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With a thousand Anglican converts, ordinariate gets going

by John Wilkins



Archbishop Vincent Nichols of Westminster stands with the three former Anglican bishops just ordained Catholic priests at Westminster Cathedral in London Jan. 15. Pictured from left are Fr. John Broadhurst, Fr. Andrew Burnham, Nichols and Fr. Keith Newton. The priests became part of the Personal Ordinariate for former Anglicans. (CNS/Marcin Mazur)

ANALYSIS

Not for nothing has the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in Rome been known as the "Suprema." It does not specialize in consultation with other bodies, whether within the Vatican or elsewhere. This mindset was spectacularly exhibited with the abrupt unveiling of a new supra-territorial Roman Catholic church structure titled a "Personal Ordinariate," with its doors open to groups of disaffected Anglicans throughout the world who were invited to move collectively to Rome, bringing their Anglican patrimony with them. This explosive device had been secretly laid below the surface of Anglican-Roman Catholic relations by a small party of doctrinal congregation sappers, encouraged by Pope Benedict XVI. In press conferences on Oct. 20, 2009, it was detonated.

The debris from the explosion is now settling. In England, the only country so far where the ordinariate is up and running, almost a thousand ex-Anglicans, composed of groups of laity with 64 of their pastors, of whom 54 have applied to become Catholic priests, have come over in the first wave. The ordination of the former Anglican clergy is being fast-tracked for Pentecost. The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith is calling the shots, for the local Roman Catholic bishops had wanted these clergy to undergo a year's preparation.

Three former Anglican bishops, all of them married, all now with the title of monsignor, are the leaders. One, Keith Newton, has been appointed the ordinary, may carry a crosier and wear a miter, and participates in meetings of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales with an equal voice. In an echo of the Anglican synodical tradition, he is required to consult with a governing council of priests and laity, and future holders of his office will be appointed from a list of three candidates drawn up by this council, not by the nuncio.

One of the three, Msgr. Andrew Burnham, a big man with a stubbly beard and quizzical or humorous look, recalled to me how it all came about. At present, he and his wife are still living in the capacious Bishop's House at Dry Sandford just outside Oxford. They are preparing to move out, for the ordinariate in England cannot take any Anglican churches or buildings with it. We talk in his study, where there is an altar, a prie-dieu, candles burning.

Like most of the incomers, Burnham is a former member of Forward in Faith, the majority movement for Anglo-Catholics who fear that the Church of England has lost its hold on church order. At its head has been Bishop John Broadhurst, also now one of the ordinariate's leaders. The precipitating factor causing these Anglicans to go into what has been almost an internal schism was the 1993 decision of the Church of England's General Synod to approve the ordination of women priests. For Forward in Faith, the impending inevitable further move toward the ordination of women bishops threatens to sever the link with the apostolic succession that the Church of England has previously claimed.

A key moment in his journey, Burnham says, came in 2008. "I was 60. I decided I must make a supreme effort. I would go to Rome and try to visit the Vatican." On making inquiries, he was startled to find that not only would he be received at the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, tasked under Cardinal Walter Kasper with Anglican ecumenism, but also at the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, where the prefect, Cardinal William Levada, and his staff would attend.

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He told the news to Keith Newton, like him at that time a "flying bishop," charged

with oversight of Anglican parishes that did not accept women priests. Newton flew out to join him.

Burnham draws a distinction between the responses of the two Vatican dicasteries. At the unity council, Kasper said that the policy so far had been only to dialogue with whole churches. It was not the council's

competence to deal with groups. But Levada at the doctrinal congregation said that "anyone who seeks to adhere to the Catholic faith and believes in the Catholic catechism ought to be received into communion with the Catholic church. That's our competence. Therefore, yes, we're very interested."

These were not the only Anglican bishops fishing in Roman waters. There were clandestine visits by as many as a dozen others from Church of England dioceses. There were energetic approaches from the breakaway Traditional Anglican Communion, claiming to be already Catholics and asking to be accepted lock, stock and barrel.

Says Burnham: "Rome decided that we were the horse to back."

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Hence the doctrinal congregation's brainchild, the Personal Ordinariate, launched without consultation with the Vatican unity council or with the bishops of either local church, and with only two-and-a-half weeks' notice to Anglican Archbishop Rowan Williams of Canterbury, England. Some shell-shocked bishops must be wondering about courtesy, ecumenical method, and observance of the Vatican II doctrine of collegiality between pope and episcopate.

"Isn't this ecumenism as you-come-in-ism?" I ask Newton as we talk in his present office in the Catholic curia in central London. He is dressed precisely in Catholic clericals and wears a large silver pectoral cross. I continue: "I thought the Catholic church, envisaging a long haul, no longer saw things that way?"

"Well," he says, "as for me, I'm impatient."

But still, I ask: Why cross the Tiber in groups? After all, the incomers still have to make an individual profession ("Going through the sheep-dip," Burnham calls it) before rejoining their companions. What stops these petitioners from doing what John Henry Newman did, which was to seek discernment, make up his mind, summon a Catholic priest and in 1845 ask to be received? He brought his Anglican patrimony with him (consultation of the laity, development of doctrine, patristic instead of scholastic sources, primacy of conscience) and he made waves with it. He did not need an ordinariate.

