

Rome opens U.S. Catholic home for ex-Episcopalians

by [David Gibson](#) in the [February 8, 2012](#) issue

American Episcopalians upset with their denomination's acceptance of gay and female clergy can now convert to the Roman Catholic Church while keeping many cherished traditions in a special new U.S. diocese that was established on New Year's Day by Pope Benedict XVI.

The Houston-based diocese, called the Personal Ordinariate of the Chair of St. Peter, will allow a special Anglican-style Catholic mass that can include sections from the Book of Common Prayer and other Anglican liturgies.

This new structure grew out of a controversial 2009 effort by Pope Benedict to convince conservative Anglicans to align with Rome under an exemption that allows Anglican priests, laity and even entire congregations to convert while keeping their prized music and prayers.

Bishops who convert under the rite will be allowed to function as Catholic priests but not as bishops. Married Anglican male priests will be able to remain married and serve as Catholic priests, though unmarried priests who join will not be able to marry later without renouncing their priesthood.

The American ordinariate is only the second such jurisdiction established since Benedict launched the process; the first was set up a year ago in England, the birthplace of Anglicanism, and others are being considered for Canada and Australia.

It is still unclear how much of a draw the new jurisdiction will be. So far, some 100 former Episcopal priests have applied to become Catholic priests in the U.S. ordinariate, and about 1,400 individuals—as well as six small congregations—have sought to join the Catholic Church under the new provision.

After a year's time, the ordinariate in England and Wales still counts only 1,000 formerly Anglican laypeople and 60 former Anglican priests as members.

Some Episcopalians in the U.S., like some Anglicans in other countries, have opted to affiliate with conservative Anglican bodies or breakaway traditionalist groups rather than become Catholics.

The U.S. ordinariate will be led by Jeffrey N. Steenson, a former Episcopal bishop of New Mexico and father of three who became a Catholic in 2007 and was ordained a Catholic priest in 2009.

In a statement on January 2, Steenson was enthusiastic about the new rite. However, he also cautioned that Episcopalians who join will face "a steep learning curve" in trying to integrate under such a novel arrangement.

"Pray that we may strive to learn the faith, laws, and culture of the Catholic Church with humility and good cheer," Steenson said. "But pray too that we do not forget who we are and where we have come from, for we have been formed in the beautiful and noble Anglican tradition." —RNS