

A response from the Anglican Catholic Church to Rome's Offer to Former Anglicans

1. Rome's Offer

The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) on October 20th issued a widely publicized Note that summarizes a forthcoming Apostolic Constitution concerning former Anglicans seeking to be received into full union with the Roman Catholic Church. This Constitution, as best one can judge from the Note, mainly will do two new things:

First, it will extend internationally terms offered already to some in North America by the Pastoral Provision and by the Book of Divine Worship. The Pastoral Provision permits ordination as Roman Catholic priests for some married, formerly Anglican clergy who join the Roman Catholic Church, and this despite the general Roman demand for clerical celibacy. The Book of Divine Worship contains some liturgical forms which have sources in the Anglican tradition: the so-called Anglican Use. At present these forms may be permitted by the local Roman bishop when both a group of former Anglicans desiring the Use and also a competent priest are present. The Pastoral Provision has permitted many dozens of former Anglican clergymen to become Roman Catholic priests. The Anglican Use, in contrast, has had little success, with fewer than ten congregations. In any case, the Apostolic Constitution will extend beyond North America permission both for the Roman Catholic ordination of married, former Anglicans and also for some Anglican liturgical usages within the Roman Church.

The second and more innovative development promised by the Note is the establishment of Ordinariates composed of former Anglicans and led by former Anglicans ordained as Roman clergy and then appointed by Rome as Ordinaries. The new Ordinariates would, it seems, have jurisdiction over such former Anglicans even while those former Anglicans live within the boundaries of existing Roman Catholic dioceses. This development may give a somewhat higher status to an "Anglican Use" within the Roman Church and may signal its development into something more than a short-lived, transitional arrangement in the rare cases of joint conversion to Rome by a suitable Anglican clergyman and by a congregation interested in retaining elements of the Anglican patrimony.

The Note, in brief, offers terms for conversion by Anglicans to the Roman Catholic Church. These terms are, from Rome's point of view, fairly generous and innovative. For persons who already believe that the doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church is superior to classical Anglican or Orthodox theology, such terms are significant. We have nothing to say against the pleasure such former Anglicans will feel in evidence of a benevolent interest from the Vatican. And we are certain that Pope Benedict by this Constitution intends to be generous, kind, and welcoming and even, in a sense, subjectively intends to be respectful towards and appreciative of some aspects of our Anglican heritage.

II. Our Response

The Note, however, does not mark in any respect an ecumenical advance. The Note assumes the fullest and highest claims for the Petrine Office which emanate from Vatican I and Vatican II. The Note assumes the essential correctness of Pope Leo XIII's condemnation of Anglican Orders and practically implies that for all effective purposes that condemnation has not been reconsidered or superseded in any degree by subsequent events. The Note assumes that Anglican confirmations and ordinations are utterly null and absolutely void. The Note does not imply the union of ecclesial bodies, but rather the conversion of former Anglicans to Roman Catholicism with what amounts to the prior, effective, and complete dissolution of their former ecclesial structures. This conversion by absorption is the case even if some of the leaders of those former structures may eventually gain

office in new subdivisions of the Roman Catholic Church. We assume that local or congregational ownership of property will be entirely extinguished in accordance with normal Roman Catholic practice.

Insofar as the Note and subsequent Constitution provide for relatively one-sided conversions of former Anglicans with minimal concessions, we fear that the Note and Constitution in fact will harm and retard genuine ecumenical progress. By genuine ecumenical progress we mean, for instance, joint consideration of the Petrine Office of the sort some hoped for after promulgation by John Paul II of his encyclical *Ut Unum Sint*. While Pope John Paul repeated a description of the modern Petrine Office and noted the need for 'the power and authority without which such an office would be illusory' (94), he also seemed to speak of a joint exploration of the manner in which that office is exercised which might, it seems, help to reconcile classical Anglicans, as well as Orthodox and Oriental Christians, to the Roman Catholic Church. Pope John Paul wrote,

"I am convinced that I have a particular responsibility in this regard, above all in acknowledging the ecumenical aspirations of the majority of the Christian Communities and in heeding the request made of me to find a way of exercising the primacy which, while in no way renouncing what is essential to its mission, is nonetheless open to a new situation. For a whole millennium Christians were united in 'a brotherly fraternal communion of faith and sacramental life ... If disagreements in belief and discipline arose among them, the Roman See acted by common consent as moderator.'" (95)

Anglican and Orthodox Christians look for union and full communion without "conversion," submission, and effective absorption and for an exercise of the Petrine Office that is compatible with the actual situation of the Church of the first millennium. The new Constitution will do nothing to forward that goal.

The forthcoming Constitution is in effect addressed to those who are already essentially Roman Catholic. We are not. We wish nothing but the best to Roman Catholic converts when they act in good conscience. But persons already convinced of the truth of Roman Catholic teaching in its fulness should become Roman Catholics promptly with or without the Pastoral Provision, with or without a liturgical "Anglican Use," and with or without the new Ordinariates. We see in this Note an offer which is merely prudential and practical in its nature and effect, and we do not see anything to attract persons who are not already essentially Roman Catholic in faith.

We believe that classical Anglicanism, as presented clearly in The Affirmation of Saint Louis and in our liturgies and other authoritative formularies, is already faithful to Scripture and the Fathers and is already fully Catholic and Orthodox. Conversion is not necessary and absorption is not appropriate. We believe that our Anglican patrimony is, moreover, by God's grace and Providence, also most appropriate for the English-speaking peoples and probably is essential for the successful evangelization or re-evangelization of the English-speaking lands. We hope eventually for a genuine dialogue concerning the Petrine Office and long for the day when we, with our Orthodox and Oriental Christian friends, may again find in the successor of Saint Peter a patriarch with the primacy of honor and with high authority both as an organ for strengthening the Church's unity and also as an instrument for the articulation of the Church's teaching. We regret that the forthcoming Constitution, while kindly meant, seems set to delay that happy day.

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