

Fr. Perozich comments —

This is sent to inform laity, in part, as to how bishops are selected. The suggestion of more lay participation could be just as political as it currently is described within the current episcopal and Vatican structure in the article below, wherein poorly catechized laity could promote to the episcopacy a priest who thinks as they do. Even without this danger, the process still is political at the top. The holy father still must rely on those already chosen as bishops and cardinals.

Fat chance that those in charge would give up power to control the organization by allowing others to have power to select over those in charge.

It is easy to tell where a bishop's loyalty lies, more with the institution and those in charge of it, or with the person of Jesus Christ due to the bishop's personal relationship with the Lord.

Just listen to whom a bishop quotes, the pope and only institutional documents or Jesus and the holy Bible. Observe the cleric at prayer during the divine liturgy. See how often he seeks a microphone or other media to promote his own catechism or Jesus' teaching.

We have what we have. We will continue to have it.

The sending of the article was to inform the reader regarding the process and why the men who occupy the episcopacy are there. It is up to each one to ponder if lay input would really change anything.

Thanks anyway Dr. Cafardi.

The People Should Choose Their Bishops Again

An Ambrose of Our Own

By Nicholas P. Cafardi

December 9, 2020



Chicago Auxiliary Bishop John R. Manz shares the sign of peace with newly ordained Bishop Kevin M. Birmingham at Holy Name Cathedral, November 13, 2020 (Karen Callaway/Chicago Catholic).

There are a number of conclusions one could draw from reading the Vatican report on former Cardinal Theodore McCarrick. For example: that the clerical sex-abuse crisis in the Church is worse than we thought and extends to vulnerable adults. Also, that position and influence in our Church are easily bought, and that bishops lie, even to the pope, to protect other bishops. But the conclusion that encompasses all of these things is that the way we choose our bishops is deeply flawed, producing bishops who are, in turn, deeply flawed. How did things get this way, and what can be done about it?

First, let's consider a bit of history. Once the office of bishop was clearly established in the early Church as the unitary head of a diocese (a Roman administrative unit), that office was filled by someone chosen by local people and priests, then ratified by the neighboring bishops, as a sign of the unity of the Church. Even the unbaptized were eligible, as we know from the oft-told story of St. Ambrose, whom the clergy and people of Milan chose as their bishop while he was still a catechumen. The first bishop of the United States, John Carroll, was elected by the priests of Maryland and confirmed by the pope. Today, we are so used to the pope choosing our bishops for us that we think it was always that way. It wasn't. In fact, the right of the pope to choose bishops was only settled with the 1917 Code of Canon Law, a papal document that clearly allocated that power to the holder of the papal office.

Arguably, there is some limited lay input in the selection of bishops. When a priest is being considered for appointment as bishop, the papal nuncio sends out what are called apostolic letters to a select group, which may include laypeople from the area, asking their opinion of the candidate based on some very specific questions. Because the papal nuncio does not actually know the laypeople of a diocese, he normally gets their names from the outgoing bishop, which means that the recipients of the letters are usually wealthy donors. Under Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI, the areas of query in the apostolic letters were: Has the man ever said anything about birth control, abortion, married priests, female priests, the remarriage of divorced Catholics, same-sex marriage? These questions reveal the biases that gave us so many culture-warrior bishops under those popes. Since the election of Pope Francis, the questions focus more on pastoral concerns. But most of the letters still tend to go to influential (i.e. wealthy) people.

Apart from these letters, there is no other lay input into the choice of bishops. The system is still pretty much an old boys' network. Each diocese in the United States is part of an ecclesiastical province—every diocese in Illinois, for example, is in the province of Chicago; every diocese in Pennsylvania is in the province of Philadelphia. At their annual provincial meetings, the bishops of each province can put the names of priests they favor on a list of potential candidates for bishop. This is called the provincial list, and every so often the bishops update it. When there is a need for a diocesan or auxiliary bishop in

the province, the papal nuncio begins the hunt by looking at the candidates on the provincial list. Laypeople do not get to put names on the provincial lists. And the papal nuncio is not even bound by the provincial list: it is only a starting point in putting together his list of potential candidates. On his own initiative, the nuncio may add the names of priests from other provincial lists around the country, or names that aren't on provincial lists, to create the list of candidates that he sends to the Congregation for Bishops in Rome.

The Congregation for Bishops, currently headed by Cardinal Marc Ouellet of Canada, has thirty or so members, including cardinals who work at the Vatican, plus cardinals and bishops from around the world. The congregation vets the nuncio's list (called a terna because it has three names on it) and may add different names before sending it to the pope. An American bishop (usually a cardinal) who is a member of the Congregation for Bishops has inordinate influence on who becomes a bishop in the United States.

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body of the laity, beyond those few apostolic letters.

After receiving the terna, the pope can accept it and select a name from it; he can reject it entirely and ask the congregation for a new terna, with names on it that he suggests; or he can ignore the terna completely and just choose his own man.

This is our system. And it is easy to see how the McCarrick case fits into it. His first appointment as bishop was as an auxiliary in his home archdiocese of New York in 1977, where he had been serving as secretary to Cardinal Terence Cooke since 1971. Cardinal Cooke, with the consent of the other bishops of the province of New York, had his secretary's name placed on the provincial list. When the apostolic delegate, Archbishop Jean Jadot, went looking for names for a terna for auxiliary bishop of New York, there was McCarrick on the provincial list. The Vatican report says that between 1968, when McCarrick was first considered for auxiliary bishop, until 1977, when he was appointed, fifty-two apostolic letters were sent out, mostly to bishops and priests in the New York area, suggesting that very few apostolic letters were sent to laypeople. With his limited investigation complete, Jadot placed McCarrick's name on the terna that he sent to Rome. The Congregation for Bishops did its vetting, the list went to Pope Paul VI (who probably had a conversation or two with Cardinal Cooke), and McCarrick

was chosen. His appointment required no consultation with the body of clergy of New York, and no consultation with the body of the laity, beyond those few apostolic letters. It mostly required Cardinal Cooke's patronage.

