


[About Woodstock](#)
[News](#)
[Programs](#)
[Publications](#)
[Resources](#)

A Survey of the American Bishops

By Thomas J. Reese, S.J., senior fellow at the Woodstock Theological Center
America, November 12, 1983
 Copyright © 1983 by [America Press](#)
 All rights reserved

Post-Vatican II ecclesiology has continually stressed the importance of bishops in the Christian community, but very little is known about these men who are the principal shepherds of the church. Who are they, how are they appointed, what do they do? These are questions that few scholars can answer, let alone the average Catholic.

The importance of bishops in the church is not only indicated by theologians but also by the response to the U.S. bishops' pastoral letter, "The Challenge of Peace." The reaction to this letter proved that bishops could have an impact not only within the church but also outside it.

Despite the growing importance of bishops in both theory and practice, little is known about them and how they operate. In *The Catholic Priest in the United States: Psychological Investigations* (1972), Eugene C. Kennedy and Victor J. Heckler noted, "Empirical research by psychologists and sociologists on bishops and other administrators is apparently nonexistent."

In the hopes of improving this situation, I began collecting information on the American bishops: In order to supplement the data currently available from *The Official Catholic Directory* and the *Catholic Almanac*, I sent a brief questionnaire to the American bishops requesting information on their backgrounds prior to their appointments as bishops. The response rate was a remarkable 90 percent, and in this article I give the preliminary findings from my study.

Numbers and Ages

Approximately 380 bishops are members of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops (N.C.C.B.). These numbers change constantly because of deaths and new appointments. They come from 178 dioceses covering every location in the United States together with the Virgin Islands and Guam (Puerto Rico has its own conference). Besides ordinaries, there are 15 auxiliaries, 82 retired bishops and a few bishops holding nondiocesan appointments. The N.C.C.B. includes 14 Eastern rite bishops.

The average member of the N.C.C.B. is 64 years old, with the oldest group being, of course, the retirees (78 years). The four nonretired American cardinals have an average age of 64 years, while the 28 archbishops as a group are two years younger. Ordinaries (the principal bishop leading a diocese) are on average only a couple of years older than auxiliaries--60.5 years as compared to 58.5 years.

Whether the bishops are considered old, young or middle aged, depends on one's perspective and probably one's own age. But to put these ages in an American context it should be remembered that the President of the United States is 72 years old, and the average age of the Supreme Court Justices is 68. On the other hand, the average age of the U.S. Senate is 54.4 years and of the House 46.5 years. When the Rev. Andrew M. Greeley surveyed American priests (*The Catholic Priest in the United States: Sociological Investigations*, 1972), he found that "68 percent of the bishops are over 55 as opposed to 23 percent of the active diocesan priests."

Ecclesiastical Elite?

From a sociological point of view, the bishops can be considered an elite. Normally, elites come from higher social and economic backgrounds than other people in their organizations. This is true of economic elites and "other strategic elites, such as the military, the diplomatic corps, intellectuals, journalists and religious leaders," according to David A. Putnam in *The Comparative Study of Political Elites*. A study of the Church of England, for example, found that "bishops have higher social origins than local clergy."

The social origins of the American Catholic bishops, however, appear to be rather modest--64 percent of their fathers did not graduate from High school, and only 12 percent graduated from college. Father Greeley in his 1972 study of American priests found that although the fathers of bishops scored 0.7 points higher on his occupational prestige index than did fathers of priests over 55 years of age, the bishops' fathers were less educated than the fathers of these priests. These findings indicate that there is no clear link between socioeconomic class and higher office in the American Catholic Church as there is in many other organizations. Their roots in the working class may partially explain why the American bishops have taken "liberal" positions on economic policy questions, especially since these positions have accurately reflected papal encyclicals.

Education

Two-thirds of the American bishops began their ecclesiastical careers in a minor seminary, a phenomenon that will surely decline since many of these institutions are now closed. Almost half (47 percent) of the bishops attended only seminaries for their higher educations, while an additional 45 percent also attended a Catholic college or university. One out of five bishops attended a non-Catholic college or university for part of his education. Most bishops never received more than a bachelor's degree for all their schooling, although 10 percent report having doctorates and 26 percent have a master's. An additional 5 percent, most of whom worked in Catholic Charities, have a master's of social work (M.S.W.).

Surprisingly few of the bishops have ecclesiastical degrees. About 10 percent have S.T.D.'s (theology), and another 10 percent have J. C.D.'s (canon law). Two percent have both. An additional 10 percent have licentiates or bachelor's degrees in canon law. Most of these degrees are either from Roman schools, such as the Gregorian University, or from The Catholic University of America in Washington, D. C. These institutions are the ecclesiastical academies recognized as training grounds for future bishops. At least one-third of the bishops studied in Rome at one time or another, and one-third of them studied at Catholic University. Interestingly, a number of bishops who had attended The Catholic University of America indicated on their questionnaires that they had never gone to a nonseminary Catholic university. This would seem to indicate that when they attended Catholic University their education was for all practical purposes segregated from that of the non-seminary students.

