

Exceptions Prove the Rule

The Pastoral Provision of Pope John Paul II and How it Conforms to the Tradition of the Church

by Eric Bergman

"...first, for thy holy catholic Church: that thou vouchsafe to keep it in peace to guard, unite, and govern it throughout the whole world..."

—From the Canon of the Mass, The Anglican Usage of the Roman Rite Liturgy

God willing, I will be ordained a priest in the Roman Catholic Church. I also happen to be married, the father of four young children, and a convert to Catholicism from Anglicanism. For more than two years I have patiently explained on many occasions to Catholics, Protestants, and secularists alike why the Church sees fit to ordain men like me. But the quizzical looks I have received and the stammered questions posed during this time have convinced me that while most people accept at face value that the Church sometimes will make exceptions to her universal norms of discipline, these same people do not comprehend why such decisions are made. This article is an attempt to redress the misunderstandings that so frequently surround the 1980 Pastoral Provision Decision of our late Holy Father, Pope John Paul II.

Understand from the outset that by no means am I a pioneer. For twenty-six years now Catholic bishops in the United States have been ordaining married men to the priesthood. The numbers, relative to the total number of priests ordained during this period, are miniscule: only about one hundred such ordinations have taken place since 1981. Yet these ordinations have attracted much attention, both in and outside of the Church, enough so that many Americans have heard that under certain circumstances a married man can be ordained a priest of the Roman Rite. Pope John Paul II was the first pontiff to regularly permit such ordinations, and his successor, Pope Benedict XVI, continues to permit them even now. To begin my explanation why married men are being ordained priests of the Roman Rite I will share the story of the St. Thomas More Society of St. Clare Church in Scranton, Pennsylvania, one fruit of the Pastoral Provision with which I am eminently familiar, having been its Director since the Society was established.

A Common Identity Community is Born

Two and a half years ago, on the Feast of Saints

Simon and Jude, I met with His Excellency, Bishop Joseph Martino, Bishop of Scranton, to begin planning the reconciliation to the Church of about sixty of my parishioners, as well as my possible ordination to the Catholic priesthood. At the time I was a clergyman of the Episcopal Church, the American branch of the Anglican Communion, having been ordained in 1997. I was the rector of a conservative Episcopal parish, but the Episcopal Church had long since ceased to be conservative. Increasingly alarmed by Anglicanism's inability to discipline even the most obstinate heretics, and troubled by the denomination's affirmation of sexual license, I had been looking Romeward for years. A Catholic priest who had become a dear friend through various ecumenical endeavors, Msgr. Joseph Quinn, introduced me to the bishop.

Conversations with a friend of the family had made me aware of several 'common identity' Catholic parishes in the United States, Roman Rite Catholic Churches whose form of liturgy closely resembled the worship of the Episcopal Church, which I had offered our Lord for my entire life. Meeting with Bishop Martino I asked if he were willing to see such a parish erected in the Diocese of Scranton. He was receptive to the idea, and he pledged to do all that he could to help us. But Bishop Martino also wanted to make sure that my parishioners and I were embracing the Catholic faith, not simply rejecting Anglican error. In the ensuing months, as we made the transition from Anglicanism to Catholicism, my parishioners and I would come to articulate the reason why we wanted to become Catholics — very simply, the Catholic Church possesses the fullness of Truth, and we desired to be fully united to that Truth.

The Pastoral Provision Process Begins

My time with Bishop Martino on October 28, 2004 was my formal introduction into the Pastoral Provision process, the means by which former Anglican clergymen and their congregations can be reconciled to the Church while retaining elements of their Anglican traditions and heritage. Upon the conclusion of our meeting the bishop contacted Msgr. William Feldcamp, Pastor of St. Clare Church, who graciously agreed that his parish should host our mission. Bishop Martino then created our Society, of which he made me the Director. Finally, he appointed the current Pastor of St. Peter's Cathedral, Fr. Charles

Connor (yes, the man seen often on EWTN), to be our catechetical instructor. On December 31, 2004, with these arrangements in place, about half my parishioners and I left the Episcopal Church as a group and began our swim across the Tiber. We would be received into the Catholic Church exactly ten months later, at the Vigil Mass for All Saints' Day, 2005, when we made the profession of faith and received the sacrament of Confirmation.

One of the reasons the Pastoral Provision was attractive to the members of my flock is that it can allow me to become their pastor once again. This will happen later this year, as Bishop Martino has received permission from Pope Benedict XVI to ordain me and erect in the Diocese of Scranton a personal parish at which the Anglican Usage of the Roman Rite Liturgy will be celebrated every day. The Anglican Use, as this liturgy is commonly called, is the only variation of the Roman Rite approved for worship in the United States by our nation's conference of Catholic bishops. Containing portions of the Book of Common Prayer, the Episcopal prayer book, and published in the Book of Divine Worship, the Anglican Use Mass retains traditional Anglican customs of worship. The priest faces the altar while celebrating Mass, communicants kneel to receive Holy Communion under both species, and the language of the liturgy is of a more formal idiom, being a sixteenth century translation of the Sarum Rite, the Latin Mass used in much of England at the time of King Henry VIII's schism from Rome. Thus, the Pastoral Provision not only facilitates the reconciliation to Rome of Anglicans without separating the pastor from his flock, but also without requiring that they forswear those portions of their patrimony that are consistent with Catholic faith and practice.

