NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (https://www.ncronline.org)

Pope Francis' game-changing decision: non-ambitious, pastoral bishops

Eugene Cullen Kennedy | Sep. 5, 2013 Bulletins from the Human Side

Pope Francis told a gathering of apostolic nuncios in June that he wants them to recommend men of pastoral experience to become bishops. This may be the most potent source of game-changing energy he has yet injected into the church's daily life in his six months as the Holy Father.

He told the nuncios with the same disarming directness with which he paid his hotel bill after his election that he wanted these key figures to seek out potential bishops who are "close to the people, fathers and brothers" as well as "gentle, patient, and merciful, animated by inner poverty, the freedom of the Lord, and also by outward simplicity and austerity of life." In addition, potential bishops "should not have the psychology of princes."

Francis has, in effect, told central ecclesiastical casting not to summon what Hollywood calls "dress extras"; that is, those who already have the costume necessary for the roles they are to fill. In this case, that's men who have already purchased the red-trimmed cassocks and gleaming crosses they can don immediately when their longed-for call from the nuncio in Washington finally comes.

Pope Francis has disrupted the clerical game of musical chairs by, as Vatican expert Jesuit Fr. Thomas Reese put it [1], warning the nuncios "against ambitious prelates who want to be promoted from one diocese to a more prestigious one" and reminding them of "the ancient view that bishops 'are married to a Church' and should not be 'in constant search for another.' "

Father Reese notes that notably absent from "Francis' list of Episcopal attributes were loyalty and orthodoxy, the two criteria that dominated the nomination process under Popes John Paul and Benedict." In short, Francis is revolutionizing the process that had looked for men who were willing to start on a farm team diocese if it were in a town close to Mount Hierarchicus, whose peak they longed to scale.

In one address, Francis let church-watchers know how he plans to reform the Curia, now largely staffed by men who set out to make a career in the church. Many of these men are capable administrators, but most of them are routine bureaucrats: men who never solve problems but keep reviewing, restating or revising them lest they end up actually solving one and putting themselves out of the only work they know how to do, reading and stamping the mail but never delivering any of it. Such bureaucrats protect themselves from making a mistake that might harm their chances for advancement.

Curial bureaucrats will do anything to keep on the right side of the Holy Father. They will be puzzled by the pope's demand for pastors not ambitious to become princes. They have built their careers, mastering the moves as carefully as ballet dancers, only to learn now that the pope has changed the game altogether and, for them, ambitioning high honors was the only game in town. Curialists, of course, are famous for "waiting out" popes then going back to business as usual. But they say to themselves, their hearts racing, "The people like this pope. Suppose his ideas catch on?" They may, whether out of their instinct for survival or out of what Saul Bellow termed our "universal eligibility to be noble," abandon the waiting game and reform themselves.

Pope Francis has aimed a blow at what the whole hierarchical system is built on: a graded system with the higher clergy in the skyboxes, the devoted religious in festival seating, as they say of the crowds at rock concerts, and, on the bottom, the laity in standing room only. By looking for pastors who live closely with their people rather than clergy who feel they are entitled to live above them, Francis has loosened the weight-bearing beam of the hierarchical structure that made clericalism and all its charms and privileges possible.

This psychological basis of clericalism was symbolized in the nicknames given to the most obvious of the self-serving ambitious, for example, "the Alpine bishop" was bestowed on a still-living, high-ranking American ecclesiastic "because he was such a climber." Francis is looking for a simplicity that chills the heart of the purebred cleric who fears that a whole way of life in the church may be coming to an end.

Such outcomes would fulfill many of the reforms for which Vatican II Catholics have been working. These include lay participation in the selection of bishops and, something that is bound to come with the fall of clericalism, a greater role for women in the church. These notions are very threatening to the ambitious clergy who did not get the memo on choosing pastors rather than chancery officials to be bishops. They are in a quandary because they planned their lives and careers on pleasing the pope in their every thought and action, and now they have a pope who doesn't care about their pleasing him as much as pleasing and serving their people as good pastors. This will one day be regarded as a turning point in the true reform and renewal of Catholicism.

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