

An Intriguing History: Election of Bishops in the Catholic Church

The Early Church

In the first century, the term *bishop* referred to the leader of a local church and was used synonymously with the term *presbyter*. It was at the turn of the second century in Asia Minor that *bishop* had come to mean the monarchical leader of a group of churches. The western city of Rome, on the other hand, was lead by a group of elders and presbyters until Anicetus became the first official monarchical bishop in 154 C.E.

In these early centuries, the nominations and elections of bishops were done solely by a popular vote of all the faithful. St. Cyprian believed elections prevented unworthy persons from becoming bishops. By the middle of the third century, however, evidence shows that women were beginning to be excluded from the voting.

The Christian Roman Empire

The conversion of the Roman Empire had dramatic effects on the role of the bishop. Seen as part of the imperial elite, the bishops received their now famous palliums, hats, thrones, and rings as signs of their secular authority. The original term for a bishopric, *parochia*, was replaced with the imperial term *diocese* and began to be called the bishop's seat or *see*. Due to their new prestige, Bishops were prevented from transferring to new diocese as it was seen as "covetous".

The church in this period was governed by councils and authority rested in ecumenical assemblies of all the bishops. The seeds for papal authority, however, were planted in 381 C.E. when it was agreed the bishop of Rome enjoyed a primacy of honor since Rome was the ancient imperial capital. Thus, preeminence was determined through imperial prominence, not apostolic succession.

Popular elections remained the norm during this period. The fifth century popes Celestine I and Leo I condemned any attempt to impose a bishop without popular consent. Yet, there were attempts in this era to prevent the ordinary laymen from voting and

restrict it only to the wealthy and powerful.

The Early Middle Ages

By the end of the sixth century, seeing the Church's flourishing wealth and power, secular rulers desired to influence the selection of bishops. In the Byzantine East, the emperors restricted episcopal elections to clergy and nobility, claimed the right to nominate the bishop of Constantinople, and began to require money in return for confirmations, a practice known as simony.

In the Latin West, popular elections remained but royal interference increased. Kings began to control the nominations and even started choosing laymen as bishops.

By the tenth century, bishops were full feudal lords that even went to war with complements of troops. The laity were removed completely from the election process and almost all bishops were appointed by monarchs, a practice called lay investiture. Simony became the norm. To prevent control by the empire in 1059 C.E., the Council of Cardinals was created to elect the bishop of Rome.

The issue of lay investiture came to a climax in the fifty year *War of Investitures* as the Church and the empire fought for control of appointing bishops. It concluded in 1122 C.E. with the Concordat of Worms which ended lay investiture but still gave royalty much influence in elections.

The Late Middle Ages

By the end of the twelfth century, episcopal elections were further limited as new bishops were elected solely by cathedral canons, a bishop's elite group of administrative advisors. The symbols of the bishop were imbued with spiritual significance and the ring was seen as the sign of a bishop being wedded to his diocese, thus making transfers "spiritual adultery." As bishops began to reside in the papal court in Rome, absenteeism became a major problem.

From the thirteenth century onward, papal intervention in episcopal elections increased. The pope claimed the right of confirmation on any bishop-elect. Rulers were given the authority to nominate the candidates and some, such as the rulers of Spain, were given full power to appoint bishops.

In 1485, Pope Innocent VIII completely removed any mention of election from the the rite of consecrating bishops. Instead of pledging fidelity to their archbishop, the candidate now had to pledge fidelity to the pope.

The Modern Era

Disillusioned with the Church structures, protestant leaders looked towards alternatives. Luther argued the people have the right to choose their own bishops, Calvin believed they were unnecessary, and Henry VIII appointed them himself.

In response, the Council of Trent in the sixteenth century confirmed papal authority over the whole Catholic Church and the papal right to approve bishops. The rights of cathedral chapters were downplayed and rulers continued to be allowed to appoint bishops, subject to the pope's approval.

The following three centuries were marked by an increase in the authority of the imperial papacy. The Church continued to make agreements with secular rulers to allow popes to name bishops. Fearing the spread of democracy to the Church, Vatican I in 1870 issued the doctrines of papal infallibility and papal primacy, thus helping secure absolute authority for the pope.

The centralization of Church power culminated in the 1917 Code of Canon Law which legalized and confirmed the papal right to appoint all bishops. This same authority was reaffirmed by the documents of Vatican II. By 1983, Canon Law created structures for bishops to nominate candidates, but the pope is not required to appoint a candidate from their nominations.

