



Furthering the New Evangelization:
Consulting the Laity on Candidates for the Episcopacy

Prepared for Voice of the Faithful by

The VOTF Bishop Selection Committee

August 2013

Furthering the New Evangelization: Consulting the Laity on Candidates for the Episcopacy

Voice of the Faithful—whose members are among the most committed Catholics and active members of their parishes¹—is promoting the participation of all members of a diocese in recommending candidates for their bishop prior to his appointment by the Pope.

We respectfully request the Holy Father to invite interested Conferences of Catholic Bishops to develop demonstration projects on participation of all the laity and clergy of a diocese in *recommending candidates* for their bishop. These projects would provide the Holy See with best practices that could be promulgated for use throughout the Church.

Voice of the Faithful proffers this request in hope that it promotes the good of the Church. It expresses our commitment to be “co-responsible for the being and action of the Church, promoting a mature and dedicated laity.”² In this way we promote the “new evangelization,” because a warm reciprocal relationship between a bishop and his diocese is indispensable to its success.

We have developed this supporting document for the consideration of the Holy See and the various national Conferences of Bishops. The document includes an overview of the proposal and a rationale for adopting it; namely, consideration of the new evangelization and the bishop, the history and current practice generally followed in selecting and appointing bishops, and the timeliness of expanding the laity’s role in the *recommendation* process.

PROPOSAL

Bishops today submit their resignations to the Pope upon reaching age seventy-five. This requirement lends itself to establishing a process to solicit the recommendations of all the laity and clergy of a diocese on candidates to succeed a retiring bishop. Because this would be a new step for the Church today, prudence suggests beginning with some experimental approaches to arrive at best practices, which could be promulgated for use throughout the Church.

National Conferences of Bishops electing to participate would develop and implement several projects in select dioceses of their countries designed to demonstrate effective ways to achieve the participation of all the laity and clergy in the process of *recommending* candidates for their bishop.

As *demonstrations*, these projects would be time-limited (e.g., three years); would include development, implementation and follow-up phases; and would be directed by the Conference

of Bishops. The Conference would engage requisite expertise to develop a demonstration process and to provide on-site technical assistance to the select dioceses in planning and implementing their demonstrations.

These demonstrations should provide for three areas of consultation:

1. In your opinion, what are the most important needs and opportunities facing your diocese?
2. In view of the needs and opportunities you see, what desirable qualifications and qualities do you think the new bishop should possess to meet them?
3. Based on your comments above, who do you think would be good candidates for your next bishop? Briefly explain why.

In each select diocese, a project committee would be established, composed of both clerical and lay members of the diocese, to plan and implement a demonstration project and then provide a detailed report on their findings and recommendations to the Bishops Conference.

The Conference, in turn, would provide the Holy See with a national report of findings and recommendations based on the outcomes of the several demonstrations. To assist in developing its report, the Conference would convene representatives of the diocesan committees and the assisting expertise. The report would detail the processes followed in the several projects, their findings and recommendations, and propose feasible norms that the Holy See could consider for the whole Church.

At the Holy See, the Pope would appoint a commission of select members of the Curia and the Synod of Bishops' Secretariat. The commission would follow the progress of the several demonstration projects through on-site visits and review of progress reports.

At the conclusion of all the projects, the commission would meet with representatives of the involved Bishops Conferences to review the processes and outcomes of the demonstrations and draft proposed norms for use throughout the Church. The commission would circulate the draft norms to all national Conferences of Bishops for review and comment with a specified due date for comments.

The commission would review the comments received and modify the draft norms accordingly. These would be circulated, with the comments received, to those Conferences that had conducted demonstration projects, and the Conferences would review and comment on the draft norms in view of their experiences. Then the commission would finalize proposed norms and prepare a report for the Pope recommending that he promulgate the norms for the Church.

Internet Model

Today's wide access to the Internet offers a feasible approach for consulting the laity of a diocese on candidates for their bishop. Use of the Internet eliminates the need to organize and conduct numerous consultation sessions throughout a diocese. Instead, each person participates in the process by simply entering their concerns and recommendations into a format available on their computer.

On completing the format, with basic identifying information, each person would transmit his or her recommendations to the committee via the Internet. The committee would review all submissions received and develop a comprehensive report of findings and recommendations, which it would transmit to the Bishops Conference.

Our Bishop Selection Committee has developed a model format using the Internet that may be useful to the Holy See and the national Conferences of Bishops. A pilot test of it in Chicago IL in 2012 involving some two hundred lay men and women revealed strong interest to participate in recommending candidates in this way. The model may be viewed at www.votf.org/bishop.

