

# The Vatican thirst for power divides Christianity and damages Catholicism

The astonishing efforts to lure away Anglican priests show that Pope Benedict is set on restoring the Roman imperium



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After Pope Benedict XVI's offences against the Jews and the Muslims, Protestants and reform-oriented Catholics, it is now the turn of the Anglican communion, which encompasses some 77 million members and is the third largest Christian confession after the Roman Catholic and the Orthodox churches. Having brought back the extreme anti-reformist faction of the Pius X fraternity into the fold, Pope Benedict now hopes to fill up the dwindling ranks of the Catholic church with [Anglicans sympathetic to Rome](#). Their conversion to the Catholic church is supposed to be made easier: Anglican priests and bishops shall be allowed to retain their standing, even when married. Traditionalists of the churches, unite! Under the cupola of St Peter's! The Fisher of Men is angling in waters of the extreme religious right.

This Roman action is a dramatic change of course: steering away from the well-proven ecumenical strategy of eye-level dialogue and honest understanding; steering towards an un-ecumenical luring away of Anglican priests, even dispensing with medieval celibacy law to enable them to come back to Rome under the lordship of the pope. Clearly, the well-meaning Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Rowan Williams, was no match for cunning Vatican diplomacy. In his cosying up with the Vatican, he evidently did not recognise the consequences. Otherwise he would not have put his signature to the downplaying communique of the Catholic Archbishop of Westminster. Can it be that those caught in the Roman dragnet do not see that they will never be more than second-class priests in the Roman church, that other Catholics are not meant to take part in their liturgical celebrations?

Ironically, this communique impudently invokes the truly ecumenical documents of the [Anglican–Roman Catholic International Commission](#), which were worked out in laborious negotiations between the [Roman Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity](#) and the Anglican Lambeth conference: documents on the Eucharist (1971), on church office and ordination (1973), and on authority in the church (1976/81). People in the know, however, recognise that these three documents, subscribed to by both sides at that time, aimed not at recruitment, but rather at reconciliation. These documents of honest reconciliation provide the basis for a recognition of Anglican orders, which Pope Leo XIII, back in 1896, with anything but convincing arguments, had declared invalid. But from the validity of Anglican orders follows the validity of Anglican celebrations of the Eucharist. And so mutual Eucharistic hospitality would

be possible; in fact, intercommunion. A slow process of growing together of Catholics and Anglicans would have been the consequence.

However, the Vatican Congregation on the Doctrine of the Faith quickly made sure that these documents of reconciliation disappeared in the dungeons of the Vatican. That's called "shelving". At the time, a confidential press release out of the Vatican cited "too much Küng theology" in them – in other words, a theological basis for a rapprochement between the churches of Rome and Canterbury.

As I wrote in 1967, "a resumption of ecclesial community between the Catholic church and the Anglican church" would be possible, when "the Church of England, on the one side, shall be given the guarantee that its current autochthonous and autonomous church order under the Primate of Canterbury will be preserved fully" and when, "on the other side, the Church of England shall recognise the existence of a pastoral primacy of Petrine ministry as the supreme authority for mediation and arbitration between the churches." "In this way," I expressed my hopes then, "out of the Roman imperium might emerge a Catholic commonwealth."

But Pope Benedict is set upon restoring the Roman imperium. He makes no concessions to the Anglican communion. On the contrary, he wants to preserve the medieval, centralistic Roman system for all ages – even if this makes impossible the reconciliation of the Christian churches in fundamental questions. Evidently, the papal primacy – which Pope Paul VI admitted was the greatest stumbling block to the unity of the churches – does not function as the "rock of unity". The old-fashioned call for a "return to Rome" raises its ugly head again, this time through the conversion particularly of the priests, if possible, en masse. In Rome, one speaks of a half-million Anglicans and 20 to 30 bishops. And what about the remaining 76 million? This is a strategy whose failure has been demonstrated in past centuries and which, at best, might lead to the founding of a "uniate" Anglican "mini-church" in the form of a personal prelature, not a territorial diocese. But what are the consequences of this strategy already today?

First, a further weakening of the Anglican church. In the Vatican, opponents of ecumenism rejoice over the conservative influx. In the Anglican church, liberals rejoice over the departure of the catholicising troublemakers. For the Anglican church, this split means further corrosion. It is already suffering from the consequences of the heedless and unnecessary election of an avowed gay priest [as bishop in the US](#), an event that split his own diocese and the whole Anglican communion. This friction has been enhanced by the ambivalent attitude of the church's leadership with respect to homosexual partnerships. Many Anglicans would accept a civil registration of such couples with wide-ranging legal consequences, for instance in inheritance law, and would even accept an ecclesiastical blessing for them, but they would not accept a "marriage" in the traditional sense reserved for partnerships between a man and a woman, nor would they accept a right to adoption for such couples.

Second, the widespread disturbance of the Anglican faithful. The departure of Anglican priests and their re-ordination in the Catholic church raises grave questions for many Anglicans: are Anglican priests validly ordained? Should the faithful together with their pastor convert to the Catholic church?

Third, the irritation of the Catholic clergy and laity. Discontent over the ongoing resistance to reform is spreading to even the most faithful members of the Catholic church. Since the Second Vatican Council in the 60s, many episcopal conferences, pastors and believers have been calling for the abolition of the medieval prohibition of marriage for priests, a prohibition which, in the last few decades, has deprived almost half of our parishes of their own pastor. Time and again, the reformers have run into Ratzinger's stubborn, uncomprehending intransigence. And now these Catholic priests are expected to tolerate married, convert priests alongside themselves. When they want themselves to marry, should they first turn Anglican, and then return to the church?

Just as we have seen over many centuries – in the [east-west schism](#) of the 11th century, in the 16th century Reformation and in the First Vatican Council of the 19th century – the Roman thirst for power divides Christianity and damages its own church. It is a tragedy.