Opinion
Culture
U.S. bishops from Region 13 walk in procession to pray at the tomb of St. Paul after concelebr

U.S. bishops from Region 13 walk in procession to pray at the tomb of St. Paul after concelebrating Mass at the Basilica of St. Paul Outside the Walls in Rome Feb. 12, 2020, during their "ad limina" visits to the Vatican to report on the status of their dioceses. (CNS/Paul Haring)



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Journalists who cover the Catholic Church face a hurdle in that most of the important decisions are made in secret. Personnel decisions are almost all made behind closed doors; a new bishop does not even know he is a candidate until he has been chosen. Even when a decision is public, as when the bishops elect committee chairs for the national conference, there are no campaign platforms to mark out why one candidate won and the other lost, and many times the differences are not ideological at all. It takes many years of attention to recognize the dynamics of a bishops' conference, to recognize that some alliances date back to relationships forged in seminary or as staffers in Rome, which issues unite the bishops and which divide them, and which connections in Rome can be employed to achieve a desired end. A journalist's job is to find ways to peek behind the curtain and explain what is going

on and why.

Sometimes that peek requires anonymous sourcing, and we journalists all rely on it. But the ends for which anonymity is used matters. It is one thing to rely on an anonymous source to break a story, and it is another to allow anonymity as a means to assassinate someone's character. Where is the accountability? If someone tells me anonymously that X is going to happen tomorrow and I print it, and X doesn't happen, I am on the hook for having published a false rumor. But casting anonymous aspersions against others offers no built-in mechanism of accountability, not for the sources and not for the writer. It is an approach that is inherently — you might even say intrinsically — sinister.

This week, we got a big peek behind the hierarchic curtain *and* an example of anonymity used to assassinate from Fran Maier, the longtime amanuensis and senior advisor to former Philadelphia Archbishop Charles Chaput. A gifted writer, Maier is now a senior fellow at the Ethics and Public Policy Center and a research associate in Constitutional Studies at the University of Notre Dame.

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Maier penned a column on First Things, strangely, even creepily, entitled "Somebody Needs to be Dad" that presents the results of confidential interviews he conducted with 28 U.S. bishops in recent months.

Maier relates some unexceptional observations: The revenues of most dioceses have been affected by COVID-19 but not as badly as feared; sacramental participation rates continue to decline; administrative tasks tend to overwhelm the daily routine. Remarking on relations with civil authorities, one bishop told Maier "we're generals without armies and the civil authorities know it," which struck me as both interesting and accurate. But these are mere appetizers.

The red meat comes soon enough. In discussing the selection of new bishops, "[The bishops] do worry — this was a recurrent theme — about interference with the selection process at the Roman congregation level. This typically involved an implied, and sometimes quite explicit, distrust of a particular American cardinal who will remain unnamed."

Interference? How does a cardinal who sits on the Congregation for Bishops "interfere" in that congregation's work?

It is true that whichever Americans sit on the Congregation for Bishops will exercise greater influence over the selection of new bishops than other American bishops who are not tasked with preparing *ponenza*, the dossiers on candidates that originate with the nuncio and guide the congregation's discussion at their meetings. If there have been any end-runs around the process that cause "distrust," Maier, or his interlocutors, should name them. The last really fishy business at the Congregation for Bishops of which I know came in 2012 when Cardinals Raymond Burke and Justin Rigali brought the selection of a new archbishop of San Francisco up, and secured the appointment of their favored candidate, when Cardinal William Levada was in the hospital. He had served as archbishop of the city by the bay for 10 years, so his input might have been decisive. Levada himself told me about this over a year later, and he was still very upset by it.

Maier's anonymous bishops also apparently need a refresher course in canon law. "Several voiced irritation with Washington's Cardinal Wilton Gregory for undercutting conference leadership on the issue of Communion and President Biden's problematic sacramental status," he writes. The conference has no juridical role in deciding who should, or should not, be barred from the Communion rail. Gregory is the bishop of the church of Washington, D.C., not anyone else. The irritation of the unnamed bishops is of no consequence.

