

British bishops ponder Anglican's proposition

By Robert Nowell
Catholic News Service

LONDON — Catholic bishops in England said Nov. 19 that they would consider an Anglican bishop's request that the pope establish a personal prelature for members of the Church of England unable to accept women priests.

The bishops said they had discussed the proposal and would consider "all aspects of this delicate and complex matter, necessarily involving consultation with the Holy See."

The Nov. 19 statement was issued on their behalf by Bishop Cormac Murphy-O'Connor of Arundel and Brighton, chairman of the bishops' committee for Christian unity and Catholic co-chairman of the Second Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission.

Bishop Graham Leonard, former Anglican bishop of London, said he had discussed his proposal with a "high-placed member of the Catholic Church" who told him the move "would not receive the cold shoulder."

In an article written a week after the Church of England voted to allow women's ordination, Bishop Leonard said Anglican traditionalists would approach Rome "as suppliants and without presumption, asking if a way could be found for us somehow to preserve our Anglican identity while being in communion with the See of Peter."

"I would want to stress that we are not asking for recognition to continue an Anglican ministry, but as those who have accepted the magisterium and are in communion with the Holy See," said

Bishop Leonard. "We can only hope and pray that the Vatican and the hierarchy here in England will give sympathetic consideration to any possibility of a way forward."

A personal prelature is a church jurisdiction without geographic boundaries, erected by the Holy See to carry out particular pastoral initiatives without infringing on the rights of local bishops. The only personal prelature that now exists is Opus Dei.

Vatican spokesman Joaquin Navarro-Valls declined comment Nov. 20 because "a formal request for acceptance has not arrived." If and when the Vatican receives a request from some Anglicans "it will be examined by the competent offices of the Holy See."

Bishop Leonard said he recognized that the issue of Anglican orders could cause a problem. In 1896, Pope Leo XIII declared Anglican orders null and void. However, Bishop Leonard said that "responsible people in the Roman Catholic Church" had suggested that while the 1896 papal edict applied to the situation then, subsequent developments within the church could warrant a different response.

Archbishop George Carey of Canterbury, spiritual head of the worldwide Anglican Communion, noted that the Catholic Church would be the one to respond to Bishop Leonard's suggestion. However, he reiterated his message at the end of the Church of England's general synod that the period following the synod's decision to allow women priests should be a time of reflection, not hasty actions.

Bishop Clark

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Bishop Clark said he had no new arguments to offer in favor of the church's position. And he acknowledged that he does not find the traditional arguments put forward in opposition to the ordination of women "compelling."

Indeed, Bishop Clark said at the press conference, "I have always said that I would gladly ordain women to the priesthood, but that is not a possibility in the church at this present time."

Despite the pastoral's defeat, Bishop Clark said that work on the issues raised in it will continue through the work of NCCB committees.

He also noted that he will remain involved in that work as a member of the NCCB's standing Committee on Women in Society and in the Church. Last week's NCCB meeting brought

an end to Bishop Clark's three-year term as chairman of that committee. But the new chairman, Bishop John J. Snyder of St. Augustine, Fla., invited him to remain as a committee member.

And, Bishop Clark noted, several U.S. bishops already have begun to experience beneficial effects from pastoral's writing process. Several dioceses have established women's commissions, he reported, and a number of bishops had acknowledged that they were opening more leadership positions in their dioceses to women.

Mixed with the sadness he feels about the letter's fate, Bishop Clark said he is hopeful about the future of women's concerns in church.

"The scope and depth of discussion in the Catholic community is at an unprecedented high level," Bishop Clark said, "and I think after last week's meeting, I would be rather confident that the discussion will continue at a high level."

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