, U.S. Cardinal William J. Levada, head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, said Pope Benedict was responding to "many requests" submitted by individual Anglicans and by Anglican groups to enter into full communion with the Catholic Church.

At the same time, Cardinal Levada said the new provisions do not weaken the commitment of the Vatican to promoting Christian unity.

Cardinal Francis E. George of Chicago, president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, said the U.S. church "stands ready to collaborate" with the Vatican in implementing the provisions. In a statement released in Washington Oct. 20, he also emphasized the U.S. Catholic Church would continue to work toward Christian unity with Episcopalians.

An Oct. 20 statement by Bishop Christopher Epting, deputy for Ecumenical and Interreligious Relations in the Episcopal Church, stressed that Episcopal leaders would "continue to explore the full implications" of the Vatican statement.

He also said the announcement reflects what the Catholic Church "has been doing for some years more informally" through Anglican-use parishes.

"We in the Episcopal Church continue to look to the Holy Spirit, who guides us in understanding of what it means to be the church in the Anglican tradition," he said. He also noted that Episcopal officials would "continue to remain in dialogue" with Catholic leaders through "participation in the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Consultation and the Anglican-Roman Catholic Dialogue in the USA."

In Canada, the Vatican's announcement received mixed reaction. Cardinal Marc Ouellet of Quebec called it an "extraordinary" event while Anglican Archbishop Fred Hiltz of Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island, primate of Canada, said it would cause tension.

Bishop Peter Wilkinson of the Anglican Catholic Church of Canada was overjoyed by the news.

He said the Vatican's move could help promote much more important efforts at Catholic and Orthodox unity.

"Pope Benedict continually amazes me," he said. "Not only is he a genius and a holy man, but he can do something new, something that has not been done before."

"I hope that we can live up to expectations on how Anglicans can fulfill their role in the universal church," he added.

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Contributing to this story was Deborah Gyapong in Cornwall, Ontario.

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