Cardinal Gregory and President Biden are in good company, as Maier has some choice observations for the pope too. He writes:

> All of the men I spoke with expressed a sincere fidelity to the Holy Father. Many praised his efforts to reshape the Roman curia toward a more supportive, service-oriented posture in dealing with local bishops. But many also voiced an equally vigorous frustration with what they see as his ambiguous comments and behavior, which too often feed confusion among the faithful, encourage conflict, and undermine bishops' ability to teach and lead.

So, they thought he was a nice guy when they visited with him during their ad limina meetings, but they think he is not a very good pope, is that it? The canard about ambiguity in teaching and confusion among the faithful has been around since the

dubia cardinals launched their attack on Pope Francis in 2016. It is a staple at rightwing websites like LifeSiteNews, First Things and the EWTN-owned National Catholic Register. If the bishops with whom Maier spoke can't grasp Francis' good faith effort to do more by way of pastoral ministry than hurl a copy of the catechism at the lay faithful, then I think we can question just how "sincere" their fidelity to the Holy Father is.

Maier is part of a cabal of conservative lay Catholics who have become influential with certain churchmen. Last month, it was George Weigel's opportunity to attack Biden, and last year, he published a book, *The Next Pope*, that was one long criticism of Francis. This month, it is Maier's turn. Fr. Raymond De Souza was quick to praise Cardinal Robert Sarah after the cardinal's resignation was accepted, and the cardinal sent out a churlish tweet with "The only rock is Christ." The Register's Edward Pentin, who broke the news about the Viganò testimony calling on Francis to resign, is another part of the anti-Francis brigade.



Screenshot of photo posted in October 2018 on Francis X. Maier's Facebook timeline featuring Ed Pentin, Vatican correspondent for the National Catholic Register; Kieran Walton, private secretary to Archbishop Anthony Fisher of Sydney, Australia; Anna Halpine, founder of World Youth Alliance; Fr. Raymond de Souza, a frequent contributor to the National Catholic Register and First Things; David Scott, vice chancellor for communications for Archbishop José Gomez of Los Angeles; Robert Royal, member of EWTN's "Papal Posse;" and George Weigel

And I do not need to rely on any anonymous sourcing to know that they are all in cahoots. I know it because Fran Maier, during the 2018 Synod on Youth, posted a photograph of them all together in Rome. In the photo they are joined by David Scott, longtime aide to Archbishop José Gomez, as well as Robert Royal, a member of the "papal posse" on EWTN's "The World Over with Raymond Arroyo," Kieran Walton, private secretary to Archbishop Anthony Fisher of Sydney, Australia, and Anna Halpine, founder of the World Youth Alliance non-governmental organization. Maier was the photographer.

It stands to reason that different people would warm to different popes, as they warm to different political parties or to different kinds of entertainment. What is most remarkable, however, in the writings of the anti-Francis cabal is the fact that they make no effort to cover-up the palpable sensation that they are behaving like children who have had a toy taken away from them. How dare the American people elect Biden. How dare the cardinals elect Francis. That tone emerges in all their writings. Every time.

In this instance, the problem is more than one of tone, however. Some may think that hiding behind anonymity doesn't matter, and maybe it didn't when Maier was ghosting for Chaput. But when you are affiliated with a modern research university, presenting the results of a series of interviews as significant implies a certain veneer of social science. You can't just call your buddies and suggest they are a representative sample. Maier should release the names of the bishops he interviewed. He need not connect any particular bishop with any particular statement. But if we are to accept his conclusions as meaningful, we have a right to know if his sample was representative or not.

Besides, what is Maier's qualification to be involved in a program on constitutional studies? He used to work down the street from the Liberty Bell. Does that count?

And what does this foray into the views of his former boss' allies among the bishops have to do with constitutional studies? Certainly, nothing he writes here answers those questions. Nothing he writes here answers any questions really.

Nor does relating cowardly anonymous attacks on the pope and leading members of the American hierarchy cohere with the mission of America's flagship Catholic university, even if it is standard fare at First Things. Fr. John Jenkins: Call your office!

Archbishop Gomez, who would know Maier from their time together in Denver 20 years ago and is now the elected leader of the U.S. bishops, should call his office also. Does this article reflect the views of the bishops as a body? Are they all, or at least a majority, "frustrated" with the pope and, if so, what is Gomez planning to do about it? Is the U.S. hierarchy committed to exercising their ministry *sub Petro et cum Petro* or not?

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