

Anglican leader urges 'convergence' with Catholics

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ROME — Church of England leader Rowan Williams, Archbishop of Canterbury, said Thursday the "glass is half-full" in relations with the Catholic Church despite strains over a Vatican overture to disaffected Anglicans.

Speaking ahead of a meeting Saturday with Pope Benedict XVI, who last month approved a new structure for allowing groups of Anglicans into the Catholic fold, Williams said the two churches had "unfinished business" to resolve, but that "the ecumenical glass is genuinely half-full."

"The strong convergence... about what the Church of God really is, is very striking," he said in a lecture at Rome's Gregorian University, questioning "whether this unfinished business is as fundamentally church-dividing as our Roman Catholic friends generally assume and maintain."

While appearing conciliatory, Williams also laid down a "challenge to recent Roman Catholic thinking" on women priests, the issue behind many Anglicans' wish to leave the Church of England in preference for Catholicism.

The archbishop, noting the "sharpness of division" among Anglicans on the question of the ordination of women, said they had managed to "maintain a degree of undoubtedly impaired communion among themselves" by taking a broader view.

So he asked: "Is there a way of recognising that somehow the corporate exercise of a Catholic and evangelical ministry remains intact even when there is dispute about the standing of female individuals?"

The Vatican unveiled the new framework for the conversions on November 9 in what was described by The Times of London as "potentially the most explosive development in Anglican-Catholic relations since the Reformation."

The move, which could attract hundreds of Anglicans from around the world who oppose women and openly gay clergy, was a response to what the Vatican called "repeated and insistent" petitions.

The meeting between the pope and Williams, who is in Rome to help celebrate the 100th anniversary of the birth of Johannes Willebrands -- a Dutch cardinal who was a pioneer in Catholic ecumenism -- was scheduled long before the controversy.

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