Once a bishop, albeit an auxiliary and not a diocesan bishop, all that McCarrick had to do to advance in the hierarchy was to campaign with the apostolic delegate (whose title changed in 1984 to papal nuncio) to get his name on a terna for his own diocese. Given the discretion that the delegate had in structuring a terna, and given McCarrick's already prodigious fundraising in New York, it is not difficult to see how this might happen. When the new diocese of Metuchen, New Jersey, was established in 1981, McCarrick was named its first bishop. In clerical circles this is referred to as a "starter diocese" to describe the first small diocese given to a man meant for bigger things and bigger dioceses. When a bishop is being considered for promotion or transfer to another diocese, the papal nuncio talks not to the priests and the laypeople of the diocese, but to other bishops who know the candidate. McCarrick, his fundraising prowess increasing as he moved up the ladder, had been in Metuchen for less than five years when he was named the archbishop of Newark. He stayed there for four years, and when a cardinalatial see—Washington, D.C.—fell open, McCarrick started campaigning again. According to the Vatican's report, he had been considered for Chicago and New York before this, but concerns about his sexual relations with priests and seminarians kept his name off the final terna submitted to the pope by the Congregation for Bishops.

Thanks to the report, we know that McCarrick was not going to be on the terna submitted by the papal nuncio for Washington, D.C., for the same reason that he did not advance for Chicago or New York: the rumors of his sexual misbehavior. Learning that these rumors had reached the Vatican, McCarrick wrote a letter addressed to his friend Bishop Stanisław Dziwisz, a member of the papal household, but meant for the pope, in which he strongly denied these rumors. The letter had its desired effect. After some curial machinations, McCarrick's name ended up on the terna and he was chosen by Pope John Paul II, even though the pope had acquiesced in a prior evaluation by the Congregation for Bishops not to advance McCarrick's name for Washington. We know that McCarrick used funds at his disposal to send personal gifts to prelates at the Vatican. Was there a check for Bishop Dziwisz in McCarrick's letter, to assure that it got passed on to the pope? Who knows?

But see how this process of choosing bishops works. Thanks to the old boys' network among bishops, once McCarrick gets his name on the New York provincial list—and after a limited appraisal by a few New York laypeople for his appointment as auxiliary bishop—his further advancement does not depend on what the laity say. His moves from New York auxiliary to bishop of Metuchen to archbishop of Newark to cardinal archbishop of Washington D.C. involve only the apostolic delegate/papal nuncio talking with other bishops. It is a self-enclosed clerical system that gave us McCarrick, and that gives us our bishops still.

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This often results in bishops being parachuted into dioceses by headquarters, without any knowledge of the diocese, its priests, or its people. At least McCarrick was made an auxiliary in his home diocese. One of the practices that increased under John Paul II, and one of the worst, is the appointing of auxiliary bishops for a diocese from priests outside the diocese. This happened because provincial lists were used. But what an insult to the diocesan presbyterate: not one of you is qualified to be an auxiliary bishop of your own diocese, so we must bring in an outsider, usually an outsider who is slated for future promotions because of the influence of his patrons in the United States and in Rome.

Sometimes a parachute bishop works out, sometimes he doesn't. The system usually delivers a bishop whose only loyalty is upward, and not to his own priests and people. This fact alone—how bishops are chosen and where their true loyalties lie—explains a lot about how American bishops mishandled the sexual-abuse crisis.

What would it look like if laypeople had a real role in the choice of bishops? Let's make a modest proposal. When a diocese is about to fall vacant—and we know well in advance when that would be because a bishop must retire when he turns seventy-five—the papal nuncio or someone from the nunciature staff should travel to the diocese and speak with the laypeople directly. Ask people to stay after Mass to talk about this; that way you will get those 22 percent of Catholics who actually participate in the life of the Church to give their opinion. Or hold a convocation in the diocese attended by folks chosen by the people of the parish, not by the pastor. The people know who the good priests are; they know the men Pope Francis described in his talk to the episcopal conferences of Latin America (CELAM) when he said:

Bishops must be pastors, close to people, fathers and brothers, and gentle, patient and merciful. Men who love poverty, both interior poverty, as freedom before the Lord, and exterior poverty, as simplicity and austerity of life. Men who do not think and behave like princes. Men who are not ambitious, who are married to one Church without having their eyes on another. Men capable of watching over the flock entrusted to them and protecting everything that keeps it together: guarding their people out of concern for the dangers which could threaten them, but above all instilling hope: so that light will shine in people's hearts. Men capable of supporting with love and patience God's dealings with his people.

Let the people tell the nuncio who these priests are. They know.

Another group who knows are the priests of the diocese. If anyone gets apostolic letters from the papal nuncio, it should be these men. They know the kind of bishop the diocese needs, and they know who has the necessary talents.

Having heard from the people and priests of the diocese, the nuncio can then make his list for Rome from the names they suggested. And the list should stay that way. Neither the nuncio nor a member of the Congregation for Bishops should get to put a friend or protégé's name on the list. Their job would simply be evaluative: Which of the candidates identified by laypeople and priests doesn't think and behave like a prince, but is a pastor and close to the people? Even the pope should be bound, not in law, but in conscience, to that list.

Under such rules, the McCarrick horror would never have happened. We might have had something like Milan in the fourth century, and someone like Ambrose as bishop.

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