

A New Bridge across the Tiber

by [Rev. Dwight Longenecker](#)

The Personal Ordinariate of Our Lady of Walsingham has now been established in England. By Easter 2011, three bishops, sixty priests, and nearly one thousand lay people had left the Church of England to be received into the Catholic Church. Archbishop *Donald Wuerl* is working with interested parties to establish the ordinariate in the United States, and progress is being made in Canada and Australia for ordinariates to be erected there later this year.

What will be the future of this new ordinariate?

It could be that it will simply bring into full communion with the Catholic Church a small number of conservative Anglo-Catholics. They were an eccentric church within a church in the Anglican Communion, and some predict that they will continue to be an eccentric church within the Catholic Church. Around the world, there will be small groups of traditionalist Anglicans who will differ from all the other tiny Anglican schismatic churches, in that they will actually be in full communion with Rome.

They will keep to themselves and be viewed by mainstream Catholics as an eccentric rump of dissident Anglicans who like incense and lace, old-fashioned language and splendid old hymns, who somehow managed to worm their way into the Catholic Church. They will be regarded with bemusement and some bewilderment. Anglicans will shake their heads and wish them well and wonder why they didn't become "proper Catholics" if they wanted to swim the Tiber. Eventually, the theory goes, they will die out. Their descendants will be absorbed into the mainstream of the Catholic Church, and the whole thing will be a footnote in the history of ecumenism.

A second possibility is that the Anglican Church herself will eventually disintegrate or morph into something unrecognizably Anglican, and the ordinariate will be all that is left of historic Anglicanism. In this scenario, an increasing number of Anglicans worldwide will see that, if they want to be historic Christians within the Anglican tradition, the only place to do that will be within the ordinariate, and they will flee the sinking ship of Anglicanism to join it.

This is almost certainly not going to happen, for several reasons: First of all, the Evangelical Anglicans are Protestants. After they have made the polite ecumenical noises, they do not really understand or appreciate the Catholic Faith. Secondly, many Anglo-Catholics also do not really want to be Catholic: They want to be Anglican. They honestly do not see the importance of being in full visible communion with the Catholic Church. They have serious misgivings about some of the Catholic dogmas, and they continue to believe that they are "Catholic within the Anglican Church." Thirdly, the liberal wing of the Anglican church certainly has no wish to be in full communion with Rome. They dislike Roman authority, dogma, and moral teachings and are increasingly anti-Catholic.

However, there is a third way. The ordinariate could develop in a very different and exciting direction. The way to understand this more dynamic possibility is to see the ordinariate as a new bridge across the Tiber for a whole range of Protestant Christians.

Already, conservative, liturgically minded Lutherans are asking why there isn't a **Lutheran ordinariate**, while some of them point to the formal intercommunion that already exists between Lutherans and Anglicans and argue that the Anglican ordinariate should naturally be open to Lutherans as well.

And if Lutherans may come across the ordinariate bridge, why not Methodists? After all, Methodism was founded as a schism from Anglicanism. Could not conservative, liturgically minded Methodists also find their way "home to Rome" through the Anglican ordinariate?

For this to happen, the Anglican ordinariate will have to be flexible, and the members will have to see their mission not simply as one of conservation of a venerable patrimony but one of evangelization and outreach. The signs that this is the spirit of the ordinariate are already very positive. First of all, those who have joined the ordinariate have truly left everything to become Catholics. The Anglican bishops, priests, and people have turned their back on their parsonages, palaces, parish churches, and pension plans. They have set out with a true missionary spirit, and the sort of men and women who are willing to take such a step of faith will bring that same enthusiasm to the task of helping the ordinariate be the structure for ecumenical evangelization that it should be.

