

U.S. Catholic Church prepares to accept Episcopalians



The U.S. Roman Catholic Church will establish a body in January to house disaffected members of the Episcopal Church, beginning with a few dozen ministers and at least two congregations seeking communion, U.S. bishops were told Tuesday.

Some 35 of 67 Anglican ministers who have applied to join the Catholic Church have received the "nulla osta" from the Holy See, allowing them to move forward to become priests, said Cardinal Donald Wuerl, archbishop of Washington, D.C.

Wuerl, head of a committee to move the process forward, gave a progress report to the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops who are meeting this week in Baltimore.

The other clergy seeking ordination have had their dossiers presented to the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, he said.

The Vatican will name an ordinary to lead the Church subdivision, called an ordinariate, beginning on January 1, to oversee the process and perform duties similar to a diocese, Wuerl told the bishops.

Permission to form the ordinariate in the United States was granted last month by Pope Benedict XVI, who in November 2009 issued a formal invitation to Anglicans to join the Catholic Church. Earlier, an ordinariate was formed in England and Wales, and others are under consideration in Canada and Australia.

"It was two years ago that I was invited to Rome for the conversations in response to the Holy Father's expressed desire to move forward in a way that would adequately answer the requests for some form of corporate reunion. Those requests were made insistently over a number of years," Wuerl told the bishops.

In 2003, the 2.3 million member Episcopal Church, the U.S. arm of global Anglicanism, triggered what many observers describe as an ongoing schism by consecrating its first openly gay bishop, the

since-retired Gene Robinson. A few conservative dioceses have split from the U.S. church, and the 85-million member Anglican Communion continues to be roiled by the appointment of homosexuals and women to the hierarchy.

Virtually all of the Episcopal ministers who have asked to become Catholic priests in recent months are married and would be granted exceptions to Catholic celibacy rules in order to be ordained, church leaders said.

Wuerl said two congregations, one outside of Washington, D.C., in Bladensburg, Maryland, and another drawn from various Episcopal churches in the Fort Worth, Texas, diocese have already been accepted into the Catholic Church with the understanding they will fall under the ordinariate.

Wuerl's assistant, Father Scott Hurd, himself a former Episcopal priest, predicted the first ordinations from the new group would be in late May or June.

Candidates must undergo criminal background checks, psychological examinations, and undergo months of training through St. Mary's seminary in Houston.

The congregations already worshiping in Catholic churches, including one in their rented former Episcopal church in Maryland, number some 130 people, Hurd said. But there are other groups around the country in various stages of the process.

Andrew Stern - Reuters