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Where hype meets reality

by John L. Allen Jr.



Bishop Kevin Farrell (CNS/Nancy Wiechec)

Somebody with a flair for taxonomy could probably go to town creating tongue-in-cheek categories for news stories on the Catholic beat. Entries might include the "scandal" story, the "sleeper" story (one whose significance takes a while to sink in), and the "woe-is-me" story (involving anybody put upon by officialdom).

Then there's what might be called the "invitation to hype" story, meaning a development that stirs massive discussion and controversy, even though its real-world significance isn't actually all that great. A classic example came in 2007, with Pope Benedict XVI's decision to authorize wider celebration of the old Latin Mass. Intense debate ensued about what the move augured for the direction of the church, yet two years later the tiny number of people regularly attending Mass in the old rite could probably be captured with the Italian expression *quattro gatti e un cane* -- "four cats and a dog."

At least in the United States, we may have a new entry in the "invitation to hype" category, with the Vatican's recent decision to create new structures, called "personal ordinariates," to welcome former Anglicans wishing to become Catholic.

Depending on who's talking, the move has been breathlessly styled as:

- A bold gambit to end the 500-year-old schism between Catholics and Anglicans, which dates to the English Reformation in the 16th century;
- A serious blow to ecumenical relations, amounting to Catholic "poaching" in a moment when the global Anglican Communion is already in crisis;
- A sharp lurch to the right for the Catholic church, since those Anglicans most likely to be interested are traditionalists opposed to homosexuality and women's ordination;
- The beginning of the end for priestly celibacy in the Catholic church, since these ordinariates will have married priests;
- A stunning choice for diversity inside Catholicism, since these ordinariates will preserve much of the liturgical, spiritual and even doctrinal heritage of Anglicanism.

Somewhat buried in that avalanche of speculation, however, is the reality that the actual number of Anglicans likely to sign up, at least on the American end, is remarkably small -- so much so that some Catholic leaders are openly wondering whether there's even a market for one of these new ordinariates in the United States.

"I don't see any great rush in the Anglican community to come over in a group," Bishop Kevin Farrell of Dallas told *NCR* Nov. 14. "My feeling is that most of the Anglicans who want to become Catholic have already done that."

"Personally, I don't see the need for it [an ordinariate] here," Farrell said.

Farrell's impression may offer a good barometer of the broader American scene, since Texas has long been the epicenter of the "Anglo-Catholic" movement in the Episcopalian church, which feels the greatest affinity for Roman Catholicism. (The 2 million Episcopalians in America represent the U.S. branch of the worldwide Anglican Communion, which numbers some 77 million.)

Fr. James Massa, who heads the U.S. bishops' office for ecumenical relations, agreed. While there may be significant movement in England, Massa told *NCR* Nov. 16, the numbers in America are likely to be "far fewer." Massa said that while "several thousand" Anglicans may become Catholic in England under the new deal, at least in the short term such numbers in America aren't in the cards.

In part, those impressions are based on reactions of conservative Anglicans to Rome's offer.

The Anglican Church in North America, a new denomination created by conservative Anglicans in the United States and Canada in 2008, issued a statement in late October predicting that "this provision will not be utilized by the great majority of [our] bishops, priests, dioceses and congregations."

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Massa said that aligns with his impression that most of these Anglicans "seem committed to seeing whether this new Anglican province can thrive."

Farrell said that since the Vatican announcement, he has not received any feelers from local Episcopalians

interested in signing up for an ordinariate. In the main, he said, Episcopalians who join the Catholic church actually want to be part of a local diocese, not a separate structure.

‘They want to be Roman Catholics, and are willing to change in order to do that,’ he said. Farrell said that over the last two years, roughly 250 Episcopalians have joined the Catholic church in his diocese.

The Vatican first announced plans to create new structures for Anglican converts in late October. In essence, a ‘personal ordinariate’ amounts to a non-territorial diocese, governed by an ‘ordinary’ (in most cases, a bishop) and including its own clergy, religious orders and lay members.

On Nov. 9, three weeks after the initial announcement, the Vatican released a papal document containing the legal blueprint for those new structures, in the form of an apostolic constitution titled *Anglicanorum Coetibus* (‘On groups of Anglicans’).

According to explanations offered by Vatican officials, these new structures would be similar to the ordinariates that already exist in various nations for the armed forces. They’re designed to allow Anglicans to preserve much of their spiritual and liturgical heritage, including the tradition of a married priesthood. While individual Anglicans have always been able to become Catholic, these new structures would allow whole groups of Anglicans to join the church in corporate fashion.

Vatican officials have presented the decision as a response to requests from Anglicans, rather than something initiated by Rome. The best-known such request came from a network of churches called the Traditional Anglican Communion, which claims a following of 400,000 people around the world, including 5,000 in the United States.

How many of those Anglicans will decide to become Catholics, however, remains to be seen. Observers say the bulk is concentrated in Africa and India, where they represent a strong majority within local Anglican churches -- thus diminishing the incentive to leave.

Massa said that while the immediate impact of the Vatican move may be limited, it’s nonetheless a ‘bold’ decision that could have long-term implications in two ways: First, as a template for incorporating the spiritual traditions of other branches of Western Christianity into the Catholic church, such as Lutheranism; second, as a stage in a gradual ‘blurring’ of the distinctions between Catholics and Anglicans -- perhaps especially in Africa, where both churches are growing rapidly, and where both share a basically conservative stance on matters such as homosexuality and women priests.

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