

Traditionalist Anglicans split over response to ordaining women bishops

LONDON - A group of traditionalist Anglican bishops has admitted that Anglo-Catholic clergy are sharply divided over how to respond to the ordination of women as bishops.

Fifteen bishops belonging to Forward in Faith, the largest Anglo-Catholic group in the Church of England, admitted that the Anglo-Catholic faction of the church could not decide collectively what course of action to take.

They said members faced a range of options in response to the mid-July vote by the General Synod, the church's national assembly, to create women bishops by 2014 without meeting demands of objectors.

Describing themselves as bishops "united in our belief that the Church of England is mistaken in its actions" they wrote to more than 1,300 Anglo-Catholic priests and deacons who, in June 2008, registered their opposition to women bishops in an open letter to Anglican leaders.

The bishops' letter, posted July 31 on the website of Forward in Faith, which has 10,000 members, said it was inevitable that many traditionalists, including some bishops, would take up Pope Benedict XVI's offer of a personal ordinariate within the Catholic Church. That offer was contained in the pope's November apostolic constitution "Anglicanorum coetibus."

Under this arrangement Anglicans can be received into the Catholic Church as a group while retaining their distinctive patrimony and liturgical practices, including married priests.

An application for an English ordinariate, which would resemble a military diocese in structure, has yet to be made by a mainstream Anglican group in the U.K.

But the bishops said some Anglicans were already resolved “to join the ordinariate as the place where they can find a home in which to live and proclaim their Christian faith, in communion with the Holy Father, yet retaining something of the blessings they have known and experienced in the Anglican tradition.”

They said: “Of course the ordinariate is a new thing, and not all of us are trailblazers or can imagine what it might be like. Some will undoubtedly want to wait and see how that initiative develops before making a decision.

“Yet others will make their individual submission and find their future as Roman Catholics,” they said.

Some Anglo-Catholics, the bishops added, would remain in the Church of England “perhaps even reluctantly because of personal circumstances, family loyalties, even financial necessity, but with a deep sense of unease about the long-term future, an unease that is surely well-founded.”

They said such worshippers “cannot currently imagine themselves being anywhere else but within the Church of England.”

The clergy’s 2008 open letter to Anglican Archbishops Rowan Williams of Canterbury and John Sentamu of York asked the church to make “generous and coherent provision for us” if the synod pressed ahead with plans to ordain women as bishops.

The signatories had sought episcopal visitors, or “flying bishops,” to minister to their members, the synod rejected this in favor of women bishops agreeing to make alternative arrangements for traditionalists through a code of practice.

In their letter, the traditionalist bishops said that “those of us unable in good conscience to accept that any particular church has the authority to admit women to the episcopate” were now facing “grave times.”

They said that the legislation, if ratified in its current form in 2012, would not allow the Anglo-Catholic tradition to “grow and flourish.”

“We will be dependent on a code of practice yet to be written and, sadly, our

experience of the last almost 20 years must make us wonder whether even such an inadequate provision will be honored in the long term," the bishops said.

"We must now accept that a majority of members of the Church of England believe it right to proceed with the ordination of women as bishops, and that a significant percentage of those in authority will not encourage or embrace with enthusiasm the traditional integrity (movement) or vocations within it," they said.

The bishops also warned clergy against infighting.

"It would be a sad and destructive thing indeed if we allowed our unhappiness and wondering to drift into unguarded or uncharitable criticism of those who, in good conscience, take a different path from our own," they said.

"We must assume the best motives in one another, and where there are partings let them be with tears and the best wishes of godspeed," the bishops said.