

The Church of England has survived the Spanish Armada, the English Civil War and Elton John performing “Candle in the Wind” at Princess Diana’s Westminster Abbey funeral. So it will probably survive [the note](#) the Vatican issued last week, inviting disaffected Anglicans to head Romeward, and offering them an Anglo-Catholic mansion within the walls of the Roman Catholic faith.

But the invitation is a bombshell nonetheless. Pope Benedict XVI’s outreach to Anglicans may produce only a few conversions; it may produce a few million. Either way, it represents an unusual effort at targeted proselytism, remarkable both for its concessions to potential converts — married priests, a self-contained institutional structure, an Anglican rite — and for its indifference to the wishes of the Church of England’s leadership.

This is not the way well-mannered modern churches are supposed to behave. Spurred by the optimism of the early 1960s, the major denominations of Western Christendom have spent half a century being exquisitely polite to one another, setting aside a history of strife in the name of greater Christian unity.

This ecumenical era has borne real theological fruit, especially on issues that [divided Catholics and Protestants](#) during the Reformation. But what began as a daring experiment has decayed into bureaucratized complacency — a dull round of interdenominational statements on global warming and Third World debt, only tenuously connected to the Gospel.

At the same time, the more ecumenically minded denominations have lost believers to more assertive faiths — Pentecostalism, Evangelicalism, Mormonism and even Islam — or seen them drift into agnosticism and apathy.

Nobody is more aware of this erosion than Benedict. So the pope is going back to basics — touting the particular witness of Catholicism even when he’s addressing universal subjects, and seeking converts more than common ground.

Along the way, he's courting both ends of the theological spectrum. In his encyclicals, Benedict has addressed a range of issues — social justice, environmental protection, [even erotic love](#) — that are close to the hearts of secular liberals and lukewarm, progressive-minded Christians. But instead of stopping at a place of broad agreement, he has pushed further, trying to persuade his more liberal readers that many of their beliefs actually depend on the West's Catholic heritage, and make sense only when grounded in a serious religious faith.

At the same time, the pope has systematically lowered the barriers for conservative Christians hovering on the threshold of the church, unsure whether to slip inside. This was the purpose behind his controversial outreach to schismatic Latin Mass Catholics, and it explains the current opening to Anglicans.

Many Anglicans will never become Catholic; their theology is too evangelical, their suspicion of papal authority too ingrained, their objections to the veneration of the Virgin Mary too deeply felt. But for those who could, Benedict is trying to make reunion with Rome a flesh-and-blood possibility, rather than a matter for academic conversation.

The news media have portrayed this rightward outreach largely through the lens of culture-war politics — as an attempt to consolidate, inside the Catholic tent, anyone who joins the Vatican in rejecting female priests and gay marriage.

But in making the opening to Anglicanism, Benedict also may have a deeper conflict in mind — not the parochial Western struggle between conservative and liberal believers, but Christianity's global encounter with a resurgent Islam.

Here Catholicism and Anglicanism share two fronts. In Europe, both are weakened players, caught between a secular majority and an expanding Muslim population. In Africa, increasingly the real heart of the Anglican Communion, both are facing an entrenched Islamic presence across a fault line running from Nigeria to Sudan.

Where the European encounter is concerned, Pope Benedict has opted for public confrontation. In a controversial 2006 [address](#) in Regensburg, Germany, he [explicitly challenged](#) Islam's compatibility with the Western way of reason — and sparked, as if in vindication of his point, a wave of Muslim riots around the world.

By contrast, the Church of England's leadership has opted for conciliation (some would say appeasement), with the Archbishop of Canterbury going so far as to speculate about the inevitability of some kind of sharia law in Britain.

There are an awful lot of Anglicans, in England and Africa alike, who would prefer a leader who takes Benedict's approach to the Islamic challenge. Now they can have one, if they want him.

This could be the real significance of last week's invitation. What's being interpreted, for now, as an intra-Christian skirmish may eventually be remembered as the first step toward a united Anglican-Catholic front — not against liberalism or atheism, but against Christianity's most enduring and impressive foe.

A version of this article appeared in print on October 26, 2009, on page A23 of the New York edition.

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Published: October 25, 2009