

Anglican Reformations: Endings and Beginnings

By George Egerton

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In the promised Apostolic Constitution, the Roman Catholic Church has prepared a welcome for dissident Anglo-Catholics in the Anglican Communion who have lost all confidence in the polity and fidelity of Anglicanism within the Church of England, The Episcopal Church (US), and other Anglican Churches of the first world, as the official structures seem determined to depart from traditional Anglican teaching and practice, in the name of inclusion, feminism, and human rights.



Other conservative Anglicans under North American revisionist jurisdictions have, in large measure, already departed. Having exhausted the hopes for reform and renewal within their national churches, they have formed new confessional jurisdictions, such as the Anglican Network in Canada, under the broader umbrella of the Anglican Church in North America, and in alignment with the burgeoning Anglican churches of the global south.

Anglican evangelicals and charismatics share the concern and alienation of Anglo-Catholics, and they can understand the desire to embrace the terms which the Vatican is offering in allowing continuation of Anglican liturgy, accepting a married priesthood, and providing non-territorial episcopal oversight to be exercised by unmarried Anglican priests or bishops. If it is an occasion of sadness to see the imminent departure of faithful Anglo-Catholics to Rome, we wish them well, even as they will have to abandon much of the heart of classic Anglican theology. But for Anglican evangelicals, like this author, joining the Roman Catholic Church and necessarily accepting its doctrines and papal ecclesiology is not a path that can be followed in good conscience.

What can be hoped for now in the deeply-divided world of the Anglican Communion given the crises precipitated by the revisionists of First World Churches? Does the Vatican initiative signal something broader than the establishment of another concessionary ethnic 'prelature'? The answers to these questions are probably closely associated. We can see the Vatican has proved itself capable, given its long experience with ethnic diversity, of adapting its structures to make reasonable accommodations, while insisting on the preservation of its doctrinal teaching and the authority of its magisterium.

By contrast, Anglicanism has proved incapable of maintaining classic Christian teachings on an array of issues, most notably on sexual and marital ethics, while simultaneously refusing to adapt its territorial episcopacy and national structures to allow conservatives extraordinary forms of episcopal oversight with adequate jurisdiction. One of the principal arguments presented by the revisionist Bishops of the Anglican Church of Canada against episcopal innovations to accommodate conservative Anglicans was that such action would violate the traditional status of a territorial episcopacy. Clearly, there were limitations to the revisionists' imagination, and the Vatican's offer illustrates what is possible when there is charity and goodwill.

The departure of Anglo-Catholics will not have massive numerical or theological impact in the

United States, or Canada, where Anglican demographics are already in free-fall. But in Britain, their reception by Rome will change the nature of the Church of England and profoundly affect Anglican - Roman Catholic relations. The Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, was quick to downplay the significance of the Vatican announcement, denying that it was an aggressive move or was anything other than a continuation of the ecumenical discussions of the two churches. But, equally, it is clear he was blind-sided by the Catholic overture, which was generated wholly apart from the ecumenical bureaucracy, and drove the Anglican Archbishop to his default mode of denial and positive spinning.

The Vatican's abrupt initiative (Williams had but a week's notice), represents the inferred abandonment by Rome of the long-term ecumenical dialogue with Anglicanism. They will now turn to the much more hopeful ecumenical rapprochement with Eastern Orthodoxy, where both sides have increasing desire for unity.

Without its Anglo-Catholics, the Church of England will be left with an already dominant liberal hierarchy much more entrenched and determined to extend its revisionist agenda. This will compound Archbishop Williams' problems, as he struggles to steer the world wide Anglican Communion 'through many dangers, toils and snares.' If the Anglo-Catholics have been offered refuge in Roman Catholicism, the Anglican evangelicals and charismatics have found rescue in the missions mounted by two-thirds world African, Asian, and Latin American Anglican Primates, and their provision of extraordinary Episcopal protection to faithful Anglicans who have become victims of hostile revisionist Bishops and church bureaucracies.

The rescue of alienated North American conservative Anglicans by global south Anglicans, who constitute the overwhelming majority of the Anglican Communion, has generated a new reformation in the international polity of Anglicanism, with the conservatives convening the Global Anglican Future Conference in Jerusalem in the summer of 2008, issuing a confessional statement in the Jerusalem Declaration, and proceeding to organize a world-wide Fellowship of Confessing Anglicans.

The Archbishop of Canterbury, with the ground shifting under his feet, has attempted, with winsome and artful determination, to re-establish Anglican identity and discipline, through a conciliar process which produced the Windsor Report of 2004 and then presented a draft Anglican Covenant of proposed norms and procedures. The Archbishop has faced resistance from revisionists on any moves to reassert confessionalism and discipline, while evangelicals have endorsed the Windsor Report and the draft Covenant with enthusiasm.

With the departure to Rome of most of the Anglo-Catholics, the increasing institutional entrenchment of the revisionists within the Church of England, and the spreading momentum of the Fellowship of Confessing Anglicans, Archbishop Williams' leadership seems stressed beyond capacity. Anglicanism, in Canada and globally, seems at a tipping point. Perhaps next summer's General Synod of the Anglican Church of Canada will serve as a microcosm of things to come for first world Anglicanism, as the global Anglican Communion is facing both the end of the old Reformation for Anglo-Catholics, and a new reformation for confessing Anglicans.

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