

Vatican tells traditionalist Anglicans it is studying unity request

OTTAWA - The Vatican has assured a group of traditionalist Anglicans that it is studying seriously their request for full communion with the Roman Catholic Church.

Cardinal William J. Levada, head of the Vatican's doctrinal congregation, also linked the issue of corporate unity for the Traditional Anglican Communion to larger issues within the Anglican Communion.

"The situation within the Anglican Communion in general has become markedly more complex," Cardinal Levada said in a letter to Archbishop John Hepworth of Blackwood, Australia, primate of the Traditional Anglican Communion. "As soon as the congregation is in a position to respond more definitely concerning the proposals you have sent, we will inform you."

Last October, Traditional Anglican Communion bishops from around the world met in plenary session in Portsmouth, England, and signed a letter "seeking full, corporate, sacramental union" with the Holy See.

The Traditional Anglican Communion, formed in 1990 as a worldwide body, represents so-called continuing Anglicans who left the Canterbury-led Anglican Communion over the ordination of women. It has been in informal talks with the Vatican since the early 1990s.

While the Traditional Anglican Communion seeks unity with Rome, the much larger Anglican Communion headed by the archbishop of Canterbury is wrestling with issues such as the ordination of active homosexual bishops, blessing same-sex unions and, more recently, a Church of England decision to ordain women bishops. At least twice during the once-a-decade Lambeth Conference that began in July, Vatican officials have warned of the consequences some of the Anglican decisions have on

Anglican-Catholic unity.

Speculation has been rife on the Internet about whether the Vatican was planning to receive disaffected Anglicans en masse, perhaps through expanding the Anglican-use provision that already exists in the United States. The Vatican established a special pastoral provision to oversee the movement of former Episcopalian clergy in the United States who wanted to minister as priests in the Roman Catholic Church.

The provision also set up guidelines for Anglican-use Catholic parishes, allowing former Episcopal parishes to retain some of their Anglican liturgical and spiritual traditions.

Archbishop Hepworth received Cardinal Levada's letter via the Australian apostolic nuncio July 25.

"This letter should encourage our entire communion and those friends who have been assisting us," Archbishop Hepworth said in a statement posted on the Traditional Anglican Communion Web site, www.themessenger.com.au.

Of various Anglican splinter groups, the Traditional Anglican Communion is the largest and the only one with a global reach. It represents 300,000-400,000 Anglicans. Though their worship is Anglo-Catholic, they are often confused with Anglo-Catholics who have remained with the worldwide Anglican Communion.

Two Anglo-Catholic bishops from the Anglican Communion went to Rome recently to see what provisions the Vatican might make for them should up to 1,000 English clergy defect over the Church of England's decision to ordain women bishops.