In reply, Newton refers to Newman's expressed concern for help to "those shivering on the brink."

Group entry, Newton adds, makes real the exchange of gifts. "If you become a Catholic individually, you take on a new history. But with the ordinariate, you take what's made you what you are, and you bring it into the Roman Catholic church with you, you're proud of it and you revel in it. I found my vocation at the age of about 15, and I've been ordained for 37 years: I can't pretend that hasn't happened."



This affirmation of the enduring value of his Anglican past chimes with

the stress laid on 'Anglican patrimony' in the constitution and norms for the Personal Ordinariate, published under the title *Anglicanorum Coetibus*. Here is an attempt to put flesh on the bones of a promise first made to Anglicans during the Malines Conversations in Belgium in the 1920s, that they would be 'united, not absorbed.' The promise was reiterated by Pope Paul VI in a passage added at the last minute in his own hand to the text of his homily for the canonization of 40 English and Welsh martyrs in 1970. He spoke of the Anglican church as an 'ever-beloved sister' with a 'worthy patrimony of piety and usage' that must be preserved.

But what exactly does this patrimony consist of? The answer is by no means obvious.

Anyone who watched the televised service of evening prayer in Westminster Abbey when the pope visited Britain last year -- or for that matter the recent royal wedding in the same abbey -- will have been impressed by Anglican liturgy: the ordered dignity and rhythm of the ceremonial, the poetry of the words, the very English expression of restrained emotion, the well-turned addresses, the hymns that draw the congregation into the beauty and the challenge of Christian doctrine and life and -- Catholics please note -- are sung to raise the roof. 'Most of us,' says Burnham, 'have that in our DNA.'

But to what extent will the incomers have it also in their consciousness? In 2009 when Levada called at Lambeth Palace to acquaint Williams with the Roman innovation that was coming down the tracks toward him, the Anglican ecumenist Bishop Christopher Hill of Guildford, England, was called to join them. The cardinal began to praise the riches of the Anglican liturgical patrimony.

Hill felt impelled to enter a reservation. The group of clergy who might consider opting for the ordinariate, he demurred, were precisely those who for many years had used the Roman Missal and the Roman Divine Office. 'I could see the cardinal's face drop,' the bishop told me.

The rite being prepared for the ordinariate in concert with the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and the Congregation for Divine Worship will be based on the Book of Divine Worship approved for nine 'Anglican use' parishes in the United States since 1980. Hill sees little here that is authentically Anglican. He hopes that the version for England, due soon, will be more imaginative.

Another fundamental aspect of Anglican patrimony is a married clergy. Former Anglicans with their wives and families are by now a familiar feature of the Catholic priesthood in Britain. Now there will be more. But the norms for the ordinariate anticipate that the present provision for such clergy will be phased

out. Indeed, says Newton, but the ordinary may petition Rome for exceptions on a case-by-case basis.

Where does all this leave the previous mainstream ecumenical instrument between the two Communion, the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission? A recent editorial in the newspaper of the Catholic diocese of Lancaster opined that only the ordinariate now offered a viable way of reunion.

Yet the commission, under the aegis of what was then the Vatican's Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity, now the unity council, at first made amazing progress. Crucial was its method, as set out by Pope Paul VI and Archbishop of Canterbury Michael Ramsey, and later confirmed by Pope John Paul II: to seek to cross the line of opposed doctrinal formulations to examine how far the Christian reality underlying them was in fact shared. By taking this course, the commission claimed to have reached agreement on ministry and sacraments, and considerable agreement on authority. But then came divergence. The Church of England put the ordination of women above ecumenism and, after keeping the Anglicans waiting for 10 years for a response, Rome appeared to repudiate the commission's whole method.

The ordinariate's new leaders hope that the doctrinal congregation sappers have now blown a way through the subsequent ecumenical roadblock. The congregation is introducing a new ecumenical model, says Burnham, based on assent to the Catechism of the Catholic Church as the authoritative expression of Catholic belief.

But though the catechism contains dogmatic statements, it is not itself dogma. Some Roman Catholic theologians, such as Professor Nicholas Lash of the University of Cambridge, England, have deep reservations about the congregation's approach. The catechism is not a profession of faith, Lash protests, and should not be treated as such.

No one knows what the future holds. People are waiting to see how the ordinariate in England progresses, and what the Church of England does next. But what remains with me is the joyful relief and commitment of these newcomers. At last, they feel, they are understood and wanted.

Though still tempted to look over their shoulders at the factions in the church they have left, they have no need to worry about that anymore. They are free now, they feel, for mission to everyone, Anglican style. They are determined to make the experiment work: They know they have to mix in, while bringing their particular gifts. They come with humility, they say, and stress their gratitude for the warmth of their welcome.

[John Wilkins is a former editor of *The Tablet*. He was himself an Anglican before becoming a Catholic 45 years ago.]

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