

How To Select Bishops?

Michael Sean Winters | Jan. 16, 2013 | Distinctly Catholic

[As reported here at NCR](#) [1], Swiss Benedictine Abbot Peter von Sury has called for greater local involvement in the selection of bishops, including lay involvement.

Certainly, the abbot is correct that the current system is a "closed system" and such systems are notoriously resistant to change, even necessary change. These days, it seems more important to have been a classmate, or a co-worker, with Cardinal Raymond Burke than to have a personality of the kind that would make one a good bishop. A degree from the North American College has long been a credential that puts one in the ranks of the potential bishops, and I have some very fine priest friends who attended the NAC. But, there are also some NAC alumni who skipped classes, got the notes from the previous year for the exams, and don't have two theological pennies to rub together to save their life.

America's history in selecting bishops displays three models. The first bishop in the U.S. John Carroll, was elected by his peers, the other Catholic priests in Maryland. They gathered at Sacred Heart chapel, which can still be seen here in Bowie, Maryland, and voted for Carroll, acting on a one-time dispensation from Rome that permitted the election. The chapel has been expanded and the election probably took place in what is now the sacristy, but if you call ahead, they will give you a tour. After that, when a see needed to be filled, the priests of a given diocese drew up a terna of three names, then the bishops of the province did the same. For archiepiscopal sees, the other U.S. bishops also drew up a terna. These were all sent to the Propaganda Fide, which then examined the ternas, arranged the final terna for the Pope, and the new bishop was chosen. The nuncio was not involved because there was no nuncio to the U.S. at the time.

The occasion of the 1892 Columbian Exhibition in Chicago brought a papal representative to the U.S. and, after some conniving by the liberals in the hierarchy led by Archbishop John Ireland, the man chosen to represent the Pope at the exhibition, Archbishop Francesco Satolli, became the first apostolic delegate to the U.S. early in the new year. He and his successors would gradually take over the job of assembling a terna, giving the delegate, who became nuncio with the establishment of formal diplomatic relations between the U.S. and the Holy See in 1984, enormous influence over the selection of bishops. That influence should not be overstated. For example, during the long tenure of Archbishop Cicognani at the nunciature, he and Cardinal Spellman had a frosty relationship. But, Spellman was able to send his hand-picked men to be the new archbishops in both Washington, D.C. and Los Angeles, where both would become cardinals, as well as controlling appointments within his province. Archbishop Pio Laghi, who was the nuncio throughout the 1980s once told a friend that only about half of his ternas went through as planned, suggesting that Roman officials, influenced by God knows who, can succeed in adding and subtracting names from a terna, or re-arranging the order.

I concur with the abbot that we need to have more consultation in the selection of bishops and I think a return to the nineteenth century model of ternas from the clergy and the bishops of the province would be the way to proceed. Say, for example, in a given province, the clergy consistently requested a different set of names from those suggested by the bishops. It would be good for the nuncio, and Rome, to know that such divergences of opinion existed totally apart from any consideration about selecting new bishops. More information is always

better. Nor do I fear that multiple ternas would lead to electioneering, in fact quite the contrary. There is something unseemly about campaigning for ecclesiastical office. The fact that the whole process is now done in secret permits quite a bit of electioneering. Shedding a little light on the process might actually serve to discourage campaigns!

I am quite sure I do not agree with the desire to introduce lay involvement in the process. My concern has several sources. First, call me old-fashioned, but I do think that decision-making in the Church should be entrusted to people who hear confessions. Our world, and our culture, can be so protean, so aggressive, I think that only people who serve as ambassador's of God's mercy at least a part of every week should exercise decision-making authority in the Church. Second, there are many lay people who are very, very smart about the affairs of the world but who seek to apply that wisdom about the world to the Church in ways that don't work. One often hears the complaint, "You couldn't run a business that way!" and, of course, I always want to scream, "Well, yes, but the Church is not a business!" The idea that because someone is a successful doctor or lawyer (or blogger!), that somehow makes them fit to assess candidates for the episcopacy, that does not translate. Thirdly, I worry that conservative Catholics are so much better organized than liberal Catholics, any lay involvement would make it more likely, not less, that we would get bishops pledged to a partisan political agenda approved by the Catholic neo-cons.

