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Report on U.S. ordinariate for ex-Anglicans

by Nancy Frazier O'Brien by Catholic News Service

BELLEVUE, Wash. -- As many as 100 U.S. Anglican priests and 2,000 laypeople could be the first members of a U.S. personal ordinariate for former Anglicans who want to enter into full communion with the Catholic Church, Cardinal Donald W. Wuerl of Washington reported to his fellow bishops June 15.

Cardinal Wuerl was appointed by the Vatican last September to guide the incorporation of Anglican groups into the Catholic Church in the United States under "Anglicanorum coetibus," an apostolic constitution issued by Pope Benedict XVI in November 2009.

At a news conference following his report, Cardinal Wuerl said he "wouldn't be surprised" if the Vatican were to establish the U.S. ordinariate by the end of the year. "I think it will be sooner rather than later," he said.

Two Anglican congregations in Maryland -- St. Luke's in Bladensburg and Mount Calvary in Baltimore -- have announced their intention to join the new ordinariate once it is established.

Addressing the bishops at the close of the first day of their spring general assembly near Seattle, the cardinal said St. Mary's Seminary in Houston has developed and the Vatican has approved an intensive nine-month program of priestly formation for Anglican clergy who wish to become Catholic priests.

Father Jeffrey Steenson, the former Episcopal bishop of the Rio Grande who became a Catholic in 2007 and now teaches at St. Mary's Seminary, was instrumental in developing the program, which focuses on "the areas of historic theological divergence" between the Catholic and Anglican churches, Cardinal Wuerl said.

The only ordinariate created thus far under "Anglicanorum coetibus" is the Personal Ordinariate of Our Lady of Walsingham in England, which includes 60 former Anglican clergy and some 1,000 laypeople.

Ordinariates are under consideration in Australia and Canada, as well as in the United States.

Outlining the process he has followed to ascertain interest in formation of a U.S. ordinariate, Cardinal Wuerl said he received "a significant number of letters, emails and calls" from interested Anglicans after his appointment last September.

The cardinal heads a task force that also includes Bishop Robert J. McManus of Worcester, Mass., and Bishop Kevin W. Vann of Fort Worth, Texas. Father Scott Hurd, a priest of the Archdiocese of Washington who had been an Episcopal priest, serves as liaison to the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops for implementation of "Anglicanorum coetibus."

Cardinal Wuerl said the task force reported earlier this year to both the Vatican and the USCCB that the establishment of a U.S. ordinariate "would in fact be workable."

The current task involves preparation of dossiers to be sent to the Vatican on each of the Anglican priests who is seeking admission to the priestly formation process, he said.

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"This information will include the results of criminal background checks, a psychological evaluation, a letter of resignation from their Anglican entity" and letters from Cardinal Wuerl or the head of the ordinariate once it is established, the Catholic bishop in which the candidate resides and, if possible, his former Anglican authority, the cardinal said.

Once that information has been submitted to the Vatican, the candidate "will cease celebrating the Anglican Eucharist" and begin leading his congregation in the catechetical preparation for them to become Catholics, he said.

Cardinal Wuerl suggested that the U.S. bishops could assist in the process by providing worship space to small communities in their dioceses that are seeking to become Catholic; assigning a priest to serve as liaison to such groups; making available the resources of diocesan marriage tribunals to assist Anglicans, clergy and lay, whose marriages need to be regularized; and offering the services of a local director of religious education or other educator to assist in the catechetical preparation of those seeking to become Catholics.

The questions directed at Cardinal Wuerl by his fellow bishops indicated a certain level of anxiety about how the ordinariate will operate in relation to their dioceses and how they might respond to members of other denominations who are attracted to the ordinariate idea.

Although the ordinariates are designed to be fully Catholic while retaining elements of the Anglican heritage, Cardinal Wuerl acknowledged that it is not entirely clear what those elements are and how they will be maintained.

The cardinal also stressed that the reception of formerly Anglican congregations into the Catholic Church through the provisions of "Anglicanorum coetibus" is distinct from the Pastoral Provision established by Pope John Paul II through which married Anglican clergy could join the Catholic Church as individuals.

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