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Pope Francis wants pastors as bishops

Thomas Reese | Jun. 21, 2013 NCR Today

In an address to papal nuncios, [1]whose job it is to nominate bishops, Pope Francis described the kind of persons he wants them to put forward. He wants pastors who are "close to the people, fathers and brothers." They should be "gentle, patient and merciful; animated by inner poverty, the freedom of the Lord and also by outward simplicity and austerity of life." They should "not have the psychology of 'Princes.'"

The pope spoke at an audience to the papal representatives who had come from hundreds of countries around the world for a two-day conference at the Vatican. The pope specifically warned them against ambitious prelates who want to be promoted from one diocese to a more prestigious one. He cited the ancient view that bishops "are married to a church" and should not be "in constant search of another."

What was missing from Francis' list of episcopal attributes were loyalty and orthodoxy, the two criteria that dominated the nomination process under Popes John Paul and Benedict.

While he did mention the need for bishops who are "vigilant of the dangers that threaten" the flock, the stress was positive not negative. He wants bishops who can "imbue hope" and "have sun and light in their hearts, to lovingly and patiently support the plans which God brings about in His people."

The pope places greater stress on prudence for leaders than on holiness or scholarship. "*Si sanctus est oret pro nobis, si doctus est doceat nos, si prudens est regat nos* - if holy let him pray for us, if learned teach us, if prudent govern us."

Some would argue that pope's tend to want bishops who are very much like themselves. John Paul wanted bishops who would be aggressive in taking on cultural values contrary to church teaching, even if that meant getting into the political arena. Benedict looked for bishops who could be teachers of the faith. Francis is looking for bishops who with simplicity and joy can reinvigorate the church with a positive, compassionate message and witness.

In the coming years we will see whether the nuncios find such men for the pope.

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