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Former Episcopalians welcome new Catholic structure

by Jerry Filteau



Fr. Jeffrey N. Steenson (CNS)

WASHINGTON -- Leaders of the new U.S. Catholic ordinariate established Jan. 1 for former Anglicans/Episcopalians said they and their people welcomed with "joy and gratitude" the historic Vatican announcement that Pope Benedict XVI had established the new church jurisdiction for them.

The new ordinariate -- the equivalent of a nationwide diocese -- is based in Houston and is headed by Fr. Jeffrey N. Steenson. A former Episcopal bishop, he became Catholic along with his wife, Debra, in 2007; was ordained a Catholic priest in 2009; and now teaches theology at two Catholic institutions in Houston, the University of St. Thomas and St. Mary's Seminary.

Key to the ordinariate is that former U.S. Anglican/Episcopalian priests and communities entering the Catholic church will be able to continue worshiping in their centuries-old Anglican tradition centering on the Book of Common Prayer. It is slightly adapted to conform with classical Catholic worship but retains most of Anglicans' own special traditions and customs -- most of which marked no real departure from Roman Catholic teaching or practice -- while entering into full unity with Rome.

St. Mary's will be the formation center for all former U.S. Episcopal priests entering the Catholic church and seeking Catholic ordination as part of the new ordinariate. It will also likely be the main formation center for any future seminarians preparing for priesthood in the ordinariate.

Most former Episcopal priests who reconcile with the Catholic church by entering the ordinariate are married, as was the case since 1980 with U.S. Episcopal priests who became Catholic and were accepted for Catholic ministry under a special pastoral provision established by Pope John Paul II.

The chief difference is that most priests who became Catholic under the 1980 provision entered into full Catholic communion as individuals (albeit often with their wives and perhaps their children), while applicants for the new ordinariate are ordinarily former Episcopal priests who are accompanied by a group of former lay Episcopalians who share their desire to reconcile with the Catholic church.

Stenson is married and therefore cannot be ordained a bishop, but as head of the ordinariate he is a voting member of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

In a news release Jan. 1 on its new website, www.usordinariate.org, the new ordinariate said that more than 100 U.S. Episcopal priests and some 1,400 laity from 22 U.S. Episcopal parishes are already in the process of transitioning from membership in the U.S. Episcopal church to the Catholic church under the auspices of the new ordinariate.

In a national phone teleconference for media Jan. 2, Stenson described both the pain and the joy that he and many fellow former members of the Anglican Communion, which includes the U.S. Episcopal church, feel in their pilgrimage to reconciliation with the Roman Catholic church -- repairing a break that goes back to the 16th century, when King Henry VIII formed the Church of England.

Stenson said his pilgrimage to reconciliation with Rome began several years ago with conscientious objections to the way the Anglican Communion sought to respond to movements within the communion to bless gay unions. What troubled him was not so much the doctrinal issue itself, but how church authority was or was not being exercised to respond to it, he said.

"The archbishop of Canterbury and the Anglican Communion tried to bring in what they called stronger instruments of unity, that each of the members of the Anglican Communion would be accountable to each other," he told journalists in the teleconference. "And the [U.S.] Episcopal church said in 2007: No, we can't do that. Our polity demands that we [function] as an autonomous democracy, basically."

"That was a question that was a real catalyst for me in bringing me to my journey to the Catholic church," he continued.

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"But you know, that's only a catalyst, because you quickly leave all those issues behind and the journey becomes a very positive journey, reaching out to the fullness of the Catholic truth."

"So before I knew it, all that emotion and that troubled soul -- that was all in the rearview mirror for me. And I look back now with joy and gratitude for my life as an Anglican. All those memories that were difficult are gone. It's sort of like childbirth, I'm told. They [mothers] don't remember the pains; they just remember the joy, and that's, I think, something of how I must feel in this."

Stenson is a theologian with a graduate degree from Harvard Divinity School in Cambridge, Mass., and a doctorate in patristics, the study of ancient Christian theologians, from the University of Oxford in England.

Fr. Scott Hurd, another former Episcopalian priest and currently pastor of an Anglican use Catholic parish in the Washington archdiocese, has been named vicar general of the new ordinariate.

The formation of the new Ordinariate of the Chair of St. Peter for former Anglicans/Episcopalians in the United States seeking reconciliation with Rome in groups is the immediate result of a 2009 apostolic constitution by Benedict, *Anglicanorum Coetibus* (?Groups of Anglicans?).

It is also an evolutionary development from the 1980 U.S. pastoral provision by Pope John Paul II. Both Catholic initiatives, in 1980 and 2009, came in response to numerous requests from within the Anglican Communion, especially by priests who felt called to reconciliation with the Catholic church and the papacy and regarded new positions adopted within the Anglican Communion as fresh obstacles impeding and delaying, perhaps indefinitely, their desired ecumenical reunion between the sister churches.

Since 1980, more than a dozen Catholic communities -- where former Episcopal clergy received into the Catholic church were joined by a substantial number of their former Episcopalian flock -- have been established within local U.S. Catholic dioceses.

A few of those communities have been sufficiently large and stable to be established as full parishes of the diocese -- distinguished by the use of Anglican liturgical and devotional traditions, adapted only as necessary to conform to Catholic teaching.

The new U.S. ordinariate is the second to be formed. The first, formed a year ago, is the Ordinariate of Our Lady of Walsingham, for England and Wales. Similar ordinariates are also under consideration currently in Canada and Australia.

In the teleconference, church officials said that some U.S. Catholic parishes or communities of Anglican use that are currently under the authority of the local Catholic diocese might request to be transferred to the authority of the ordinariate. Such requests will be considered on a case-by-case basis, they said.

Stenson emphasized that whether an Anglican-use parish or community is part of the national Catholic ordinariate or part of the local Catholic diocese in terms of jurisdiction and administration, it will be called to participate actively in the life of the local diocese and develop strong bonds of trust and collaboration.

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What does the presence of Catholics in the new ordinariate mean for other Catholics? Filteau answers this and other pastoral, canonical and ecclesiastical questions about the new ordinariate in an in depth analysis found on the NCR website at NCRonline.org/node/28397.

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