



NEWS

FILE
COPY

BISHOP LAW ISSUES STATEMENT
ON FORMER EPISCOPAL PRIESTS

DATE: January 12, 1982

FPOM: William Ryan

C - 202-659-6700

H - 202-686-1824

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

WASHINGTON--The bishop who serves as the Ecclesiastical Delegate for the Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in questions pertaining to the admission of former Episcopalian clergy into the Catholic priesthood has issued a progress report on the past year's developments.

Bishop Bernard F. Law of Springfield-Cape Girardeau, Mo. reported that 64 former Episcopal priests have entered the petition process and about 20 others have sought information. The process being followed for petitioners is basically in the hands of local Catholic bishops.

"It would be impossible to accurately characterize the more than sixty priests as conservative or liberal," Bishop Law said. "They do not fit a mold any more easily than do Catholic priests. They are approaching the Catholic Church individually as a matter of conscience. They believe that they must be in communion with the See of Peter if they are to be fully faithful to Christ's will for the Church."

Bishop Law said that all but two of the priests are, or until recently were, pastors of congregations. Two are

/more

NATIONAL CATHOLIC OFFICE FOR INFORMATION

1312 MASSACHUSETTS AVENUE, N.W. • WASHINGTON, D. C. 20005

2/Episcopal Priests

college professors. "There is a strong sense of joy in pastoral ministry represented among them and the Anglican tradition manifests a careful and personal concern for people," the Bishop wrote.

"It is gratifying that the Holy See and the bishops of the United States have responded positively to these petitioners in spite of the many questions that such positive response would inevitably raise," Bishop Law said. "In no way has this response indicated a diminution of commitment to the ecumenical movement."

It was announced in August, 1980 that the Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith had agreed in principle to a request presented by the National Conference of Catholic Bishops on behalf of some clergy and laity of the Episcopal Church seeking full communion with the Catholic Church. The agreement was to include provision for already married clergymen to continue in the ministry with ordination in the Roman Catholic Church to be allowed in keeping with the customary norms and practices of the Roman Catholic Church.

In March, 1981 Bishop Law met at the Vatican with officials of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and was appointed Ecclesiastical Delegate. He then wrote to the Catholic Bishops of the United States telling them they could begin processing the petitions of actual or former priests of the Episcopal Church who are married and who wish to serve as priests in the Catholic Church.

Following is the text of Bishop Law's statement:

/more

3/Episcopal Priests

The Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, in a document dated March 31, 1981, appointed me its Ecclesiastical Delegate in the U.S. in matters pertaining to the reception of Episcopal priests and lay persons into full communion with the Roman Catholic Church. In recent months certain questions have been raised which indicate that it would be helpful for a progress report to be made.

In June of 1980, the Holy See, through the Doctrinal Congregation, agreed to a request made by the bishops of the United States on behalf of some priests and lay people formerly or actually members of the Episcopal Church for full communion. The initial requests were made by groups and individuals to local bishops and through the Apostolic Delegation in Washington. In one instance an approach was made directly to the Holy See but was referred to the National Conference of Catholic Bishops (NCCB).

The requests fall into two categories: married Episcopal priests who desire priestly ministry in the Catholic Church, and married and celibate priests who seek a common identity as former Anglicans for themselves and their parishes or lay groups.

In the public statement released in March 1981, the Sacred Congregation declares, "the Holy See's response to the initiative of these Episcopalians includes the possibility of a 'Pastoral Provision' which will provide, for those who desire it, a common identity reflecting certain elements of their own heritage.

The entrance of these persons into the Catholic Church should be understood as the 'reconciliation of those individuals who wish for full Catholic Communion' of which the Decree on Ecumenism (no. 4) of the Second Vatican Council speaks.

In accepting former Episcopal clergy who are married into the Catholic priesthood, the Holy See has specified that this exception to the rule of celibacy is granted in favor of these individual persons, and should not be understood as implying any change in the Church's conviction of the value of priestly celibacy, which will remain the rule for future candidates for the priesthood from this group."

There are presently sixty-four such priests who have entered the petition process, and about twenty others who have sought information.

/more

4/Episcopal Priests

In the fall of 1981 a three-day meeting with twenty-six of these petitioners was held in Dallas. This gathering included several Catholic scholars as consultants. Lectures and discussion sessions filled the days giving a clear picture of priesthood in the Catholic Church as well as the anxieties and concerns of the Episcopalians.

During March of last year and again in November, I was in Rome to confer with officials of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. Several reports and various questions of details have been submitted in regular correspondence with that Congregation.

A considerable amount of work has gone into the liturgical and jurisdictional aspects of the Pastoral Provision, but this work has not yet reached final form. It is presumed that jurisdictional details would receive prior concurrence of the NCCB before submission for final approval to the Congregation.

It is important to point out that in every instance the Church is responding to an individual's faith in the Church. Even in the matter of congregations, as in the four small parishes of "the Pro-Diocese of St. Augustine of Canterbury" the members will be received, after catechesis, as individuals.

The process being followed for the petitioners is basically in the hands of local Catholic bishops. A priest makes his application to the ordinary of a diocese who prepares a dossier on the petitioner's personal, academic, theological, spiritual, marital, and psychological background. His statement of motive and his baptismal and ordination records are included. The dossier is sent to me and, if in proper order, transmitted to the Prefect of the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith as a formal petition for permission to ordain the individual candidate to the priesthood in the Catholic Church. The actual decision regarding time and place of such ordinations is the decision of the local ordinary.

It would be impossible to accurately characterize the more than sixty priests as conservative or liberal. They do not fit a mold any more easily than do Catholic priests. They are approaching the Catholic Church individually as a matter of conscience. They believe that they must be in communion with the See of Peter if they are to be fully faithful to Christ's will for the Church.

/more

5/Episcopal Priests

While it is true that recent events in the Episcopal Church may have precipitated the decisions of some, the fact remains that a concern for Catholic faith has been operative in the lives of these petitioners for many years. Their decision to seek full communion at this moment represents a logical development of thought. To imply that their motive is a desperate reaction to events that have occurred in the Episcopal Church, or to dismiss them as "dissidents" is to fail to recognize their underlying motive of faith.

A group of scholars has assisted in preparing an assessment instrument by which to determine the special private theological study each candidate may require. A written and oral examination will certify each candidate's preparedness for ordination. To support this study program a grant has been obtained to establish an adequate lending library of theological books.

In reporting to bishops having petitioners at the Dallas meeting I wrote that, "the body of Episcopalians present is representative of all those now approaching the Catholic Church. Each man holds the Master in Divinity (M.Div.) degree from an Episcopal Church theological seminary and three have the Ph.D. degree. All but two are, or until recently were, pastors of congregations. Two are professors in colleges. There is a strong sense of joy in pastoral ministry represented among them and the Anglican tradition manifests a careful and personal concern for people."

I count it a privilege to be assisting in this work. It is gratifying that the Holy See and the bishops of the United States have responded positively to these petitioners in spite of the many questions that such positive response would inevitably raise. In no way has this response indicated a diminution of commitment to the ecumenical movement.

#

X,A