

Anglicans expect exodus to Catholic church

Simon Caldwell Catholic News Service Al Webb Religion News Service | Jul. 13, 2010



Archbishop Rowan Williams of Canterbury, head of the Anglican Communion, arrives with Cardinal Walter Kasper for a vespers service at the Caravita oratory in Rome in this Nov. 20, 2009, CNS file photo.

LONDON -- The largest Anglo-Catholic group in the Church of England is expecting an exodus of thousands of Anglicans to Catholicism after a decision to ordain women as bishops without sufficient concessions to traditionalists.

The Church of England's General Synod on Saturday (July 10) rejected a compromise proposal by its top two bishops that would have allowed individual congregations to "opt out" of having women bishops. The vote came after nearly 12 hours of debate.

The move was an embarrassing setback for Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams and his chief deputy, Archbishop of York John Sentamu, who had hoped to head off a defection of traditionalists over the issue of women bishops.

The rejection of the two archbishops' plan effectively leaves the church on the same path to the eventual consecration of women bishops -- but not until 2014 as "the earliest possible time."

Stephen Parkinson, director of Forward in Faith -- a group that has about 10,000 members, including more than 1,000 clergy -- told Catholic News Service in a July 13 telephone interview that a large number of Anglo-Catholics are considering conversion to the Catholic faith.

A July 12 statement from Forward in Faith advised members against hasty action, saying now was "not the time for precipitate action."

"This draft measure does nothing for us at all," said Parkinson. "We explained very carefully why we could not accept women bishops theologically.

"We explained what would enable us to stay in the Church of England, but the General Synod has decided to get rid of us by giving us a provision that does not meet our needs," he said. "They are saying either put up or shut

up and accept innovations, however unscriptural or heretical, or get out."

Parkinson said he expected thousands of members of Forward in Faith to consider accepting Pope Benedict XVI's offer of a personal ordinariate, issued last November in the apostolic constitution "Anglicanorum coetibus," in which a group of Anglicans can be received into the Catholic Church while retaining their distinctive patrimony and liturgical practices.

"Many, I expect, will be exploring the provisions of Pope Benedict's apostolic constitution. We have got 10,000 members, so clearly we are talking about thousands," he added.

A number of breakaway national Anglican churches, in communion with the Traditional Anglican Communion rather than the much larger Worldwide Anglican Communion, have already written to the Vatican to accept the pope's offer.

The defection of thousands of mainstream Anglican traditionalists from the Church of England would represent the largest single block.

The controversy over female bishops dominated the five-day gathering of the General Synod, the church's national assembly, in York. The compromise was seen as a last-ditch attempt to avoid a schism.

Parkinson said developments were unlikely within the next six months, however, adding that until women bishops are ordained, Anglican traditionalists had a "couple of years" to think about what to do.

The Forward in Faith statement said the proposals must be considered by provincial synods in September and the outcomes could be debated a month later when Forward in Faith holds its annual meeting.

The diocesan synods have now been asked to scrutinize a scheme where women bishops would have the authority to make alternative arrangements for objectors through a statutory code of practice. The Anglo-Catholic group of the synod had wanted episcopal visitors, or "flying bishops," to minister to their members instead, but their requests were rejected.

If the resolution is supported by a majority of the diocesan synods, it will be returned to the General Synod for ratification in 2012.

Archbishop Williams told the General Synod that its vote illustrated that the Church of England was "committed by a majority to the desirability of seeing women as bishops for the health and flourishing of the work of God's kingdom, of this church and this nation."

"We are also profoundly committed by a majority in the synod to a maximum generosity that can be consistently and coherently exercised toward the consciences of minorities and we have not yet cracked how to do that," he said during the July 12 debate.

The Church of England first voted to ordain women as priests in 1992, a move that led to about 500 clergy defecting to the Catholic Church.

Since 1994, when the changes came into force, more than 5,000 women have been ordained as Anglican priests. In 2005, church leaders approved, in principle, the idea of women bishops. Work on legislation to codify women bishops began two years ago.

Last year, the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales set up a committee of bishops to liaise with Anglicans interested in a personal ordinariate, which will resemble a military diocese in structure, and also with the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

On July 5, Catholic Bishop Malcolm McMahon of Nottingham met about 70 Anglican clerics to discuss the possibility of an English ordinariate.

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