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Former rector of nation's largest Episcopal church becomes a Catholic

by Greg Garrison by Religion News Service

Birmingham, Ala. — The former rector of the nation's largest Episcopal church has become a Roman Catholic.

The Rev. Larry Gipson was dean of the Cathedral Church of the Advent in Birmingham from 1982-94 and rector at St. Martin's Episcopal Church in Houston, where his parishioners included former President George H.W. Bush and his wife, Barbara, from 1994 to 2008.

Last month, Gipson was accepted as a Catholic into the Personal Ordinariate of the Chair of St. Peter, a structure set up by Pope Benedict XVI to accept former Anglicans into the Catholic church.

"The nature of authority in the Catholic church is what attracted me to it," Gipson said. "After I retired, I was concerned and had been for many years about the Episcopal Church's authority structure."

Gipson will be among 69 candidates for Catholic priesthood attending a formation retreat this weekend in Houston at the ordinariate's headquarters.

Among those leading seminars at the Formation Retreat in Houston will be Fr. Jon Chalmers, who was ordained a Catholic priest in June, the second former Episcopal cleric to be accepted as a priest under the ordinariate.

His wife, Margaret Chalmers, former canon lawyer for the Catholic Diocese of Birmingham and now chancellor of the ordinariate, will also be a presenter at the weekend retreat that runs Friday night through Sunday.

"It's a really big deal," she said. "Larry Gipson, who was the priest of the largest Episcopal church in America, is now a Catholic."

Although married Episcopal priests have been accepted as Catholic priests since 1983 under Pope John Paul II, only about 100 came in during that process, Margaret Chalmers said.

This year, the ordinariate has already ordained 24 priests, with 69 in preparation. Her husband was accepted as a Catholic in January and ordained as a Catholic priest in June.

Fr. Matthew Venuti of Mobile was the first ex-Episcopal priest ordained a Catholic priest in the ordinariate, which covers the United States and Canada.

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Venuti and Chalmers both have young children, as do many of the new Catholic priests, Margaret Chalmers said.

The ordinariate allows the new Catholics to keep their Anglican form of worship, including the Book of Common Prayer.

Gipson and his wife of 48 years, Mary Frances, attend the headquarters church of the ordinariate, Our Lady of Walsingham in Houston.

"All their services are Prayer Book services," Gipson said. "The music is from the 1940 (Episcopal) hymnal. It is the Anglican Rite prayer book. It's the opportunity to come into the Catholic Church while maintaining Anglican tradition."

Although many Episcopalians have left the denomination over issues such as consecrating openly gay bishops and blessing same-sex unions, Gipson said he didn't leave in anger.

"I don't have the right to ask the Anglican Church to change its traditions for me," he said. "I'm the one who has got to make the changes. Anglicanism has always been hesitant to define doctrine because it has opposing factions. It has left doctrine blurry. People can believe almost mutually opposing beliefs."

Gipson, 70, started attending an Episcopal church with his future wife when he was 14 in Memphis. "I'm thankful to the Episcopal church," he said. "I spent my life there. All my friends and people I love are in it. I do not in any way wish to denigrate it. I'm not angry. I was seeking something that I've been longing for, for a long time."

Now, he's looking forward to the possibility of being ordained as a Catholic priest. Earlier this year he earned a master's degree in Catholic theology from St. Thomas University, although he already had a master of divinity degree from Yale University.

"I was an Episcopal priest for 42 years," he said. "I can't imagine not being a priest. I'm anxious to get back to priestly work."

[Greg Garrison writes for *The Birmingham News*.]

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