

Anglican leader, in Vatican City, downplays church strains: Dialogue back on track

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Speaking in Vatican City a month after the Vatican unveiled plans to facilitate the conversion of conservative Anglicans to Catholicism, Arch bishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams offered a moderately hopeful assessment of ecumenical relations between the two churches.

The “ecumenical glass is genuinely half full,” he said on November 19 after his lecture at the Pontifical Gregorian University.

In his talk, Williams stressed the “theological convergence” on major doctrinal questions accomplished by Anglican-Catholic dialogue during the past four decades. He characterized areas of continued controversy, including disagreements over the ordination of women, as “second-order issues.”

Williams referred only once to what he called the “elephant in the room,” the Vatican’s plan to establish special Catholic dioceses in which former Anglicans can retain many traditional forms of worship and governance, as well as a limited married priesthood.

The archbishop downplayed the significance of the Vatican plan, which he called an “imaginative pastoral response to the needs of some” that “does not break any fresh ecclesiological ground.” A new Catholic diocese for former Anglicans, he suggested, is more likely to resemble a mere “chaplaincy” than a full-fledged “church gathered around a bishop.”

In an official communiqué on November 21 after their first meeting, Pope Benedict XVI and Williams said relationships between their large church bodies will not be scuttled by the Vatican offer to embrace disaffected Anglicans. A commission preparing the third phase of their international theological dialogue met days later.

Writing on the Web site of *America* magazine, Catholic journalist Austen Ivereigh said that the dialogue between the two traditions “appears to be back on track after some years on the sidings.” A key Williams adviser, Jonathan Goodall, remained in Rome to prepare for the new round of talks. -*Religion News Service, Ecumenical News International*