

CrossCurrents

A Catholic Reflects on Faith in Our Times



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A Second Reformation?

The Vatican made front-page news this week, triggering angry denunciations – and grateful praises – by inviting Anglicans to Church-swap. Even Jon Stewart’s *Daily Show* got in on the act, sarcastically commenting that the Vatican was offering people the chance to “change your service, but keep your old number”!

I wonder: is the Vatican prepared for the consequences?

The bishops’ conference of any country will now be authorized to establish a new legal structure called “personal ordinariates” if they want. This will allow “disgruntled” Anglicans to become Catholics not just as individuals, but as whole populations declaring themselves Roman Catholics along with their priests, even if they are married. Like military dioceses, they will be non-territorial collections of parishes, and they will have their own bishop.

Some angry commentators claim this amounts to poaching on the turf of the Anglican Communion, a “preemptive exploitation of Anglican distress” (James Carroll), but officials on both sides claim otherwise. Vatican Cardinal Walter Kasper insists “We are not fishing in the Anglican lake,” and even the Anglican Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, joined his Roman Catholic counterpart, Archbishop of Westminster Vincent Nichols, in releasing this statement:

The apostolic constitution [creating the new structures] is further recognition of the substantial overlap in faith, doctrine and spirituality between the Catholic Church and the Anglican tradition...Without the dialogues of the past forty years, this recognition would not have been possible, nor would hopes for full visible unity have been nurtured. In this sense, this apostolic constitution is one

consequence of ecumenical dialogue between the Catholic Church and the Anglican Communion.

With God's grace and prayer, we are determined that our on-going mutual commitment and consultation on these and other matters should continue to be strengthened.

Obviously they are putting the best spin on what is happening.

Up to 400,000 Anglicans (including members of America's Episcopal Church) have been distressed by Anglican acceptance of women priests and bishops, to the openly gay bishops, and the blessing of same-sex unions.

For many of them, the Catholic Church seems a safer haven – especially if they can keep their congregation, their church, and their priest. This works especially well for those members of Episcopal churches that are really “Anglo-Catholic” – that is, they belong to the Church of England but resemble Catholicism in having sacraments, priests, Mass, saints, convents with nuns, even confessionals and rosaries.

But what makes this news intriguing to me is not its causes, or even the Vatican's intentions, but its effects. It's obvious why this is happening, but what will be the consequences? Here is where commentators differ, but maybe the important thing is not who is right. Maybe the important thing is this: they could *all* be right. Here are some of the possibilities:

The End of the Anglican Communion? I don't believe the Church of England risks sinking into extinction, as one British journalist predicted, but the “Communion” holding its various parts together might begin to fragment. Anglicanism has always been proud of its “latitude” – its ability to tolerate diverse views and practices – but this might prove that even latitude has its limits.

The End of our Priest Shortage? No one knows how many parishes or priests will become Roman Catholic; anyhow there aren't enough Episcopal priests in the U.S. to compensate for the shortage of Catholic priests. But it is likely that some areas (such as Rhode Island, where the Episcopal Church ranks #2) might see a rise in Catholic priests' numbers. I know two former Catholic priests who left to get

married, and are now Episcopal priests. I wonder if they would be welcomed back?

A Crack in the Door? The door in question is priestly celibacy. Suppose we find married priests in our midst. Suppose our celebrate priests begin closer working relations with them. Suppose our bishops get to know them. Who could be surprised if this brought a “climate change,” as attitudes against married clergy thawed and the defense of mandatory celibacy melted? How ironic if Roman Catholicism comes to ordain its own married men only after ordaining married men from another church.

The Danger of the “No” Church. We are told that even Pope Benedict is concerned lest our Church become the “No” Church, known only for what it opposes. It’s no secret the Catholic Church opposes artificial contraception, artificial insemination, abortion, married priests, women priests, and same sex marriage. Inviting others in on *those* grounds reinforces public awareness of what the Church stands *against* rather than what the church stands *for*. More bad PR for an institution desperate for more public credibility.

A New Realignment? Those likely to take the Vatican’s invitation are the Episcopal Church’s most conservative parishes. Whether the “flow” is a trickle or a flood, the result is a *less conservative* Episcopal Church and a *more conservative* Catholic Church, and it begs the question whether it may provoke some progressive Catholics to “flow” the other way.

For years now Catholics have been parish-shopping. Instead of automatically worshipping wherever parish boundaries dictate, millions of Catholics crossed parish lines every weekend to worship someplace they find more appealing.

Are we now facing an era when Catholics might even swap to another Church to meet their spiritual needs?

This is not a brand new idea, of course. Catholics have joined churches due to mixed marriage, or to seek ordination even though married– or even though a woman! And many Protestant churches, Unitarian-Universalist communities, and even evangelical churches have welcomed Catholics (especially Catholics troubled by some aspect of Catholic

doctrine or practice). But this week's news raises the prospect of even more (perhaps even *en masse*) church-swapping.

And what is to stop conservative Catholics from joining those new Anglo-catholic congregations—thus leaving their former parishes more progressive by default? This would be a realignment among “Catholic” parishes along the theological / political lines. Will that mean a new imbalance – or a new equilibrium?

Ecumenical Boost? In theory, at least, this could be a precedent-setting event. What if several Christian traditions open their doors to whole congregations that are like-minded but just *happen* to belong to another church? Could it lead to more barriers falling?

Underlying this possibility is a hidden dynamic within the ecumenical movement. Whenever I work with ecumenical groups, I have notice two things: (1) they tend to be among the more progressive members of their respective churches and (2) they tend to feel they have more in common with each other than they do with the conservatives in their own churches.

In other words, for many in the ecumenical movement theological outlook trumps institutional membership or affiliation.

A Second Reformation? What if, by encouraging conservative Anglicans to join the like-minded Catholic Church, the Vatican eventually encourages all Christians to seek out like-minded churches for themselves? Suppose some progressive Catholics become Anglicans just because it seems more progressive? Suppose others find the Unitarian more congenial? This has already happened to individuals, but what if it happens with entire congregations and their priests?

Christianity's first Reformation resulted in people forced to belong to whatever Church their ruler chose. So Northern Europe became Protestant while Southern Europe remained Catholic, and resisters nearly everywhere were persecuted. Hence theological differences not only fractured Christian unity – they validated violence.

Perhaps a new Reformation would peaceably encourage everyone to make their own choice: the Body of Christ as consumer society!

Such free choice is already widespread in US Protestantism, but if it became universal it would transform the ecumenical movement. Instead of working to resolve the logical and political differences as a precondition for Christian unity, different churches would simply lower their barriers and encourage people (whether individually or in whole congregations) to choose the differences they prefer and migrate across church lines. Such church-swapping could promote Christian unity not by requiring uniformity but simply by accepting differences.

This would not be the first time God's providence outstripped the Vatican's intentions. No one planned shortage, nor the rise of lay ministry that now makes woman 85% of US parish ministers. So a Second Reformation could happen and catch Vatican officials totally unaware.

If so, will they be pleased by what they have wrought?

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