

Catholic Church Makes ‘Stunning’ Move

(Oct. 20) — The number of married Catholic priests could grow sharply as the result of the Vatican’s epochal decision to welcome thousands of disaffected Anglicans and Episcopalians into the Catholic church.

At press conferences in Rome and London on Tuesday, Vatican officials announced that the church would set up a special canonical structure that will ease the conversion of members of the Anglican Communion without them having to give up what the Vatican called “the distinctive Anglican spiritual and liturgical patrimony.” That means not only a body of prayers and hymns, but also a tradition of married priests and bishops.

“It’s a stunning turn of events,” says Lawrence Cunningham, theology professor at Notre Dame University. “This decision will allow for many more married clergy in Western churches, and that’s going to raise anew the question, ‘If they can do it, why can’t the priests of Rome?’” says Cunningham. “I can already picture the electronic slugfest on the Internet in coming days and weeks.”

The Catholic church already allows clergymen who convert from Protestant denominations to remain married on a case by case basis, and married priests are common in the Eastern Rite, a group that uses Orthodox traditions but is loyal

to Rome.

But the arrangement with the Anglican Communion goes much further. Cardinal William Levada, the Vatican’s top doctrinal official, announced in Rome that the church would set up a personal ordinariate — in essence a diocese defined not by geography, but by function, like the division that serves Catholics in the military — for converted Anglicans.

The move comes after years of discord within the Anglican Communion, which unites 77 million Anglicans and Episcopalians under the loose authority of the Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams. The church has been racked by schisms over the ordination of women and its stance toward homosexuality.

Some Anglicans believe the Vatican’s move will deepen those divisions. “When it comes to elegant funerals, no one can beat the Vatican,” wrote commentator Andrew Brown in **The Guardian**. “The Roman Catholic church is no longer even pretending to take seriously the existence of the Anglican Communion as a coherent body.”

For many traditional Episcopalians, as the denomination is known in the U.S., the last straw was the 2003 election of openly gay Gene Robinson as bishop of the Diocese of New Hampshire. In protest,

hundreds of churches have broken links with the Episcopal church and declared themselves in line with the conservative Anglican bishops in Africa or South America.

Martyn Minns, the bishop of one such dissident group, the Convocation of Anglicans in North America, said today, "This move by the Catholic church recognizes the reality of the divide within the Anglican Communion and affirms the decision to create a new North American province that embraces biblical truth."

The news is likely to have a particularly strong effect in Great Britain, where there has been a tendency for years for members of the nominally Anglican majority to join the Catholic church, from theologian John Cardinal Newman in the 19th century to former Prime Minister Tony Blair in 2007.

Such conversions have generally meant not only a recognition of the pope's authority, but also a rejection of Anglican traditions. That turning away may no longer be necessary. "Now you can be an Anglican and still be Catholic," says Jo Bailey Wells, director of Anglican Studies at Duke Divinity School. "The Anglicans never had that vote of confidence before."

Indeed, two prominent British priests who publicly broke from Anglicanism years ago stated today that after this ruling from Rome, some Anglicans "will begin to form a caravan, rather like the People of Israel crossing the desert in search of the Promised Land."

Whether that happens or not, today's decision marks a milestone in the relations between the Vatican and the church of England, which King Henry VIII established in 1534 after the pope refused to grant him a marriage annulment. Since then, religious and social battles have often marked relations between Catholics and Anglicans. Says Cunningham: "This would have been unthinkable 200 years ago, and barely imaginable in the 19th century."