

Media priest's conversion strains ecumenical ties: Alberto Cutié joins Episcopal Church

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In the nearly 500 years since the Church of England split with the Roman Catholic Church, a fair number of converts have crossed from one church to the other. Still, the path can be rocky, as Alberto Cutié—the most recent high-profile convert—discovered on May 28 when he left Catholicism to join the Episcopal Church.

Known as “Father Oprah” because of his popularity and media savvy, Cutié was caught by a photographer in an embrace with his girlfriend on a Florida beach early in May. The 40-year-old celebrity cleric later admitted to struggling with the Catholic priesthood’s mandatory celibacy requirement and was suspended from ministry.

Just weeks later, Cutié announced that he hopes “to continue priestly ministry and service in my new spiritual home,” the Episcopal Church, which allows priests to marry. He had been considering conversion for two years, according to the Episcopal Diocese of Southeast Florida.

With a star of Cutié’s magnitude— millions have tuned in to his television and radio shows focusing on relationship advice—media attention to his conversion perhaps was inevitable. Reporters from English- and Spanish-language media crowded into Trinity Episcopal Cathedral in Miami to witness the half-hour ceremony and subsequent press conference.

Miami’s Catholic archbishop, John Favalora, Cutié’s former boss, was not pleased. In addition to criticizing the new convert, he blasted his Episcopal counterpart, Bishop Leo Frade of Southeast Florida, for breaking the unwritten rules of conversion: Advise the other bishop about your plans and don’t show up the other faith by making a public display.

“Bishop Frade has never spoken to me about his position on this delicate matter or what actions he was contemplating,” Favalora said in a statement. “This is a truly serious setback for ecumenical relations and cooperation between us.”

Moreover, Favalora said his archdiocese “has never made a public display when, for doctrinal reasons, Episcopal priests have joined the Catholic Church and sought ordination. . . . I regret that Bishop Frade has not afforded me or the Catholic community the same courtesy and respect.”

Even some Episcopalians say Favalora has a point. Bishop Christopher Epting, the Episcopal Church’s point person for interfaith affairs, said: “There’s no written rule, but it’s certainly been the informal understanding between all our ecumenical partners that it’s not something one seeks headlines about. It doesn’t help us ecumenically.”

There’s a delicate diplomacy relating to conversions, with long-established protocols to ensure that interfaith bridges that take decades to build are not burned in a single afternoon. Epting said the Episcopal Church’s ecumenical office, which is usually consulted on all conversions, was not informed about the ceremony ahead of time.

“I wish we had been consulted,” Epting said. “We will be pursuing this.”

Frade told the *Miami Herald*: “The only thing we can say is that we pray for ecumenical relations. . . . I am sorry they are sorry, and we love them.”

In his blog on his diocese’s Web site, Frade indicated May 28 that the timing of Cutié’s announcement was not ideal. “Given the publicity that Father Alberto has gained, once he made his decision we believed it necessary to move quickly and decisively.” The bishop said that “we want to maintain openness and dialogue on all church matters, but we also want to avoid rumors and speculation.”

As Cutié begins his new ordination process, Frade wrote to diocesan priests and members, “the Episcopal Church, with our message of inclusiveness and reconciliation, will serve as a vital new spiritual home for Father Cutié.”

Cutié is hardly the first Catholic to leave the fold for love. In fact, the Church of England, which later spawned the Episcopal Church in the U.S., was created when King Henry VIII wanted to divorce his wife and Pope Clement VII wouldn’t let him. Henry started the Church of England and appointed himself its head.

But there’s been plenty of traffic toward Rome too, said William Stetson of the Newark, New Jersey–based Office of Pastoral Provision, which was created by Pope John Paul II in 1980 to prepare former Episcopal priests for ministry in the Catholic Church. Every year four or five former Episcopal priests—in recent years including several bishops—convert to the Catholic Church, he said.

However, his office “has always advised not giving publicity to these events,” Stetson said. For example, when the former Episcopal bishop of Southwest Florida, John Lipscomb, announced his conversion to Catholicism two years ago, “there was no display,” Stetson said. “This case in Florida [with Cutié] where you have it within a couple of weeks, and in a public ceremony—that’s not cool.”

But none of those other converts were celebrities. In a sense, Frade’s hands were tied because of the new convert’s fame, said Jim Naughton, director of communications for the Episcopal Diocese of Washington.

“When [someone] joins the Episcopal Church, it would be silly to chase them away,” he said. “And in such unusual circumstances it’s very difficult to be critical of Bishop Frade because he has [not only] a very vibrant and gifted priest [in Cutié] but also an atmosphere of controversy. Unless you’re from that community, I think it’s very hard to pass any judgment.” —*Daniel Burke, Religion News Service*