On Oct. 20, Pope Benedict XVI announced through the Archbishop of Westminster (in London) that former Anglicans may enter into “full communion with the Catholic Church while preserving elements of distinctive Anglican spiritual patrimony.” Or, as the Anglican leader Rowan Williams put it, ”they can retain aspects of Anglican liturgical and spiritual tradition.”

Although details will not be released for several months, the goal is to ease the conversion of Anglican priests and congregations from Anglicanism to Roman Catholicism. Since Catholicism already has procedures by which married (and non-married) clergy may become priests of the Roman church, attention was immediately drawn to its effect on congregations. The question swirled through the media, would this decree drain Anglicanism of its core of believers? An editorial in the New York Times even suggested that it could change the religious character of English society.

True, many Anglicans' first reaction was that the Catholics were “poaching” on the Anglican Christians at the time of their difficulties involving the ordination of women and practicing homosexuals. Second thoughts were significantly less worried. Even the largest breakaway movement, the Anglican Church in North America, dismissed its impact, “we believe that this provision will not be utilized by the great majority of [members of] the Anglican Church in North America. . . .”

One reason for the ho-hum response is that Anglicanism is a big-tent organization. With 77 million members, the international Anglican Communion is the largest Protestant denomination in the world. It has long balanced conflicting views and beliefs. As UW religion professor Kris Utterback observed in the Casper Star-Tribune, "The Episcopal Church tries to stay in and slug it out."

Anglicanism's founding decades set up this broadly inclusive character. When King Henry cut the English church off from the Roman Catholic Church in 1534, his aim was not reform. That happened after his death. For several decades, the national church swung between Catholicism and Protestantism, with persecution and execution on both sides.

Finally, under Queen Elizabeth, a broad compromise was reached. The Anglican church brought together a simplified Catholic liturgy with elements of Calvinist theology. This compromise was embodied in the Book of Common Prayer and the 39 Articles of Religion.

This compromise has always been uneasy. In the early centuries, it led to criticisms from the Calvinist wing: Puritans who tried from within to purify the Church of its remaining Catholic elements; Separatists who left the Church because they judged it would never change. (The group that came to America as "Puritans" were actually Separatists, just to be confusing.)

Anglicanism has spawned many new churches from this wing of the Church: Congregationalism (Church of Christ), most early types of Baptists, and Methodism. Although not all these movements emphasized Calvinism, all moved away from the Catholic elements of Anglicanism. Those who remained within Anglicanism are now often termed Orthodox Anglicans.

The other wing of Anglicanism has not been quiet. Known as the Anglo-Catholics, this branch of the Church emphasizes continuation of Catholic elements. In the 1830s and 1840s, the Oxford Movement, led by John Henry Newman, increasingly emphasized the Catholic character. Although Newman himself ultimately converted to Catholicism, the Oxford movement had a strong impact on Anglicanism. Anglican worship increased its emphasis on the Eucharist, expanded the priestly use of vestments and organized religious orders (i.e., "monks" and "nuns").

Within modern Anglicanism, both Orthodox Anglicans and Anglo-Catholics are unhappy about the ordination of women and gay priests and bishops. But their reasons differ significantly. One side sees it as against Biblical and Calvinist theology, while the other side sees it as against Catholic teachings.

Most of the congregations that have broken away from the Anglican Church are Orthodox Anglican; that is why the ACNA is so sure that few of their members will take advantage of the Pope's offer. Most of these have joined dioceses in Africa (e.g., Uganda, Rwanda) where modern innovations such as female priests have not happened.

A few Anglo-Catholic congregations have broken away: most have joined the Traditional Anglican Communion, based in 16 countries. In fact, the Pope's announcement is a response to a request by this organization for help in easing their transition away from the Anglican Church and into Catholicism.

Interestingly, the controversy over female and gay ordination may be the first time in Anglican history that differences do not lead to new forms of Protestantism but instead result in congregations moving to other forms of Christianity.

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