

Hume knew Alan Hopes would one day be bishop



When 12 Anglican priests in 1995 reached the end of nearly two years of transition and preparation for ordination as priests in the Catholic diocese of Westminster, there was a faculties examination - an interview to determine whether we were truly Catholic in spirit, grasped canon law for a new pastoral setting, and could be trusted to administer the sacraments, especially matrimony and penance. Afterwards, Cardinal Basil Hume came to check how we had got on and emerged saying, 'Coraggio - you have all passed. And from what I hear [from what was said in the interviews], one of you is going to be a bishop.' We all laughed, but immediately realised he was not joking. It was clear to us that he meant Alan Hopes, who this week Pope Francis announced would be the next Bishop of East Anglia.

Alan was the self-effacing but outstanding parish priest of St Paul's in Tottenham, located a few yards away from the Spurs football ground. It drew weekly attendances of 500 or more, unusual in the Anglican structure that allows for smaller but more numerous churches than the Catholic Church's provision for larger gatherings of people from wider areas. It says much about him that, even though he felt shortly afterwards, as did many of us, that the Church of England had little remaining space in its communion for Anglicans who simply shared the same belief as the rest of the Western Catholic Church on a number of issues, his parting from Anglican friends was charged not with controversies about those issues but affection for his ministry that has endured to this day.

The Diocese of East Anglia has a long tradition of ecumenical leadership. Its first bishop, Alan Clark, was the first Catholic Chairman of the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission and the late Michael Evans was passionate about the Catholic Church's dialogue with the Methodist Church. As the first English Catholic diocesan with a background in Anglican ministry since Gordon Wheeler of Leeds, Alan Hopes brings to bear not only the articulation of the clear and joyful Catholic faith of someone whose personal pilgrimage has been put to the test, but a rare insight into how different kinds of Anglicans think and converse with each other in their Church as well as in encounter with ecumenical partners.

Since in the last few years Bishop Hopes has had pastoral responsibility for the ordinariate for former Anglicans in its formative stages, will he be setting up new groups in East Anglia? The answer is no, because any new groups would be a matter for the ordinariate itself. It bears repeating that the ordinariate is not a system for persuading people to abandon the Churches they belong to, but a provision for people who want to become Catholics to preserve aspects of their Anglican patrimony and existing bonds to other former Anglicans.

A good sign is given by the pilgrimage village of Our Lady of Walsingham. With its different Anglican and Catholic shrine centres, and a long-standing Orthodox church presence too, the churches there have striven to be a model of living side by side and sharing in witness to the Incarnation. The relationship between them has been challenged as people have been seeking to be faithful in, around and across all our churches for many years. But the shrines have remained resolute in the hope of building unity, not halting it, despite setbacks. Certainly Bishop Alan Hopes, for whose diocese Our Lady of Walsingham is principal patron, will be looking to Walsingham and its pilgrimage as a source of sanctification and renewal in East Anglia's vocation to serve the cause of Christian unity.

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