Rationale for Adopting Proposal

The New Evangelization and the Bishop

Pope Benedict XVI convoked the biennial Synod of Bishops in 2012 on the theme “The New Evangelization” in acknowledgement—by the Holy See and the Catholic bishops generally—of a demise of faith among growing multitudes of the laity. The Synod addressed the “necessity to revive faith, which risks being made obscure in the context of today’s cultures, also faced with the weakening of the faith by many baptized persons.”³ A revival of faith, it said, depends on members encountering the Church as a “receptive community and experience of communion; from this, then, Christians become its witnesses ...”⁴ That is, they become evangelists.

But the Synod noted that “to evangelize one must be evangelized first of all ...”⁵ Thus, the goal of the new evangelization is the interior conversion of so many members whose faith is tepid at best and whose membership in the Church is largely nominal. It is a task not entirely unlike that of evangelizing people who have never heard the Gospel or confessed that “Jesus is Lord”—a task much like that which Jesus and his apostles faced.

Jesus drew people to himself through his miracles, visible and tangible actions that moved people to believe in him. He first healed their bodily ills, then preached the “good news” to them. His apostles and disciples did likewise. So also have the Church’s missionaries done over the centuries down to the present: they open schools, provide medical and social services, feed and

clothe the poor. These tangible good works dispose people to listen as they preach the “good news” to which many confess, “I believe.” In turn, they become evangelists to their families and communities, engendering the Church anew “as receptive community and experience of communion ...”

The new evangelization must be well rooted in this pedagogy. It means the Church must *outwardly show* what it believes itself to be: “a kind of sacrament or sign of intimate union with God, and of the unity of all mankind,” and *convincingly convey* that it is “an instrument for the achievement of such union and unity.”⁶

A sacrament is an outward sign that conveys inner grace. So the Church as “a kind of sacrament” must be at pains to appear outwardly what it confesses itself to be. When its outward actions suggest otherwise, Pope Francis warns us, “these do great harm to the Church.”⁷

The bishop is *preeminently* a quasi-sacramental sign of the mystery of the Church and must convey this uniquely both in his person and his office. The Church Community has held its bishops to this expectation from earliest days: “... be examples to the flock,” says 1 Peter to the “Elders” of the Church; a bishop “must be above reproach” and “blameless,” writes Paul. Why? Because Jesus said, “He who sees you, sees me, he who hears you hears me.”

While each Christian is called to give a mystical presence to Christ through his or her life, this is uniquely true of a bishop. The early second century letters of St. Ignatius of Antioch bear eloquent witness to this: “we must regard the bishop as the Lord himself”; “the bishop presiding in the place of God”; “respect the bishop who is a model of the Father ...”⁸ And in this same tradition, Vatican II declared, “The faithful must cleave to their bishop as the Church does to Jesus Christ ...”⁹

However, aspects of its history in the second millennium negatively impact the view of the bishop today. Episcopal titles of address bespeaking royalty not discipleship, episcopal residences too often palatial, and an episcopal “presence” largely remote and overly corrective have served to distance the bishop from his flock and they from him. Since Vatican II many bishops strive to live and minister in a more evangelical manner, and now the presence of the Holy Father Francis will propel them farther along this path.

But the laity’s esteem for their bishops has been severely tried and eroded over recent years by the widespread clerical sexual abuse of minors and the knowledge that bishops had mismanaged predatory priests, including transferring them from one parish to another where their crimes continued. This “has caused such justified anger and outrage on the part of the faithful and damaged trust so profoundly in the integrity of the leaders of the Church.”¹⁰ Indeed, such scandalous conduct is a roadblock to the new evangelization.

To achieve the goals of its new evangelization, therefore, Church authorities should renew the role of the bishop to ensure that he is a magnetic presence among his people, drawing them to a life-transforming faith in Christ. *Practical* steps are required through which the members of a diocese can experience close bonds with their bishop, “cleave to their bishop as the Church does to Jesus Christ ...”

One practical step in this direction would be to consult all the members of a diocese on candidates for their bishop prior to his appointment by the Pope. Christians of the Early Church generally esteemed their bishop so highly and supported his leadership thrusts because they had an essential role in his selection as their bishop. Only after their voiced assent, “he is worthy,” did the provincial bishops proceed to ordain a man bishop.

The new evangelization, therefore, is an opportune, and perhaps imperative, moment to draw all the laity and clergy once more into the process of *recommending* candidates for their bishop. Formal consultations with all the members of a diocese on candidates for their bishop should inform the development of the *Ternum* forwarded to the Holy See. This would express a happy blend of *ressourcement* and *aggiornamento*: the Early Church informing the Church today as it seeks its way in this new millennium.