Following in the Footsteps of a Rare Breed

While the St. Thomas More Society is the most recent Pastoral Provision group to form, we are not the first. Five other Pastoral Provision communities exist in the United States, and I have had the pleasure and privilege of visiting every one. The Congregation of St. Athanasius in Boston shares space with St. Theresa's parish in West Roxbury. St. Anselm of Canterbury is a mission of the Diocese of Corpus Christi. The other three Pastoral Provision communities are Anglican Use personal parishes. Our Lady of the Atonement in San Antonio, erected in 1983, was the first to form. Our Lady of Walsingham in Houston came into being shortly thereafter. St. Mary the Virgin in Arlington, Texas came into full communion with the Church in 1994. Originally consisting solely of converts to Catholicism from Anglicanism, the Pastoral Provision parishes and congregations have now grown to include

Catholic converts from many other Protestant ecclesial communities. Over the years the Pastoral Provision has thus been responsible for literally thousands of conversions to Catholicism, one of God's instruments for achieving a measure of the unity for which Christ prayed in John 17.

In the reconciliation to the Church of our separated brethren the Pastoral Provision can be seen to be fulfilling its purpose. Nevertheless, one might reasonably wonder, "If the existing Pastoral Provision communities have been so successful in reconciling Protestants to the Church, why haven't more such communities been established?" The answer, I believe, can be found in the delicate balance Rome has attempted to strike between warmly welcoming those who want to come home and the avoidance of even the appearance of impropriety in the pursuit of Christian unity.

For example, when the Pastoral Provision Decision was issued in June of 1980, the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith made a public statement, which reads in part, "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 of the Second Vatican Council speaks". In other words, the Pastoral Provision is a mechanism to receive people into the Catholic Church, not a mechanism to recruit people for the Catholic Church. Pastoral Provision communities can be established where people ask for them. But the Church has not thus far offered the Anglican Use Mass in various places with the hope that such a community might thus be prodded to form.

Ninety Percent ask for only Half of What's Offered

To be clear, where a group of Anglicans has not asked for the implementation of the Pastoral Provision, no Anglican Use community has been founded. The fact that a man does not have a group of people desiring to convert to Catholicism with him, however, does not prevent an individual Episcopal clergyman from offering himself for priestly ministry in the Catholic Church. Indeed, many bishops across the United States, as well as in other nations such as the United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia, have been happy to receive married former Anglican clergymen as candidates for ordination. Their ministry in the Church, though, comes with conditions. Contrasting my situation with the individual candidate for ordination will help me explain.

When I am ordained, Bishop Martino will appoint me as the pastor to my flock, made up of former Episcopalians who converted to Catholicism with me. But unlike the

men who are ordained to pastor Anglican Use communities, those former Anglican clergymen reconciled to the Church without an accompanying congregation are not upon ordination to be assigned the 'ordinary care of souls'. This proviso means that married men are not ordinarily pastors of Roman Rite parishes, and those who take advantage of only half of the Pastoral Provision's generosity thereby usually end up serving as chaplains at hospitals or universities, or they assist in administrative, educational, or parish work. That the Pastoral Provision has only been half-implemented in most locales therefore explains the disparity between the 100 married Catholic priests in America mentioned above and the mere six Pastoral Provision communities. Even if one takes into account the once extant Pastoral Provision communities in Georgia, Nevada, and Texas that no longer exist, the fact remains that to date only about one out of every ten men ordained in the United States through the Pastoral Provision process has actually brought a congregation with him.

Married Priests Worldwide

Unfortunately, the United States is the only nation where a married former Anglican clergyman can be the pastor of a Pastoral Provision parish. That's because only here has the Pastoral Provision been implemented. The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops decided twenty-five years ago that 'common identity' Roman Rite parishes could be erected here, and so far no other Catholic Bishops' conference has followed suit. Ironically, even though the Anglican Use is not available in Great Britain, Queen Elizabeth's realm is home to the largest number of married Roman Rite priests in the world. Between three hundred and five hundred former Anglican clergymen now serve as priests in the dioceses of the United Kingdom, the fruit of an Anglo-Catholic exodus from the Church of England after women's ordination began there in 1994. However, these men were ordained through the ordinary law of the Church, not through the Pastoral Provision. They did not bring their congregations with them. The chance to do so was not even offered. There is no Anglican Use where Anglicanism originated.

