



REUTERS

Anglicans enthrone controversial new leader

By Gideon Long

CANTERBURY, England, Feb 27 (Reuters) - Liberal cleric Rowan Williams, who has clashed with the British government over Iraq, was enthroned as Archbishop of Canterbury on Thursday to the accompaniment of harps, African drums and Welsh poetry.

Williams, an honorary Druid from Wales, becomes the 104th Archbishop in the 1,500-year history of Christianity in Britain and promises to be one of the most controversial.

In recent weeks he has been locked in a debate with Prime Minister Tony Blair over the morality of attacking Iraq. Blair who was among 2,400 worshippers packed inside Canterbury's magnificent Gothic cathedral for the colourful two-hour ceremony.

Ironically, the prime minister selects the new archbishop from a short-list given to him by church leaders.

As well as becoming spiritual leader of the world's 70 million Anglicans, Williams becomes the most powerful religious voice in Britain where, despite dwindling church attendance, 70 percent of the population still regard themselves as Christian.

The bearded Williams has branded the U.S.-led bombing of Afghanistan "morally tainted" and described possible war in the Gulf as unacceptable and "deeply disturbing".

He touched on those concerns again in his enthronement sermon.

"When Christians grieve or protest about war, about debt and poverty, about prejudice, it is because of the fear we rightly feel when insult and violence blot out the divine image in our human relations."

On ecclesiastical matters, the 52-year-old Archbishop is no less forthright. He has openly acknowledged ordaining a gay man as a priest and favours the consecration of women bishops.

His views on sexuality are perceived as liberal and have drawn howls of protest from evangelical conservatives, a handful of whom wore black armbands and staged a small protest outside the cathedral before the ceremony started.

They fear he will drag the Church of England further away from its traditional roots.

But inside the cathedral the emphasis was on unity and friendship, with a good dose of Welsh culture thrown in.

Born in Swansea in 1950, Williams is the first Archbishop of Canterbury from outside England since the church split from Rome in the 16th century, and the first from Wales for more than 1,000 years.

The Archbishop wore vestments made by Welsh craftsmen, and a silver clasp bearing the insignia of two dragons - one the white dragon of England and the other the red dragon of Wales.

A Welsh poem was read, the harp was played and later, African drummers and dancers performed a traditional song, reflecting the worldwide reach of the church.

Britain's heir to the throne Prince Charles - his mother Queen Elizabeth is titular head of the church in England - represented the Royal Family, and there were scores of representatives from the world's main religions.

One of the readers at the ceremony was Archbishop Gregorios of Thyateira and Great Britain, representative of the Orthodox Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople.

Near him sat Metropolitan John of Pergamon, another leading representative of the Orthodox Church, which split from Western Christianity in the Great Schism of 1054.

His Grace Saliba Touma Touma was also present, representing the Syrian church, alongside Metropolitan Teofan of Oltenia from Romania.

During the ceremony, Williams kissed a bound copy of the Canterbury Gospels, believed to have been presented by Pope Gregory the Great in the sixth century to St Augustine, the first Archbishop of Canterbury.

The book, one of the oldest in Britain, has an estimated value of 50 million pounds (\$79 million).

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