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Vatican confirms: five Anglican bishops convert

by Sarah Delaney by Catholic News Service

VATICAN CITY -- Five Anglican bishops have decided to join the Catholic Church and step down from their current positions with the Church of England, a Vatican spokesman said.

Jesuit Father Federico Lombardi, director of the Vatican press office, confirmed to reporters a statement issued Nov. 8 by the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales welcoming the five bishops.

Father Lombardi said that a "constitution" that would govern the entry of former bishops of the Anglican Communion was being studied.

One year ago, Pope Benedict XVI established a special structure for Anglicans who want to be in full communion with the Roman Catholic Church while preserving aspects of their Anglican spiritual and liturgical heritage. The move was seen as a bridge to those unhappy with recent Anglican decisions on the ordination of women and the acceptance of homosexuality in some areas.

Father Lombardi said, "Regarding the declaration of five bishops until now belonging to the Anglican Communion who have decided to join the Catholic Church and who therefore are obliged by conscience to resign from their current pastoral duties in the Church of England, we can confirm that the constitution of a first ordinariate is under study, according to the norms established by the Apostolic Constitution 'Anglicanorum coetibus,' and that any further decisions regarding this will be communicated at the proper moment."

Under the arrangement Anglicans can be received into the Catholic Church as a group while retaining their distinctive patrimony and liturgical practices, including married priests.

Father Lombardi was referring to a statement issued Nov. 8 by the Episcopal Commission of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales that said, "We welcome the decision of Bishops Andrew

Burnham, Keith Newton, John Broadhurst, Edwin Barnes and David Silk to enter into full communion with the Catholic Church through the Ordinariate for England and Wales, which will be established under the provisions of the apostolic constitution 'Anglicanorum coetibus.'"

"At our plenary session next week, the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales will be exploring the establishment of the ordinariate and the warm welcome we will be extending to those who seek to be part of it. Further information will be made known after the meeting."

The statement was signed by Auxiliary Bishop Alan Hopes of Westminster, the highest-ranking former Anglican priest in England and Wales. He joined the Catholic Church in 1994 after the Church of England agreed to ordain women as priests.

A statement from Anglican Archbishop Rowan Williams of Canterbury said he would initiate the process for filling the vacant sees.

In a joint statement released Nov. 8 the five bishops, who resigned their posts effective Dec. 31, said that despite ecumenical efforts, they had been "dismayed, over the last 30 years, to see Anglicans and Catholics move further apart on some of the issues of the day." They said they were particularly "distressed by developments in faith and order in Anglicanism which we believe to be incompatible with the historic vocation of Anglicanism and the tradition of the church for nearly 2,000 years."

The five said that "Anglicanorum coetibus" was "both a generous response to various approaches to the Holy See for help and a bold, new ecumenical instrument in the search for the unity of Christians, the unity for which Christ himself prayed before his passion and death."

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"It is a unity, we believe, which is possible only in eucharistic communion with the successor of St. Peter," they said.

"As bishops, we have even-handedly cared for those who have shared our understanding and those who have taken a different view," they added. "We have now reached the point, however, where we must formally declare our position and invite others who share it to join us on our journey.

"We shall be ceasing, therefore, from public episcopal ministry forthwith, resigning from our pastoral responsibilities in the Church of England" and joining an ordinariate once one is created, they said.

The bishops said they were "very grateful for all that the Church of England has meant for us and given to us all these years, and we hope to maintain close and warm relationships, praying and working together for the coming of God's Kingdom."

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Contributing to this story was Simon Caldwell in Manchester, England.

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