

> Nicole Winfield article for Associated Press

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> VATICAN CITY (AP) _ When the U.S. Episcopal Church confirmed the election of its first openly gay bishop, Anglicans around the world warned of schism and a crisis that threatened the unity of the 77 million-member Anglican Communion. But another casualty of the decision was Anglican-Catholic relations, which were already strained by the Church of England's 1992 decision to ordain women. Now, efforts to move the two denominations closer will likely be stalled, if not set back, over the divisive issue of homosexuality, according to participants from both sides. The newly elected Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, will get a firsthand readout of the damage done when he pays his first visit to Pope John Paul II on Oct. 4. That meeting will occur just days before Williams presides over an extraordinary gathering of Anglican leaders to discuss the fallout from the U.S. decision. John Wilkins, editor of *The Tablet*, the London-based Catholic weekly, says he doesn't think the Anglican Communion will split over the issue, but says efforts to improve relations with the Catholic Church may have been dealt a possibly fatal blow. "There comes a point when you can't go on any more," Wilkins said in a telephone interview. "The two churches are going in opposite directions." Indeed, just days before the Rev. V. Gene Robinson was confirmed as bishop of New Hampshire, the Vatican issued a broad denunciation of homosexuality that urged Catholics and non-Catholics alike to unite to stem the tide of granting legal recognition to same-sex unions. The document called homosexuality a "troubling moral and social phenomenon" and repeated the Vatican's position that homosexual acts were "intrinsically disordered." The Vatican hasn't officially commented on Robinson's election. But the head of ecumenical affairs at the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, Bishop Stephen Blaire, said the decision had "serious implications" for Anglican-Catholic relations, whose improvement has been a priority of John Paul's 25-year pontificate. "New ecumenical challenges" have been created, he said in a statement. The Rev. Donald Bolen, in charge of Anglican-Catholic relations at the Pontifical Council for the Promotion of Christian Unity, agreed that the Episcopal decision was an issue, but declined to comment further, stressing the sensitivity of the matter ahead of Williams' visit. "There is little doubt that the Catholic position on this matter has been clearly put forward," he said in an interview. The Rt. Rev. John Flack, Williams representative to the Vatican in Rome, said the U.S. decision was just the latest of several issues to divide the churches. "There clearly are still substantial areas of disagreement, not least the ordination of women, the process of intercommunion, and now on sexuality," he told *The Associated Press*. "But I do think that we are on this journey ... and the journey goes on." > Hopes for improved Anglican-Catholic relations had been raised by the Second Vatican Council, which called for new ecumenical initiatives with the Anglican Communion, which had split from Rome in 1534 over the pope's refusal to grant Henry VIII an annulment. The two churches set up a committee to work through doctrinal differences, and progress has been reached over the years. But ecumenical efforts were dealt a serious blow in 1992, when the Church of England voted to ordain women. At the time, the Vatican, which reserves the priesthood for men, called the decision a "new and grave obstacle to the entire process of reconciliation with the Catholic Church." That decision too divided the Anglican Communion, and several hundred Anglican priests defected to Catholicism as a result. Wilkins, the *Tablet* editor, said the only reason Anglican-Catholic relations didn't collapse then was because of the warm relations then-Archbishop of Canterbury George Carey had established with John Paul. Carey ended up visiting the pope six times over the course

of 11 1/2 years, more than all his successors combined. "That could have been really the end of the dialogue," Wilkins said. "But it was really Carey, I was told in Rome, who held it together." Whether Williams has the ability to keep the Anglican Communion together over the latest divide, while repairing damage with Rome, is the big question going into the October meeting. Flack said the ecumenical implications of the U.S. decision remained to be seen since the issue was still playing itself out within the Anglican Communion, where church leaders in Africa and elsewhere have suggested they might break ties with the U.S. church and some U.S. parishes have begun withholding donations in protest. "He (Williams) will find it very difficult to keep the Anglican Communion together," Flack said in a phone interview. "This is the issue which threatens to burst the balloon." Flack said the crux of the matter dividing the two churches lies in church authority: Unlike the Catholic Church, where authority flows down from Rome, the Anglican Communion is a loose association of 38 national provinces which, in practical terms, do as they wish. Williams' views carry weight because he is the Anglican spiritual leader, but he has no power. "The Archbishop of Canterbury can shout until he's blue in the face, but there will be churches who disagree with him," Flack said. That, Wilkins says, poses a serious problem for the Vatican, which wants a partner in the ecumenical dialogue that can deliver on any agreements reached. "Who's going to keep the agreement if you've got a completely disparate union?" Wilkins asked.

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> Thou wilt keep them in perfect peace whose minds are stayed on Thee...Isaiah

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