

Dialogue will continue despite Anglican vote

By Cindy Wooden
Catholic News Service

VATICAN CITY — Anglicans and Catholics have vowed to continue their dialogue despite a warning from Catholic leaders that the Church of England's decision to ordain women priests is a major obstacle to church unity.

The vote by the Church of England's General Synod also gave rise to concerns about a possible schism within the Anglican Church and the possibility that Anglicans who disagree with the vote might seek membership in the Roman Catholic Church.

The decision to ordain women to the priesthood received the necessary two-thirds approval Nov. 11 in each of the General Synod's three houses — representing bishops, clergy and laity.

The Vatican's immediate reaction echoed statements issued during the course of the Anglicans' decades-long debate on the issue.

"This decision by the Anglican Communion constitutes a new and grave obstacle to the entire process of reconcil-

iation with the Catholic Church," Vatican spokesman Joaquin Navarro-Valls said in a statement shortly after the vote.

"The problem of the admission of women to the ministerial priesthood touches the very nature of the sacrament of priestly orders," Navarro-Valls said. "The Catholic Church, for well-founded theological reasons, does not feel it has the right to authorize such ordinations."

The vote ensures that the visible unity of the Anglican and Roman Catholic churches "clearly now is not something which is going to be in the near future," said the Catholic primate of England and Wales, Cardinal George Basil Hume of Westminster.

The decision "sets the seal" on the Catholic Church's difficulty in recognizing Anglican ordinations, pointed out Monsignor Kevin McDonald, an official at the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity.

Because of the connections between ordination and how the church is structured, and between ordination and the validity of other sacraments, mutual recognition of ordinations is "a vital part



REACTION TO VOTE — Supporters of priesthood for women celebrate the announcement outside London's Church House on Nov. 12 that the Church of England's General Synod had voted to break 400 years of tradition by allowing women to become priests.

of the process" of uniting the two churches, Monsignor McDonald said.

Archbishop George Carey of Canterbury, head of the worldwide Anglican Communion, acknowledged the ecumenical concerns when he urged the Church of England's synod to vote in favor of women's ordination.

But he said Roman Catholic and Orthodox opposition to the move "cannot be an obstacle to the Church of England determining its own mind."

"I believe that constructive, loving relationships with our sister churches can and will continue whatever the outcome of our vote today," the Anglican leader said.

Cardinal Hume told Vatican Radio Nov. 11 that the Catholic-Anglican dialogue will continue based on "a real but partial communion" in virtue of a common baptism, many common beliefs and faith in Jesus Christ.

Traditionalist Anglicans in South Africa criticized the ordination decision and said it would hasten an emerging split among Anglicans in the region.

Anglican Father Douglas Brown, director of the Anglican Center in Rome, said the Church of England might have postponed its vote if unity with the Roman Catholic Church had seemed likely soon.

The Vatican's December response to

an Anglican-Catholic dialogue report "made us realize that any organic union is a long, long way off and, so, people were not inclined to wait" on the issue of women's ordination.

Even before Anglicans started ordaining women, the Roman Catholic Church did not recognize the validity of Anglican orders, Father Brown said. "Most would hope that gender is not the essential issue" to be resolved concerning the recognition of Anglican priests.

But the Vatican's view is and has been that the ordination of women constitutes a serious break with tradition.

The Vatican's position is that the Catholic Church cannot ordain women because Christ chose male Apostles, because it is the unbroken tradition of the church and because in celebrating the Eucharist, the priest acts in the person of Christ, who was a man.

Archbishop Carey told the synod that a "yes" vote on the ordination of women "alters not a word in the creeds, the Scriptures or the faith of our church."

Archbishop Carey had told the synod, "We are not departing from a traditional concept of ministry. We are talking about an extension of the same ministry to include women."

Roman Catholic leaders acknowledged that some dissatisfied Anglicans would probably leave the Anglican Church and perhaps seek membership in the Catholic Church.

But, Cardinal Hume said, "it isn't just as simple as saying, 'Well because I don't want a woman priest, I'll go along now and join the Catholic Church.'"

"You've got to embrace the Catholic Church and all it stands for," he said.

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Catholic Courier (USPS 135-580)
Vol. 104 No. 8 November 19, 1992
Published weekly except the last Thursday in December.
Subscription rates: single copy, 75¢; one-year subscription in U.S., \$19.50; Canada and foreign \$19.50 plus postage.
Offices: 1150 Buffalo Road, Rochester, N.Y. 14624, 716/328-4340.
Second-class postage paid at Rochester, N.Y.
POSTMASTER: Send address changes to Catholic Courier, 1150 Buffalo Road, Rochester, N.Y. 14624.

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