The way things might develop is best explained with a few examples of how Anglican Use Catholicism has already grown. The Church of the Atonement in San Antonio, Texas, was founded in the early 1980s by a group of disenchanted Episcopalians who felt called to the Catholic Faith. They discovered Rev. Christopher Phillips, a bright young Episcopal priest who was a convert from Methodism who also felt called to the Catholic Faith. They invited him to be their pastor, so he and his young family moved to Texas and they got started: Just a few families with a pastor, meeting in a borrowed room at the local Catholic parish on a Sunday afternoon. As part of the pastoral provision, which allowed former married Anglican priests to be ordained, personal Anglican Use parishes were established within existing Latin rite dioceses. Now, some 30 years later, the Church of the Atonement is a thriving parish with a beautiful church, school, and thousands in attendance.

In Springfield, Kansas, Shane Schaetzel, a former Evangelical who was an Episcopalian and eventually came into full communion with the Catholic Faith, has started a prayer group with fellow Catholics, a few Anglicans, and Evangelicals who are interested in Catholicism. The group meets for prayer and uses the Vatican-approved, Anglican-style Book of Divine Worship. They hope to found a new Anglican Use parish. In Scranton, Pennsylvania, Rev. Eric Bergman led members of his Episcopal congregation into full communion with the Catholic Church and, with the encouragement of the diocese and local clergy, has established a small but thriving Anglican Use congregation. In Houston, the parish of Our Lady of Walsingham has grown from similar small beginnings to a beautiful parish and thriving congregation of Catholics worshipping within the Anglican tradition.

What do these small pioneering efforts indicate? They show not only what can be done, but also the spirit in which it will be accomplished. The way to a very exciting future for the Anglican ordinariate is for the new Anglican-style Catholics to set out with missionary fervor. They might begin with American Evangelicals. Those who observe American Evangelicalism only through the mainstream media might assume that all Evangelicals are devotees of big, Baptist mega-churches, or are followers of fire-breathing fundamentalist televangelists. They do not understand the breadth and complexity of American Evangelicalism, and therefore do not realize that there are many Evangelicals who are not extremists.

There are many well-educated and thoughtful Christians who are very interested in the historic Faith. Many are disenchanted with mainstream Evangelicalism and are searching for a church rooted in history. They long for a church that is liturgical, that has a deep spirituality. When they leave their Evangelical churches and search for something more, their first stop is usually the Episcopal or Lutheran churches. They soon find that these churches are chest-deep in the whole liberal and radical agenda, so they sadly depart.

If these Evangelical pilgrims summon the courage to overcome their deeply ingrained anti-Catholic prejudice and go to their local Catholic parish, they find that it is either as liberal and trendy as the Episcopalians, or that there are cultural and devotional obstacles that they find difficult to overcome. Even if they come to agree with Catholic doctrine and are received into the Church, they are still aware of the large cultural gap between the Protestantism they were brought up on and the Catholic Church they have joined.

What they are looking for is a church that holds to the fullness of Catholic doctrine and practice but has some of the practical strengths of Evangelical congregations. If these sincerely searching Evangelical Christians could find a church that was fully Catholic and yet offered a liturgy and structure that *felt* traditionally Anglican, they would immediately feel at home.

If they found a home in parishes of the Anglican ordinariate, what would these converts bring to the whole Catholic Church? We only have to look at the contributions made to modern American Catholicism by those Evangelicals who have already made the journey: Steve Ray, Marcus Grodi, Scott Hahn, Tom Howard, Mark Shea, Carl Olson, and Francis Beckwith are just a few well-known names, but there are many more. The converts from Evangelicalism bring to the Catholic Church a sincere love of Christ, a profound faith, deep knowledge of the Sacred Scriptures, a heart ready to learn, and a love for the fullness of the Faith and a desire to bring more of their Protestant brothers and sisters into the full embrace of Mother Church.

For the Anglican ordinariate to open up in this way, those involved will have to have an old-fashioned missionary spirit. They will need to walk away from Anglican buildings and property. They will need to study how to plant and grow churches. They will need to make the financial sacrifices necessary for church growth. The Evangelicals are the

Christians who know just how to do this. And if they succeed, the Anglican ordinariate could become a new bridge across the Tiber and the way for many Protestants to find their way into full communion with the Church.