

Welcoming Anglicans not new for this parish

Joshua J. McElwee | Nov. 23, 2009



Fr. Ernie Davis proclaims the Gospel at an Anglican-use liturgy at St. Therese Little Flower Parish in Kansas City, Mo., Nov. 1. (NCR photo/Joshua J. McElwee)

KANSAS CITY, MO. -- For St. Therese Little Flower Parish here, news of a new process for welcoming Anglicans into the Catholic church is not some distant idea. It's something parishioners experience every time they come to church.

The Vatican last month announced the creation of new ecclesiastical structures to absorb disaffected Anglicans wishing to become Catholics. The structures will allow those Anglicans to hold onto their distinctive spiritual practices, including the ordination of married former Anglican clergy as Catholic priests.

Last year, St. Therese, a small parish, welcomed a group of about 20 converts from a local church in the Anglican tradition. The converts left their former church after a falling out on several fronts.

"There were some issues that came up that gave me a definite reason to question whether or not I was attending the right church," said Cristen Huntz, one of the former Anglicans who converted to Catholicism and is now the parish business manager. "I needed to look for something that provided more longevity and fit with my values and the form of worship that I was accustomed to."

Huntz, who was treasurer and senior warden at her Anglican church -- an approximate equivalent to the head of a pastoral council in a Catholic parish, said that she found herself wondering if her "son was going to have a place to go to church when he grew up if he chose to follow in my religious tradition."

Although there were many issues the new parishioners offered for their conversion, a number involved questions of sexuality.

"Openly professing gay people as bishops -- it's amazing," said Robert Fliss. "This is the church's tradition. You don't ordain women or gay people -- it's just crazy. A lot of our parish couldn't tolerate that kind of nonsense."

The new converts were helped along in the process by the parish's pastoral administrator, a converted

Episcopalian priest who was ordained in the Catholic church in 2002.

"I had really bought it hook, line and sinker that the Episcopal church was part of the Catholic church and hoped that someday it would be recognized," said Fr. Ernie Davis, speaking of his own conversion to the Catholic church. "I realized that that's maybe a nice wish and a beautiful hope, but it's not the reality."

To accommodate the spiritual desires of those who had come from the Anglican tradition, St. Therese added another Sunday Mass to its schedule. This Mass is celebrated using the approved adaptation of the Anglican Book of Common Prayer known as the Book of Divine Worship.

One of the key differences between this rite and the one normally used is its translation. Where the first eucharistic prayer in the ordinary use calls upon the Holy Spirit with the words, "We come to you, Father, with praise and thanksgiving, through Jesus Christ your Son," in the Anglican use it is "Most merciful Father, we humbly pray thee, through Jesus Christ, thy Son our Lord."

Some lifelong Catholics in the parish have concerns about the new liturgy.

"Oh my goodness," said Fran Totta, a family therapist who attends the Mass before the Anglican-use liturgy. "There's kneeling for Communion, the priest facing the altar. All the visual triggers are worrisome."

"For people my age, it's a little bit disconcerting," said Totta. "It feels like we're regressing from the Vatican II model of going with the spirit of the law to the letter of the law. There used to be more heart." Totta said she's going to wait and see what happens.

Although questions have been asked about the new liturgy and their traditions, the new members are happy in the parish.

"I've never felt as wholeheartedly welcomed as at St. Therese," said Huntz. "The questions were asked by people who cared very much for their parish and were trying to find ways to incorporate us into that family with the most ease for everybody."

Fliss, who converted with his wife a year ago, thinks that many more will convert from the Anglican tradition.

"With what the pope is offering, I think we're going to see this explode," he said. "People will take advantage of this new process."

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