Opinion
Guest Voices
Bishop Robert Barron of Winona-Rochester, Minn., listens to a question from Archbishop Chris

Bishop Robert Barron of Winona-Rochester, Minn., listens to a question from Archbishop Christopher Coyne of Hartford, Conn., during a Nov. 13, 2024, session of the fall general assembly of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops in Baltimore. (OSV News/Bob Roller)



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Since the role of bishops in the Catholic Church is so important to the life of a local church, the process by which a bishop is chosen has tremendous consequences for ordinary Catholics, and yet they currently have no say in choosing their bishop.

The members of the synod on synodality recognized that this is a problem and in their final document expressed the desire "that the People of God have a greater voice in choosing bishops."

The current selection process is centralized in the Vatican, giving the pope ultimate authority in the process.

It begins with the bishops of a province drawing up a list of priests they think could be candidates for the episcopacy. These names are given to the nuncio, the pope's representative in a country, who is responsible for drawing up a terna, a list of three candidates for a vacant see. He can nominate someone outside of these lists if he wants.

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The nuncio writes a report on each candidate using any source available, including a confidential questionnaire that he sends to selected clergy and laypeople who know the candidate. This questionnaire, which has been revised in different papacies, was secret until I first published it in America magazine in 1984.

Normally, the nuncio also asks the opinion of the bishops of the province as well as officers of the bishops' conference and other important prelates in the country.

The nuncio writes a report describing the diocese needing a new bishop. Pio Laghi, the pope's representative to the United States from 1980-1990, compared the process to an architect trying to find a statue of a saint to fit a niche in a cathedral.

For example, if the diocese had been rocked by sexual abuse, they would look for someone who has credibility in dealing with abuse. If the diocese was in financial straits, they would look for a fundraiser with financial skills. If the diocese was divided, they would look for a peacemaker.

Each pope also has criteria that he wants the nuncio to look for in candidates. Prior to the Second Vatican Council, many complained that the American bishops were more like bankers and builders than pastors. Pope Paul VI wanted more pastoral bishops. Pope John Paul II stressed the importance of unity with and loyalty to the papacy. Pope Francis wants bishops who are pastoral and close to the poor, "shepherds who smell like their sheep."

The terna and reports are sent to the Dicastery for Bishops, where they are examined by the staff and submitted to the committee of cardinals and bishops in charge of the dicastery. If they don't like the candidates, the nuncio is asked to submit another list. Ultimately, the committee votes on the candidates and submits its recommendation to the pope, who can accept or reject their suggestion.

Jesus and his apostles at the Last Supper are depicted in a stained-glass window at St. Aloysiu

Jesus and his apostles at the Last Supper are depicted in a stained-glass window at St. Aloysius Church in Great Neck, N.Y. (CNS/Gregory A. Shemitz)

There is very little room in the process for input from the clergy and laity of the diocese, except for the individuals who are sent questionnaires by the nuncio.

The process does allow for consulting the local church about the needs of the diocese and the type of bishop needed, but people usually want Jesus Christ with an MBA from Harvard, and he is not available. Under the current rules, there can be no public discussion of names, either for or against. The Vatican believes any public discussion of candidates would be divisive and lead to factions supporting and opposing candidates.

The central role of the pope in the selection of bishops is a modern phenomenon. In the early church, when a bishop died, the people would gather in the cathedral and choose a new bishop, who could be a priest or layman. Eventually, the suffrage was limited to the clergy or a part of the clergy, for example, the cathedral chapter.

But this did not necessarily eliminate the laity from the process. Pope Leo the Great in the fifth century believed a true bishop should be elected by the clergy, accepted by the people and ordained by the bishops of the surrounding dioceses.

Sadly, as the church grew rich and powerful, kings and nobles interfered in the process through threats or bribery. With the destruction of the monarchies in the 19th century, reformers saw the papacy as the institution that would appoint bishops who would serve the good of the church rather than the political ends of the state.

Today, reformers would like to see the church return to the more ancient practice of electing bishops at the local level, either by the laity or the clergy. While this might work in democratic countries that respect the independence of the church, history

warns us that political elites and dictators would likely interfere in the elections.

In addition, the election of Donald Trump as U.S. president should make progressives pause before they democratize the church. Democracy is not infallible.

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The synod on synodality is inviting us to a conversation about how to give the people a greater voice in the selection of bishops. This conversation should be done in a synodal fashion where we listen to all voices in determining where the Spirit is leading us today.

Diocesan consultative bodies (presbyteral councils, pastoral councils, synods) should be given a role since they are representative of the laity and priests. Could they nominate candidates or be given a consultative vote on the terna prepared by the nuncio? Should such participation be public or confidential?

The Catholic Church could also learn from other churches that use different methods of choosing their leaders.

All this discussion could lead to the development of several models of selecting bishops that could be tested in various situations at the discretion of a nuncio.

History shows us that bishops have been selected in many ways over the centuries, and each way had its problems. There is no perfect way of selecting bishops. Even Jesus got it wrong one out of 12 times.

Pope Leo was wise in proposing a system of checks and balances that involved the clergy, laity and the college of bishops. It is time to experiment with new ways of selecting bishops so "that the People of God have a greater voice in choosing bishops."