

Reflections on Absolute Ordination

Anglican priests who consider coming into full communion with the Roman Catholic Church sometimes take pause or even offense at the prospect of being unconditionally ordained to Roman Catholic orders. This action is perceived to imply a negative evaluation of Anglican ministry or orders, as if they were worthless or perhaps only a pretense. This is emphatically not the case, and to think this reveals a misunderstanding both of the serious juridical problem of the validity of orders and of the genuine respect for Anglican priesthood that motivates Roman Catholic thought on this question.

There are many Catholic elements in the Anglican churches, but valid orders cannot be one of them. This is not just a Roman Catholic pronouncement; it is also Anglican doctrine. Those of a Catholic mind in ECUSA or C of E may believe that their Anglican ordination was a Catholic one, but their churches officially disagree. Do we not recognize, and those of a Catholic mind a fortiori, that a sacrament is valid not because of the experience of the recipient but because of the official intent (that is, the intent of the office) and teaching of the administrator? This is what we mean when we call sacraments “objective”. This must be particularly true with regards to the sacrament of orders, which establishes both office and jurisdiction in the Church, and on which the validity of successive sacraments depends. No matter what I may believe about my orders, if the one ordaining (which is the church, not an individual) disagrees, it is the ordainer’s belief that is dispositive, not mine. (Personally, I never thought that my Episcopalian ordination made me a Roman Catholic priest. Indeed, my ordaining bishop, a good evangelical in the tradition of Sam Shoemaker, was clearer about rejecting the additions of Rome than he was the subtractions of Protestantism.) It is certainly the case that, in ordaining me, the Episcopal Church never thought that it was making me a Roman Catholic priest. Indeed, when I became Roman Catholic, I was inhibited by my bishop for abandoning the communion of ECUSA. Since ordination is by definition not a private, personal affair, but an action of the church, why would I expect the Roman Catholic Church, in receiving me, to confer a status on my Anglican ordination that the Episcopal Church did not intend in the first place?

Surely someone who recognizes the deficiencies of Anglicanism enough to be led to come into full communion with the Roman Church cannot expect that Church to recognize Anglican orders as a rule. Can anyone blame the curia for having reservations about the judgment of the Episcopalian bishops in such a matter? Would you advocate that Rome must accede to the validity of Bishop Robinson’s ordination, or Bishop Schori’s? By what kind of contradiction can someone privately reject those ordinations and then turn around and ask the Roman Catholic Church to accept his own ordination established under the exact same ritual and authority? Perhaps, as an Anglican, you were blessed to be ordained by a Catholic bishop in apostolic succession, who spoke the Catholic words with Catholic intent; but again, perhaps not. How is the Roman Church to decide, in each instance, which Anglican ordinations may be valid (or, technically, licit) and which not?

Indeed, for a time the Roman authorities did try to make distinctions among Anglican ordinations. Because of the presence of an old Catholic bishop at his ordination, Bishop Graham Leonard was conditionally ordained when he became a Catholic priest in the mid-1990s. However, in 1998 the CDF (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith) decided that the best

course was to ordain all future Anglicans absolutely, so as to resolve any and all possible doubt about the validity of their Roman Catholic orders.

This decision was made, not in any sense to make a statement about the ordinand's past, but in view to his future. The overriding concern was consideration for the confidence of the laity in the validity of the central sacrament of the priesthood—the Eucharist—as they would receive it from the hands of the former Anglican priest. It involves no theological disparagement to recognize that such a priest, usually married, is certainly unusual in the Roman presbyterate. Frequently he will be the first and only of his kind that most laypersons he meets will ever encounter. By being ordained *in forma absoluta*, there will be no cause for any doubt or concern on the part of any of the Roman Catholic faithful that the ministry of their priest is fully valid and authorized. One could assert, with the support of many Roman Catholic theologians and members of the hierarchy, the abstract ideal that Anglican orders validly convey the priesthood intended by Christ. But the leaders of the Roman Church have chosen a more pastoral route—concerned, typically, with more concrete matters—following St. Paul's teaching in Romans 14 and I Corinthians 8, to avoid any cause of stumbling or division among “weaker brethren” who may not agree. I received Roman Catholic ordination with five other ordinands in our annual Archdiocesan ceremony, in a form that was no different than theirs. This communicated powerfully to the laypersons in attendance, many of whom are now in the congregation I serve, that I was a priest in the same way, and just as fully, as those younger celibate men who had (mostly) grown up in the Catholic faith.

The important point to remember, however, is this: The question of the formal validity of Anglican orders is NOT a question about the efficacy of Anglican ministry. It is Catholic teaching that sanctification and truth are to be found outside the formal structures of the Roman Church, especially among the separated brothers of the other Christian churches. The Roman Catholic Church recognizes that those whom an Anglican priest baptizes are truly baptized, those whom he has married are truly married, and even that those to whom he has ministered communion or reconciliation can effectively encounter Christ. Almost all Roman priests and bishops acknowledge that Anglican preaching is, generally speaking, superior to Roman Catholic preaching. Just as John Henry Newman, after reconciling with Rome, still valued and appreciated the strengths of Anglicanism in his day, the Roman Catholic Church, while recognizing the need for it to be completed by a fuller communion with Rome, values and appreciates the ministry of Anglican priests, and strongly affirms the prior ministry of its former Anglican priests.

For this reason, since 1998 the following prayer, written by Cardinal Hume and approved by the CDF, has been recommended for inclusion in the Roman Catholic ordination of a former Anglican priest:

Oratio ad gratias agendas pro ministerio ab electo in Communione anglicana expleto

[Prayer for giving thanks for the former ministry of the ordinand in the Anglican Communion]

Deinde omnes surgunt. Epsicopus, deposita mitra, stans manibus iunctis versus ad electum dicit:

[Then all rise. The bishop, having doffed his mitre, standing with joined hands, facing toward the ordinand, says:]

N., the Holy Catholic Church recognizes that not a few of the sacred actions of the Christian religion as carried out in communities separated from her can truly engender a life of grace and can rightly be described as providing access to the community of salvation. And so we now pray.

Et omnes, per aliquod temporis spatium, silentio orant. Deinde, manus extensis, Episcopus orat dicens:

[And all, for a certain space of time, in silence pray. Then, with extended hands, the Bishop prays saying:]

Almighty Father, we give you thanks for the X years of faithful ministry of your servant N. in the Anglican Communion [vel: in the Church of England], whose fruitfulness for salvation has been derived from the very fullness of grace and truth entrusted to the Catholic Church. As your servant has been received into full communion and now seeks to be ordained to the presbyterate in the Catholic Church, we beseech you to bring to fruition that for which we now pray. Through Jesus Christ, our Lord.

Populus acclamat:

[The people acclaim:]

Amen.

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