

Benedict's new ecumenism: How will Anglicans respond?

by [Ian Markham](#) in the [December 15, 2009](#) issue

Pope Benedict's invitation to Anglican bodies to join the Roman Catholic Church was seen by some observers as historically momentous and by others as insignificant (after all, a provision has always been there for Anglicans to convert). Which is it?

The decision is certainly significant, because for the first time the Vatican has created a canonical provision for Anglicans within the Roman Catholic Church. Pope John Paul II in 1982 made a "pastoral provision" for Anglican priests who were unhappy with the ordination of women, allowing them to continue to use Anglican rites while being in full communion with Rome. But the latest Vatican move is the first time that the Vatican has made provision for (to use the technical language of the Apostolic Constitution) an ordinate to be led by an ordinary (one who governs)—an ordinate that retains distinctive Anglican liturgy and hymnody and that allows married Anglican priests to be Roman Catholic and married Anglican bishops to be regarded as the equivalent of a retired Roman Catholic bishop. The Roman Catholic Church has in effect created a branch of the Roman Catholic tree that can embrace significant numbers of Anglican clergy and congregations.

Predicting how attractive this offer will be is difficult, however. The English press has been full of dramatic predictions of a mass exodus to Rome by Anglo-Catholic priests and congregations. Although the Vatican's offer coincided, perhaps deliberately, with heated debates within the Church of England over women bishops, the shift to Rome is still a difficult cultural one for Anglicans. The benign hierarchy of Church of England bishops is entirely different from the hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church.

Perhaps this offer presents more of an issue for members of the recently created province called the Anglican Church of North America (ACNA). This group, headed by Bishop Robert Duncan in Pittsburgh, broke away from the Episcopal Church over a range of issues. ACNA is a coalition of low-church Reformed evangelicals and high-church Anglo-Catholics. There are tensions within the ACNA over ecclesiology and the ordination of women.

If, as is likely, the Anglo-Catholic diocese of San Joaquin, a member of ACNA, is forced to relinquish its property to the Episcopal Church, then the offer from Rome may look attractive. The diocese's clergy and congregations will need new buildings, and they have already coped with the psychological drama of leaving one church, so they may be better able to cope with an additional shift. And moving to Rome would enable them to escape inevitable theological tensions embedded in the new province.

Whether or not many Anglican groups avail themselves of this offer, it is clear that Pope Benedict XVI has rewritten the rules of ecumenical engagement. From the time when Roman Catholics and Protestants would embark on a holy war against each other, the parties had moved to a place where it was considered unseemly to seek recruits from each other's churches. After all, everyone had reasoned, all Christian communities are grounded in Christ and witness to the gospel, so what we share is more important than our differences. The differences are often seen as a matter of style—go to a Baptist church if you like a certain kind of music or go to a Lutheran church if you like liturgy. For many laypeople, denominational identity is very fluid. There are fewer and fewer cradle anythingings.

Pope Benedict XVI has shattered this cozy indifference to differences between denominations. Thomas Bohlin, head of Opus Dei in the U.S., puts it bluntly when he explains the significance of the offer this way: "Catholics believe that Jesus established the Catholic Church to bring to humanity the fruits of His redemption and His saving message . . . The Church sees herself as having a sacred duty to pass on the authentic teaching she has received from Christ." For Bohlin, the differences between Roman Catholics and non-Catholics are not simply matters of style: they include theological truths. At the eschaton and in heaven, Bohlin believes, all those who are saved will encounter the truth of the Roman Catholic Church: the eschaton is not some mystery beyond all denominations. Inviting Anglicans to recover (after all, before King Henry VIII, Anglicans were Roman Catholics) their Catholic heritage is an invitation to recover the full truth of the Church of Rome.

This stance is probably a healthy corrective to the complacency that has pervaded ecumenical conversations. While much is shared between the denominations, there are also sharp disagreements and contrasting visions. Although no one wants to return to a state of holy war, it is appropriate to recognize these disagreements.

It would be good, for example, if the Episcopal Church began work on a comparable canonical provision to enable Roman Catholic clergy and congregations to join a tradition that lives in between Geneva and Rome, one that seeks to be a big conversational tent, affirms married clergy, celebrates women in the ordained ministry, and recognizes and honors different sexual orientations. It would be good if the Episcopal Church made clear that these positions are closer to the mystery of the truth of God and will indeed be part of the richness of the life to come. All of this would be good both for the identity of the Episcopal Church and the richness of the ecumenical conversation.

The Episcopal Church would need to underpin such a response with some hard theological work. We need to use the tools of Christendom (scripture, tradition and reason) to explain to our sister churches what we believe and why we believe it. We need to demonstrate that a more “progressive” reading of scripture and tradition is possible and provide evidence that it is an act of faithfulness to God to include rather than to condemn. If we attend to these things, this can be a good moment for both the Episcopal Church and the worldwide Anglican Communion.