History and Current Practice of Bishop Selection

Throughout the first millennium and well into the second, all the members of the local Church, both laity and clergy, participated in the selection of their new bishop as a *sine qua non*. Indeed, beginning with the selection of Matthias to replace Judas¹¹ the selection of candidates for leadership roles in the Church was a sacred obligation incumbent on all members of the Church community.

Hippolytus of Rome, early third century, in his *Apostolic Tradition* testifies to the old Roman tradition. He writes: “Let the bishop be ordained being in all things without fault chosen by all the people. And when he has been proposed and found acceptable to all, the people shall assemble on the Lord’s Day together with the presbytery and such bishops as may attend. With the agreement of all let the bishops lay hands on him ...”¹²

St. Cyprian, Bishop of Carthage, mid-third century, states that this is “a practice which is based on divine teaching and apostolic observance, a practice which is indeed faithfully followed among us and in practically every province.”¹³

Sometimes the election of a bishop was by the spontaneous acclamation of the people, most notably in the election of St. Ambrose to be Bishop of Milan in the fourth century.

In the fifth century, Popes Celestine I insisted on the right of the faithful to elect their bishop. “The one who is to be head over all,” he said, “should be elected by all. No one should be made a bishop over the unwilling ...”¹⁴

Numerous provincial councils in the first millennium reiterated the principle that the bishop should be chosen by clergy and people assembled in a synod together with the archbishop and other bishops of the province.¹⁵

History attests to the benefit this practice generally provided to the local churches in securing good bishops, well esteemed by their clergy and people. The manner of their selection as bishop undergirded the strong bonds existing between them and their clergy and laity.

Throughout the second millennium, robust local input on the selection of bishops continued in many regions. For example, in the United States, John Carroll was elected locally to be the first bishop of Baltimore in 1789.

Sadly, however, major abuses had crept into the practice, most notably the actions of emperors, kings and other nobles usurping the right to appoint bishops, often to the detriment of the local churches. Church authorities strongly resisted these abuses over the second millennium, ultimately prevailing in a long struggle and reserving the right to appoint bishops solely to the Pope.

The Pope now has the authority to appoint all the Church’s bishops. He makes the appointment either directly, in most instances, or by way of necessary confirmation of those elected by a few Cathedral Chapters with the right to elect their bishops and of those elected by synods of the Eastern Catholic Churches. Moreover, the Second Vatican Council affirmed this authority of the Pope.¹⁶

In the twentieth century continuing into the present, the popes prescribed processes generally to be followed in selecting candidates preliminary to the appointment of a bishop. These processes do provide for select consultation with members of the laity, but this is merely encouraged, not required, and is limited to individual, confidential input.

This restriction deprives the bishop selection process of broader consultation with the wide group of committed laity in a diocese, which could ensure that the recommendation of candidates transmitted to the Congregation for Bishops enjoys a breadth and depth of background information that could only more wisely inform its recommendations for the Holy Father.

Timeliness for Consulting the Laity

The approval of such broad consultations would be an appropriate response to several current movements that call for the local Churches to *elect* their bishops. We propose here a middle ground between those opposed to any change in the current canonical process and those now calling for the election of the bishop by the laity and clergy of a diocese, as in the first millennium. Our proposal is faithful to the spirit and substance of that period while upholding the final authority of the Pope to appoint all bishops.

This is an especially opportune time for the Holy See to broaden the involvement of the laity in the local recommendation processes. Precisely because final authority in the appointment of bishops is now clearly reserved to the Pope, there is no danger that restoring a broad formal role for the laity in the *recommendation* processes would lead to abuses. On the contrary, it would significantly enhance the bishop selection process, leading to greater esteem for it both within and outside the Church.

The Church today enjoys a laity—both men and women—who are broadly well educated, articulate, committed to their faith, and aware that they have rights and duties as members of the Church. Indeed, lay men and women know this means that they have a proper role to exercise *within* the Church, and they take to heart the teaching of *Lumen Gentium* that:

To the extent of their knowledge, competence or authority, the laity are entitled, and indeed sometimes duty-bound, to express their opinions on matters which concern the good of the Church.¹⁷

The appointment of their bishop surely ranks high among “matters which concern the good of the Church,” upon which more and more of the laity feel not only “entitled” but “duty-bound to express their opinions.” To the extent, therefore, that the procedures for *recommending* candidates for the Episcopacy require broad consultation with all the laity in a diocese, they will eminently serve the good of the Church.

