

Traditional Anglicans want to join Catholic Church

By NICOLE WINFIELD and ROHAN SULLIVAN

VATICAN CITY (AP) — The Vatican is considering welcoming into the Roman Catholic Church a group of traditional Anglicans who broke away from the global Anglican Communion nearly two decades ago over women's ordination and other issues, officials say.

Vatican officials stress that no decision has been made and no announcement is imminent. Still, Anglicans across the spectrum of belief are closely watching for any signs of movement.

Absorbing the breakaway Traditional Anglican Communion would be a small but notable victory for Pope Benedict XVI, who has made unifying Christians a goal of his papacy.

At the same time, any invitation by the Vatican is likely to upset leaders of the 77 million-member Anglican Communion and would hurt the Vatican's decades-long efforts to strengthen ties with that fellowship of churches. Anglicans split with Rome in 1534 when English King Henry VIII was refused a marriage annulment.

The Traditional Anglican Communion formed in 1990 as an association of orthodox Anglicans concerned about what they considered the liberal tilt in Anglican churches, including the ordination of women. Members of the group are generally Anglo-Catholic, emphasizing continuity with Catholic tradition and the importance of the sacraments. The fellowship says it has spread to 41 countries and has 400,000 members, although only about half are regular churchgoers.

The traditional group aims to unify the Anglican and Catholic churches, according to Archbishop John Hepworth of Australia, who is the leader, or primate, of the Traditional Anglican Communion. They have accepted the ministry of the pope, but also want to maintain their Anglican traditions — one of several potential impediments to unification.

"We seek a communal and ecclesial way of being Anglican Catholics in communion with the Holy See," the group wrote, in a letter Hepworth presented two years ago to the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

The head of that Vatican office, Cardinal William Levada, wrote Hepworth in July 2008, saying he was giving "serious attention" to the TAC's proposal. But he noted that the situation within the broader Anglican Communion, with which the Vatican has an official dialogue, had "become markedly more complex." The Anglican Communion is on the brink of schism because of internal rifts over how it should interpret what the Bible says about gay relationships and other issues.

Hepworth has called the letter a sign of "warmth and encouragement," and the traditional Anglicans posted the note on their Web site. But Monsignor Marc Langham, who is in charge of Anglican relations at the Vatican's Pontifical Council for Christian Unity, said that Levada's letter was a "standard Vatican holding letter" and suggested interpreting it with caution.

"It's very easy to turn expectation and hope into hard fact," Langham said in a recent phone interview.

The Vatican spokesman, the Rev. Federico Lombardi, confirmed that the traditional Anglican group and the Vatican have been in contact for some time and would continue to talk.

"Their request has been taken into consideration," he said. But he dismissed as "absolutely unfounded" reports in the Australian media that a decision on welcoming the TAC was near.

Benedict's recent efforts to bring together Christians has hit many obstacles.

In January, he lifted the excommunications of four bishops of the traditionalist Society of St. Pius X, which broke from Rome because of its opposition to the liberalizing reforms of the Second Vatican Council. That decision sparked a public outcry since one of the four bishops denied that 6 million Jews were killed during the Holocaust.

Separately, progress between the Vatican and the Anglican Communion has stalled because of the same issues that have fractured the fellowship itself: women priests and bishops, the ordination of bishops in same-sex relationships and the recognition of same-sex unions.

The Traditional Anglican Communion opposes those trends as well.

Still, Langham, of the Vatican, said it was "unlikely" that there would be a mass conversion of traditional Anglicans into the Catholic Church.

"Conversion is an individual process," he said. "In our congregation, we would have trouble with that concept."

As an example of the many outstanding unresolved issues, he noted that Hepworth, a bishop, has been married. "There are various problems with this, not least the tradition of married bishops is alien to the Latin rite," he said.

Yet, the Vatican has made no secret of its willingness to welcome into its fold Anglicans who want to convert, even married Anglican priests. After the Church of England voted to ordain women in 1992, several hundred Anglican priests defected to Catholicism.

"Rome will continue talking, it's not going to turn anybody away," noted Simon Barrow, co-director of the British-based religion think tank Ekklesia. "But on the other hand it's going to be extremely cautious about a group of people who want to enter but with reservations."

Associated Press Writer Rohan Sullivan reported from Sydney, Australia.

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