Ecclesiastical Ladder

While some of the bishops studied in Rome or at Catholic University as part of their seminary training, others were sent there to get higher degrees, especially in canon law. Canon law is an important discipline for priests working in diocesan chanceries, as did 80 percent of the bishops. One out of four of the bishops were chancellors immediately prior to being appointed a bishop, and an additional 4 percent were either assistant chancellors or secretaries to a bishop. But 37 percent of the bishops say they were pastors immediately prior to their appointments while another 10 percent were working in seminaries.

Working in a chancery, the diocesan bureaucracy, appears to be an almost essential prerequisite for becoming a bishop. Less than 20 percent report never having worked in a chancery. Half of the bishops held one or more of the following top chancery positions at some time prior to becoming bishops: vicar general, chancellor, vice or assistant chancellor or secretary to the bishop. Nearly 16 percent of the bishops had been both chancellors and secretaries, while another 12 percent had only been secretaries, and another 14 percent had been only chancellors.

Other important offices in the diocesan bureaucracy which were held by bishops before their elevation included director of Catholic Charities (8 percent) and superintendent of education (10 percent). Besides chanceries and parishes, the other major breeding ground for future bishops is seminaries. Almost 20 percent of the bishops were either rectors or other administrators at seminaries, and another 11 percent were teachers.

One surprising finding of my survey is that although 37 percent of the bishops were pastors immediately prior to their appointment, one-third of the bishops were never pastors at all. These bishops worked much of their priestly lives in chanceries or seminaries. As priests they were singled out at a young age for administrative work for the diocese rather than for the normal pastoral duties that would lead to a pastorate. There is, however, some evidence for believing that a few chancery officials are sent out to be pastors "to get the experience" immediately prior to becoming bishops.

Less than 8 percent of the bishops were members of religious orders before their appointments although 40 percent of the priests in the United States are religious. One-third of the religious appointed bishops were Hispanic or black (as compared to 7 percent of all the bishops), indicating a willingness to look for minority candidates wherever they can be found. More than half of the bishops (56 percent) received their first episcopal appointment in the diocese where they had been diocesan priests, and an additional 17 percent came from the same ecclesiastical province as the diocese they were appointed to. (The dioceses in the United States are organized into 33 provinces, each under an archbishop.)

Appointments and Promotions

The average bishop was 48.8 years old at the time of his episcopal appointment. Two-thirds of the time this first appointment was as an auxiliary (plus another 3 percent who were appointed coadjutors).

The American bishops are very mobile: 36 percent of them have been moved to another diocese after their first appointments. Also, 38 percent of those first appointed as auxiliaries have been promoted to ordinaries. These percentages are higher if one eliminates from consideration recently appointed bishops. For example, 41 percent of the bishops who received their first appointments prior to 1980 were later moved to another diocese. The figure rises to 46 percent if only bishops appointed before 1975 are considered. Thus, a bishop has about a 50-50 chance of being moved to another diocese after his first appointment as a bishop. The odds are almost as good that an auxiliary will eventually be made an ordinary since 43 percent of those appointed as auxiliaries before 1975 are now ordinaries.

The average ordinary received his diocese at the age of 51, and 57 percent were already bishops. Auxiliaries promoted to ordinaries tend to be appointed auxiliaries at an earlier age (46.8 years) than those not promoted (49.8 years). On average it takes about 5 years to be promoted from auxiliary to ordinary.

Only 19 percent of the ordinaries are bishops in the same diocese where they were ordained as priests. An additional 35 percent came from the same ecclesiastical province as the diocese in which they are ordinaries. Only 10 percent of the ordinaries were auxiliaries in the diocese to which they were first appointed ordinaries. Perhaps one reason ordinaries are not always chosen from the diocese they head

is the influence of archbishops in making episcopal appointment. Their ability to have their own men appointed ordinaries can be seen from the fact that, although archdioceses only make up 19 percent of the dioceses, 40 percent of the ordinaries come originally from archdioceses.

More ordinaries tend to have had experience working in chanceries than auxiliaries have. Top chancery positions were held by 58 percent of the ordinaries but by only 42 percent of the auxiliaries. Likewise, 21 percent of the auxiliaries say they never held a chancery position, a claim matched by only 12.7 percent of the ordinaries. There was no difference between ordinaries and auxiliaries when it came to experience as pastors.

