

First Anglican bishops to join Catholic Church under new structure

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London, January 14 (ENInews)--Three former Anglican bishops are to be ordained as Roman Catholic priests on Saturday, 15 January at Westminster Cathedral – the first bishops to join Rome under a new structure set up by Pope Benedict XVI for dissident Anglicans.

The three former bishops -- Andrew Burnham, formerly of Ebbsfleet (West Canterbury), John Broadhurst, formerly of Fulham in central London and Keith Newton, formerly of Richborough (East Canterbury) – will be ordained by the Archbishop of Westminster, Vincent Nichols.

The Church of England clerics have said they cannot accept the ordination of women as priests or bishops. "This is a unique moment and the Catholic community in England and Wales is privileged to be playing a part in this historic development in the life of the universal church," Archbishop Nichols said. The three former bishops were on retreat and not available for interviews.

In November 2009, Pope Benedict established a new legal structure for Anglicans who wished to keep their Anglican identity but who wanted to enter into full communion with Rome and the pope himself. The structure is known as a personal ordinariate.

Shortly afterwards, Dr Rowan Williams, the Archbishop of Canterbury and the spiritual head of the 77 million-member worldwide Anglican Communion, said that the pope's offer to disaffected Anglicans had put him into an "awkward position." Just before Christmas last year he said he was "very taken aback that this large step was put before us (the Church of England) without any real consultation."

However, Robert Mercer, the former Bishop of Matabeleland (Zimbabwe) and former bishop of the Anglican Catholic Church in Canada, said he sees the pope's move as a

step toward reconciliation.

"I'm a great enthusiast for what is going to happen on Saturday ... Off and on over 400 years, the Anglican and Roman Catholic churches have talked in a pretty desultory way about reconciliation. Now it is happening. I will cross to Rome as soon as I hear from the Vatican. No one can say how many Anglicans will do likewise but this is the start," Mercer told ENInews in an interview.

"The present pope ... is a revolutionary and this is a revolutionary thing he is doing," Mercer added. "It's the logical outcome of the 19th century's Oxford Movement." The movement stated that Anglicanism along with Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism form three branches of the one Catholic church.

Mercer said the pope is expected to appoint a leader of the new ordinariate later this month.

He said that in recent years Anglicans had pursued a path that had made reconciliation with Rome difficult. He included support from the "liberal wing" of the Church of England for gay marriages, the ordination of women as priests and what he called "extreme feminism that turns God into a mother figure and Jesus as a daughter. In other words, what they have been doing is a revolt against the universal Christian tradition."

Earlier this month, the Catholic Church in England and Wales issued a statement saying that the three former Anglican bishops – Broadhurst, Burnham and Newton – had been received with some members of their families into full communion with the Catholic Church during Mass at Westminster Cathedral on New Year's Eve. Three former Anglican religious sisters were also received.

Two more Anglicans, Edwin Barnes, former Bishop of Richborough and David Silk, former Bishop of Ballarat in Australia, are expected to be ordained as Catholic priests either this month or in February. Mercer said he expects he will be ordained at the same time as Barnes.

An advocate for women's ministries in the Church of England, Christina Rees, director of The Churchfield Trust in Cambridge, said the world is not seeing the break-up of the Church of England. "Absolutely not! What we will see is a small number of clergy deciding to take up the pope's offer of joining the ordinariate along with this handful of retired bishops. And so we will see perhaps dozens of lay people

from congregations in the Church of England deciding to become Roman Catholics under these terms. This small trickle will not become a stream at all," she told ENInews.

She added: "One day, the Catholic Church will be considering ordaining women as priests and having women as bishops. We don't know when that will be but there's a very large worldwide grass roots movement of Roman Catholic lay people and clergy who are hoping for that day to come soon. The people who are running away from ordained women in the Church of England will, perhaps, find a sanctuary for themselves in the Roman Catholic Church right now but the next generation won't."