

Williams, in Rome, says women priests shouldn't be stumbling block

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November 17, 2010

VATICAN CITY (RNS) A week and a half after losing five Anglican bishops to the Catholic Church, the leader of the worldwide Anglican Communion reaffirmed his dedication to ecumenical relations between the two churches -- and his belief that female Anglican priests should not be an impediment to union.

Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams spoke Wednesday (Nov. 17) at a ceremony marking the 50th anniversary of the Vatican's ecumenical office. Dozens of senior Catholic leaders attended, including the church's No. 2 official, Secretary of State Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone.

While reflecting on progress in Anglican-Catholic relations, Williams admitted to "intractable difficulties" in two areas: disputes over the authority of the pope, and a failure of the two churches "to recognize each other's ministries fully."

Catholics insist on an all-male priesthood, while several parts of the Anglican Communion -- including the Church of England, the Episcopal Church in the United States and the Anglican Church of Canada -- ordain women.

Williams echoed a statement from his Nov. 2009 address to a Vatican ecumenical conference, when he asked rhetorically "in what way" the ordination of women priests could "compromise the purposes of the

church."

The issue has provoked tension not only between Rome and Canterbury, but within the Church of England itself.

Earlier this month, five Church of England bishops announced plans to join the Catholic church under a Vatican program that permits them to retain many traditional Anglican forms of worship and governance in special Catholic dioceses. The Vatican designed the program to facilitate the conversion of Anglicans upset by their churches' growing acceptance of homosexuality and women priests.

In his speech on Wednesday, Williams did not refer to the bishops' conversion or to the Vatican's overture to Anglican converts. Williams is scheduled to meet Pope Benedict XVI on Thursday.