The biggest objection to lay involvement is that such lay involvement in the past has not usually been good for the Church. Traditionally, many governments exercised the right either to nominate candidates for the episcopacy or a veto power over the selections of clerics. It is hard to imagine any model for lay involvement that would not, over time, favor the powerful of the world. There have been rare instances when such governmental involvement was necessary, such as in the first decade of the nineteenth century in France, when there were two hierarchies, the refractaires and the constitutional. The Holy See agreed with Napoleon to demand the resignation of all the bishops and to the appointment of a new bench. But, that was a relatively isolated incident. The general history of Gallicanism showed the government, in pursuit of its own purposes, carefully and unhelpfully controlling Episcopal nominations.

Abbot von Sury also said this which I found provocative: "In my opinion, a bishop who sows discord is morally obliged to step down. The same applies to an abbot or a parish priest. If they sow discord, they destroy a part of the church. It is not a case of blame. There are simply situations when people sow discord -- perhaps even without meaning to do so, and then they must step down." I have been complaining for some time about "culture warrior" bishops, and I do not take back a single word on that subject, which is what I think the abbot is getting at. But, I can also conceive of situations in which discord is unavoidable. The model here should be the words of Isaiah that we heard last Sunday: "A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out." There are some bishops who seem all too eager to snuff out those wicks and break those reeds. Other bishops are quite capable of articulating the Church's teachings in ways that break nothing and snuff out no one. At the end of the day, pastoral sensibility must be at the top of considerations in selecting bishops, no matter what system is employed.

A final thought. It is true that there are some bishops whom I look at and think "how?" But, I also want to say a word about the many more bishops I have come to know who love the Church, love their people, who are fine pastors. Since I came to Washington in 1980, we have had three great archbishops in a row, and I consider myself very blest to live in the one diocese in the country that shares a home with the nuncio: No nuncio will ever want a bomb-thrower in town, it would only complicate his job, so we are lucky to get bishops who are sane and moderate. But, I also think Cardinal Dolan is doing a great job, not only as Archbishop of New York but in trying to keep the conference together, a nearly impossible task akin to herding cats - if anyone can do it, Dolan can. Cardinal O'Malley in Boston has turned that diocese around. Rising stars like Bishop Daniel Flores in Brownsville and aging stars like Bishop Roger Morin of Biloxi are men with fine minds and big hearts. (Bishop Morin, in fact, just had surgery on his heart so say a prayer!) Most bishops, like most people, have their

strengths and their weaknesses, their achievements and their failures but, being in the spotlight, all is cast into high relief. I would not want to live there, to be sure, and I would not wish it on any of my friends. No matter how we choose them, being a bishop in the Church in the U.S. these days is a difficult and challenging assignment. And, perhaps that is the thing we must most seek in the candidates the Church needs: We need bishops who did not seek the job. Alas, no system I can think of will find them.

Note to readers: I usually try and post links to other significant articles by about 10:30, in time for your morning coffee break. But, this morning, the vet can only see Bernie, my black lab, at 9:30, and it is a one hour drive each way, so I hope to have the links up by lunchtime.

This leads to the other note. Clementine, my border collie, is recovering well from her emergency back surgery on Dec. 23rd. It was very kind of so many people to inquire about her. After two weeks of crate confinement, which she hated, she is in the middle of two more weeks of restricted movement. As of next Monday, barring any further issues, she should be as good as new with an 80% prospect of complete recovery and only a 20% chance of popping another disk. In the past week, however, Bernie, who is also twelve, has been experiencing back pain and now his right leg is lame. So, he is going to the vet this morning, one week after his last visit. Ambrose the St. Bernard, has a thyroid condition and is on medication for a month before new testing. Hopefully, the hair he lost will grow back, but otherwise, he is fine. Again, thank you to all those who sent emails or called about them.

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[1] <http://ncronline.org/news/theology/swiss-abbot-urges-change-how-bishops-are-selected>