The Appointment of Bishops in the Catholic Church in the U.S.

Ultimately, the authority to appoint bishops rests with the pope who can select anyone he chooses. In order to help the pope know who to select, the Church has created a four-step process of nomination in which different voices can weigh in and help select candidates.

Each bishop in the United States belongs to one of 33 provinces led by an archbishop and split into multiple diocese. It normally takes six to eight months, but sometimes years, for a vacancy to be filled.

Qualities of a Bishop

In 1972, the Vatican released explicit qualities to look for in a candidate. They include:

- good pastor of souls
- teacher of the faith
- enjoy a good reputation
- impeccable morality
- right judgment and prudence
- firmly hold the orthodox faith
- devoted to the Apostolic See
- faithful to the magisterium
- thorough knowledge of dogmatic and moral theology and canon law

Step One – Provincial Bishops

After secret individual consultation with the clergy and laity of his diocese, each bishop submits to the archbishop of his province the names of priests he thinks would make good bishops. The archbishop collects these names and sends the full list along with their respective *curriculum vitae* to all of the bishops in his province.

After review and discussion of the candidates at their annual province meeting, the provincial bishops vote by secret written ballot to determine which names to recommend. The archbishop then forwards the list of names, which can vary in number, along with vote tallies and minutes to the apostolic nuncio.

Step Two – The Apostolic Nuncio

The apostolic nuncio is the pope's ambassador to a nation's government and Church hierarchy. Upon receiving the bishops' candidates, the nuncio begins his own detailed investigation.

The nuncio starts by requesting a detailed report on the condition and needs of the diocese and desired qualities of a bishop from the current bishop or administrator of the diocese. This report should also contain lists of individuals, both clergy and laypeople, the nuncio might want to interview.

The nuncio will generally consult a series of people including any bishop who had served in the vacant diocese, other bishops in the province, and the president and vice-president of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.

After extensive consultation, the nuncio narrows his list of names. In order to get more detailed information on each candidate, he sends a standard questionnaire to 20 or 30 people who knew the person.

Upon examining all the collected material, the nuncio narrows his list to three candidates which is called a *terna*. He then prepares a report of approximately twenty pages that synthesizes his investigation. The nuncio then forwards the *terna* with his preference noted, his report, and all the documents he has received to the Congregation for Bishops in Rome.

Step Three – The Congregation for Bishops

The Congregation for Bishops is a department of the Roman Curia led by a cardinal prefect that consists of approximately 35 cardinals and archbishops. They are responsible for moderating the appointment of bishops as well as other duties such as establishing conferences for bishops and reviewing their decrees.

Once all the documents are in order and the prefect approves, the process can continue. If the appointment involves a bishop who is being promoted, the prefect and his staff handle the report and recommendation.

If the appointment involves a priest to be made a bishop, the whole congregation is summoned. A cardinal relator summarizes the documentation

and makes a report at a meeting of the congregation who then discuss the appointment and vote. The congregation can follow the nuncio's recommendation, choose another candidate, or ask that a new *terna* be prepared.

Step Four – The Pope

Once the congregation has made their choice, the prefect presents their recommendation and a summarized report to the pope.

A few days later, the pope informs the congregation of his decision who then informs the nuncio who in turn approaches the nominee to ask if he will accept the position.

Auxiliary Bishops

An auxiliary bishop is appointed to assist a diocesan bishop usually due to the needs of a large diocese or to health issues. The process for appointing an auxiliary bishop is similar to the diocesan except that the provincial bishops are not consulted. The diocesan bishop makes the argument why he needs an auxiliary and then submits a list of three candidates directly to the nuncio.

Appointment of Bishops in Practice

Two-thirds of all bishops were appointed as auxiliaries then transferred to diocesan positions, thus skipping step one of the process. On average, 80% of all bishops worked in the chancery of a bishop.

Historically, certain cardinals have earned the title "kingmaker" because of their immense influence in the appointment process such as Cardinal Spellman and Cardinal Bernard Law.

American representatives of the Congregation for Bishops rarely attend meetings because they cannot speak Italian.

The pope holds considerable power. If he does not agree with a province's positions, he will appoint someone of his own nature as John Paul II consistently did in the Netherlands and parts of the United States.