One can sense that by this omission a great opportunity is being lost. Once a Pastoral Provision parish has been asked for and erected, the Anglican Usage of the Roman Rite Liturgy can be fairly understood as an enticing invitation. Originally established to help a petitioning group retain a portion of their patrimony, the parish's simple existence becomes a form of evangelical outreach. It says to the prospective Anglican convert that to be reconciled to the Church he need not abandon everything he knows in order for the Church to warmly welcome him.

The implication is obvious: the more Pastoral Provision parishes are founded, the more prospective Anglican converts to Catholicism the Church can reach.

When Pastoral Provision communities are not allowed to form because a nation's conference of bishops will not permit them, or in the case of the United States a diocesan ordinary is not amenable, the potential is lost to reach those Anglicans who might more readily be reconciled to the Church under their own pastor's leadership, while they are able to look forward to the continued use of a liturgy with which they are all familiar. We certainly must be grateful that since the Pastoral Provision decision was issued in 1980 hundreds of married former Anglican clergymen from across the globe have been ordained to the Catholic priesthood, for this has been a great boon to the Church. Our late Holy Father's gift to the Church will achieve its fullest promise, however, only when every Anglican rector and his parish, in every corner of the world, can do the same thing my congregation and I have been blessed to do in Scranton. The Holy Father's concern for the unity of the Church will then have been embraced by every conference and every bishop, everywhere.

What the Pastoral Provision is Not

I hope by now that I have made explicit the point that the Pastoral Provision is a vehicle to aid in achieving Christian unity. Sadly, people all too often in their consideration of this tool cannot see past the anomaly of a married priest of the Roman Rite. That is, whether innocently or not, many laymen treat the Pastoral Provision and its fruits as if the Pope's outreach to our separated brethren were an indictment of the Church's teaching that priests of the Roman Rite must live celibate lives. They imagine, wrongly I'm certain, that the ordination to the priesthood of a few hundred married men (*worldwide!*) foreshadows an imminent change in the teaching of the Church, that the Holy Father will forswear any day now the tradition that

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priests in the West not be married. Having been immersed in the Pastoral Provision process for the past two years, it is clear to me that with regard to the Church's generosity to married former Anglican clergymen such critics do not see anything resembling what Rome sees.

Rather than view this act of kindness as signaling a break with the discipline of the Church in ages past, the Pastoral Provision ought to be understood in light of the Church's tradition. That is, the Pastoral Provision should not even be seen as an innovation, insofar as the Holy See has for centuries been making such exceptions in pursuit of achieving the unity of the Church that for nearly 1,000 years has eluded the successors of St. Peter. The history of the Church illustrates how very seriously she considers the goal of achieving the corporate reunion of all Christians. To be sure, she has consistently demonstrated this seriousness by respecting the patrimony of those Christians who truly desire to be reconciled to the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church.

In short, married Catholic priests and various rites of worship are nothing new. To achieve the reconciliation of the Ukrainian and Malabar Christians in the 16th century, to cite just two examples from more than 400 years ago, the Holy See was happy to reaffirm that different rites of worship can coexist within the one Church. Their tradition, moreover, did not require clerical celibacy for priests and deacons, which is true for all the churches of the East. Thus, a married priesthood, even for those in communion with Rome, is not a recent phenomenon. While it is true that the Pastoral Provision allows for married priests only for the first generation, with the requirement of clerical celibacy to be reestablished as vocations are raised up from these communities, this too should be seen in the light of the tradition. As distinct from our Eastern brethren, English clergy took a vow of celibacy prior to the English Reformation. With this requirement for Pastoral Provision communities Rome is actually reminding Anglicans of their roots.

The Best Hope to Reconcile Anglicans

If we are to see even larger numbers of Anglicans reconciled to the Church, the Pastoral Provision offers us the best hope. Barring a miracle, a corporate reunion between Anglicanism and Catholicism will never happen, simply because Anglicanism is a denomination founded upon the principle that widely divergent theological views can coexist within the same ecclesial community. We must therefore accept the reality that there is no theological uniformity within Anglicanism, only a common liturgy. Reconciliation will then occur after the manner of groups

like our Society, local groups of Catholic-minded Anglicans seeking to come home together.

In her inherent charity and warmth the Holy See has created a way to allow Anglicans to keep that portion of their patrimony to which they are most attached, while at the same time offering the freedom that comes in the confession of Catholic truth. To the degree that in the coming years the genius of the late Pope John Paul II prevails, we will see more and more of our separated brethren from the Anglican Communion come back to the Church their ancestors left nearly half a millennium ago. Please pray that we shall witness this genius more widely applied, that the work of the Pastoral Provision communities to spread the word about the Church's generosity will by God's grace issue in thousands upon thousands more of our separated brethren being united to Mother Church.

Eric Bergman is the Executive Director of the St. Thomas More Society of St. Clare Church in Scranton, Pennsylvania, one of six Anglican Use congregations in the world. An Episcopal priest for seven years, he received his Masters of Divinity from Yale University in 1997. He and his wife, Kristina, are the parents of four young children. For more information, go to the web: www.stthomasmoresociety.org

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