The average archbishop received his archdiocese at the age of 53. Only 29 percent of the archbishops were ordained priests in the archdiocese that they now govern. An additional 10 percent came from the same ecclesiastical province as the archdiocese. Sixteen percent of the archbishops were not bishops when they received their appointments. About 64 percent were auxiliaries before being appointed ordinaries, and 61 percent of the archbishops were ordinaries before becoming archbishops. It takes an average of 9.6 years to be promoted from auxiliary to archbishop, or 6.1 years from auxiliary to bishop and 6.2 from bishop to archbishop (the last two numbers do not add up to 9.6 because some auxiliaries are made archbishops without having been ordinaries).

Like other ordinaries many archbishops worked as priests in diocesan chanceries. Sixty-five percent of them held top positions in chanceries, but a surprising 23 percent never worked in a chancery before they were first appointed bishop. Sixteen percent of the archbishops were working in seminaries at the time of their appointments as bishops, and one-fourth of the archbishops were administrators in seminaries at some time prior to becoming bishops. The archbishops are better educated than other bishops--26 percent of them have J.C.D.'s and 7 percent have S.T.D.'s, while an additional 7 percent have both. Half did some of their studies in Rome, and 53 percent attended Catholic University in Washington.

Conclusion

From the results of this study, is it possible to make any predictions about future appointments, for example to the Boston or New York Archdioceses? Not really, but it is possible by looking at past appointments to describe a typical appointee and to make educated guesses.

For example, most of the clergy in Boston and New York would probably like to have one of their own appointed archbishop. The statistics indicate, however, that only 29 percent of the archbishops were ordained in their archdioceses. This indicates that the Apostolic Delegate and the Vatican Congregation of Bishops look at the local priests and auxiliaries, but also look elsewhere. It is most likely that the future archbishops of Boston and New York are already bishops since only 16 percent of the current archbishops were appointed while priests. Most likely they are already ordinaries, as were 61 percent of the current archbishops. They will probably have held high positions in either chanceries or seminaries. There is also a good chance they have a degree in canon law or theology and went to school in Rome or at The Catholic University of America.

It could be argued that the New York and Boston Archdioceses are unique and therefore require a bishop chosen the local clergy. In that case there are 19 living bishops who were ordained priests in New York and eight in Boston (if 1 missed someone, it is his own fault for not answering my questionnaire!). Since the average age of an archbishop when he is appointed is 53, those 65 years of age or older would probably not be considered.

Of the 19 New Yorkers, 10 are under 65. All but three held major chancery positions prior to being appointed bishops, and one of the three, Bishop Austin B. Vaughan (56), has been rector of the seminary and has an S.T.D. from the Gregorian University. He and Bishop Theodore E. McCarrick (53) of Metuchen, N. J., statistically, appear to be the most conventional local candidates because of

their age and experience. Bishop McCarrick has a Ph.D. in sociology from The Catholic University of America and was president of the Catholic University of Puerto Rico. He was also secretary to Cardinal Cooke and associate vicar for education.

If the Pope decides to appoint someone from the New York Province, then the field increases by 10 who are under 65, of whom five are ordinaries. Most had experience in chanceries or seminaries. Bishops Matthew H. Clark (45) of Rochester and Howard J. Hubbard (45) of Albany are interesting in that they were both appointed ordinaries at relatively young ages (41 and 38), both studied in Rome, and they are the only New York bishops under 50.

Six of the bishops who were ordained priests in Boston are under 65, and five of these are auxiliaries in Boston. All of them have held high chancery positions or been rectors of seminaries. Bishops John M. D'Arcy (51) and Alfred C. Hughes (50) have S.T.D.'s from the Gregorian University. When the Boston Province is considered, eight more bishops are under 65, and five of these are ordinaries. Bishop Daniel A. Cronin (55) of Fall River has an S.T.D. from the Gregorian University, and Bishops Joseph P. Delaney (49) of Fort Worth, Tex., and John A. Marshall (55) of Burlington, Vt., have S.T.L.'s from the Gregorian University. Bishop Louis E. Gelineau (55) of Providence, R.I., has a J.C.L. from Catholic University. Auxiliary Bishop Robert E. Mulvee (53) of Springfield, Mass., has a J.C.D. from the Lateran University in Rome, and Auxiliary Bishop Amedee W. Proulx (51) of Portland, Me., has a J.C.L. and S.T.L. from Catholic University.

Finally, it should be emphasized that this study does not examine all of the characteristics, nor even the most important ones, of a bishop. More important than any of the qualities measured in this study are pastoral sensitivity and holiness, qualities not easily susceptible to measurement. This study only attempts to look at easily measurable factors telling about the training and assignments of priests who eventually become bishops. Since the data is limited, the conclusions must also be limited.

See also

- [Woodstock Church Studies](#)
- [Selection of Bishops](#)
- [*Archbishop: Inside the Power Structure of the American Catholic Church*](#)
- [*A Flock of Shepherds: The National Conference of Catholic Bishops*](#)
- [*Inside the Vatican: The Politics and Organization of the Catholic Church*](#)
- [Bibliography of Thomas J. Reese, S.J.](#)