

New bishop named for U.S. ordinariate for former Anglicans

WASHINGTON – Pope Benedict XVI has established a U.S. ordinariate for former Anglicans who wish to become Catholics and named a married former Episcopal bishop to head it.

The Personal Ordinariate of the Chair of St. Peter – functionally equivalent to a diocese, but national in scope – will be based at a parish in Houston. It will be led by Father Jeffrey N. Steenson, the former Episcopal bishop of the Rio Grande who was ordained a Catholic priest of the Archdiocese of Santa Fe, N.M., in February 2009.

The establishment of the ordinariate and the naming of its first leader were announced by the Vatican Jan. 1.

More than 100 former Anglican priests have applied to become Catholic priests in the ordinariate and 1,400 individuals from 22 communities have expressed interest in joining. In fall 2011, the members of St. Luke's in Bladensburg, Md., and St. Peter of the Rock Community in Fort Worth, Texas, were received into the Catholic Church with the intent of joining the ordinariate.

It is the second such jurisdiction established under the provisions of Pope Benedict's 2009 apostolic constitution "Anglicanorum coetibus." The first was the Personal Ordinariate of Our Lady of Walsingham, created for England and Wales in January 2011; others are under consideration in Canada and Australia.

The parishes and communities accepted into the ordinariate will be fully Catholic but retain elements of their Anglican heritage and traditions, particularly in the liturgy.

Father Steenson and his wife, Debra, have three grown children – a daughter and two sons – and a grandson.

Because he is married, the 59-year-old Father Steenson will not be ordained a bishop and will not be able to ordain priests. He will, however, otherwise function as

a bishop and will be a voting member of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

After working briefly in a New Mexico parish following his ordination, Father Steenson has been teaching theology at the University of St. Thomas Center for Faith and Culture and at St. Mary's Seminary, both in Houston, since August 2009. He also is an assisting priest at St. Cyril of Alexandria Parish in Houston.

Educated at Harvard Divinity School and at Oxford, he is an expert in patristics, the study of the early church fathers. Born in Camp Rucker, Ala., he was raised on a farm in Hillsboro, N.D., that has been in his family since the 1880s.

In a 2009 interview with Catholic News Service, Father Steenson said he had been "attracted to Catholicism all of my life."

"It's not negative things that turned me to the Catholic Church," he said. "I just felt God saying, 'It's time.'"

The time came, he said, in 2007 when he felt the bishops of the Episcopal Church had decided to give priority to their autonomy rather than to unity with the larger Anglican Communion.

Father Steenson said that for him, gay people were not the issue. "It was the way the decisions were made and the way they were defended," placing the local church and modern cultural sensitivities ahead of the universal church and fidelity to tradition, he said.

The priest said that while the Episcopal Church spoke of the importance of Christian unity, it continued to approve practices - ordaining women priests and bishops, ordaining homosexuals and blessing same-sex unions - that everyone knew would be an obstacle to Christian unity.

"The frustration with being a Protestant is that every morning you get up and have to reinvent the church all over again," Father Steenson said.

The new ordinariate has been in the works since September 2010, when the Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith asked Cardinal Donald W. Wuerl of Washington to be its delegate for the implementation of "Anglicanorum coetibus" in

the United States.

Cardinal Wuerl welcomed the announcement, saying it was “the fulfillment of the hopes of many Anglicans in the United States who have longed and prayed for reconciliation with the Catholic Church while retaining cherished elements of the Anglican patrimony.”

He said Father Steenson “brings to the position of ordinary great pastoral and administrative experience, along with his gifts as a theologian.”

Cardinal Daniel N. DiNardo of Galveston-Houston, in whose archdiocese the ordinariate’s headquarters will be located, called Father Steenson “not only an outstanding patristic scholar, but a priest with a strong pastoral sense and an abiding respect for all people.”

“He will surely be an effective, kind and joyful leader who will love and guide God’s people with the attitude of Christ,” he added.

Father Scott Hurd, who was ordained an Episcopal priest in 1993, joined the Catholic Church in 1996 and was ordained a priest for the Archdiocese of Washington in 2000, will be on loan to the ordinariate for three years to serve as vicar general.

Father Hurd, who has been assisting Cardinal Wuerl in the U.S. implementation of “Anglicanorum coetibus,” will continue to be based in Washington.

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