This good can be achieved in the higher quality of recommendations forwarded to the Congregation for Bishops, and in the realization among the laity of their formal role in a matter so vitally affecting their spiritual welfare. Beyond this, new esteem would arise for the Church among non-Catholics, who largely take for granted their own consultative, if not deliberative, roles in the selection of their religious leaders.

By this step too, Church leadership would dramatically signal anew its commitment to the Second Vatican Council some fifty years after its inception. Blessed Pope John Paul II declared of that epic Council, “... I feel more than ever in duty bound to point to the Council as *the great*

grace bestowed on the Church in the twentieth century: there we find a sure compass by which to take our bearings in the century now beginning.”¹⁸

And surely Pope Benedict XVI was referring to its seminal teaching on the laity, among other areas, when he said of the Second Vatican Council: “The doctrinal and pastoral abundance which it contains and—above all, its basic inspiration—have yet to be assimilated by the Christian community ...”¹⁹

Most recently, Pope Francis asked, “Have we done everything the Holy Spirit was asking us to do during the Council?” He lamented, “We celebrate this anniversary, we put up a monument but we don’t want it to upset us. We don’t want to change and what’s more there are those who want to turn back the clock.”²⁰

This is certainly true with regard to the role of the laity *within* the Church.

To read the Council documents on this point is to realize that its seminal vision of the laity has scarcely been implemented. Indeed, many Church leaders have resisted and thwarted the Council’s bold vision for the laity rather than looking to it as a “sure compass by which to take our bearings.”

Given a voice in recommending candidates, the laity would feel stronger ecclesial bonds to their new bishop and to the Holy See. For, as their brothers and sisters in the Early Church vocally affirmed their chosen candidates for bishop, so the laity of the Church today could affirm “he is worthy” of their new bishop.

But the Pope would not be expected in every instance to appoint one of the candidates recommended to him by a local Church. Extenuating circumstances could lead the Holy Father, in his considered judgment, to appoint someone else. This would happen only infrequently since the Pope regularly acts on the advice of the Congregation for Bishops, whose recommendations to him reflect reports prepared by the Papal Nuncios on the basis of the local Church’s recommendations.

But the laity would rightly expect the Holy See always to give thorough consideration to the information forwarded about the particular needs and opportunities of their dioceses and the qualities needed in new bishops to address them. Information gathered through the local processes would be an invaluable service provided by the laity to the Congregation and the Pope in the appointment of bishops.

Conclusion

In this moment of new evangelization, it would serve the good of the Church for the Holy Father to restore to all the laity and clergy of a diocese a formal role in the *recommendation* process on candidates to be their bishop. For, in restoring to the laity and clergy that substantive role in the selection of their bishops which the Fathers of the Church held to be so essential, the Church would be moving forward in this new millennium. And it would be to the honor of Pope Francis for him to inaugurate this provision.

Accordingly, Voice of the Faithful respectfully requests the Holy Father to invite national Conferences of Catholic bishops to develop projects to demonstrate the effective participation of all the laity and clergy of a diocese in *recommending candidates* for their bishop to him.

Our Bishop Selection Committee stands ready to assist in the development of the demonstration projects in whatever manner the Holy See and the bishops may wish to call upon its service.

Contact the committee chair, John Doyle, at john.jackdoyle32@gmail.com.

References

- ¹. William D'Antonio and Anthony Pogorelc, *Voices of the Faithful: Loyal Catholics Striving for Change*, Herder & Herder Book, The Crossroads Publishing Company, New York, 2007
2. Address of Pope Benedict XVI at the Pastoral Conference of the Diocese of Rome, May 26, 2009
- ³. Final Message of the Synod of Bishops, Vatican Information Service, Vatican City, Oct. 26, 2012
- ⁴. *Ibid*
- ⁵. *Ibid*
- ⁶. *Lumen Gentium*, Chapter I, no.1
7. Address to International Union of Superiors General, May 08, 2013, Vatican City, Zenit.org
- ⁸. Francis A. Sullivan, S.J., *From Apostles to Bishops, The Development of the Episcopacy in the Early Church*, The Newman Press, New York, 2001
- ⁹. *Lumen Gentium*, Chapter III, no.27
- ¹⁰. *The Irish Times*, January 6, 2010
- ¹¹. Acts 1:15-26
- ¹². Hippolytus, *On the Apostolic Tradition*, Trans. Alistair Stewart-Sykes, St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, Crestwood, NY, 2001, 56-64
- ¹³. Cf. Sullivan
- ¹⁴. Celestine I, *Epistolae*, 4.5, PL 50: 434-35
- ¹⁵. *Statuta Antiqua Ecclesiae*, (compiled circa 475); the Second Council of Arles (453-473); the Council of Clermont (535); the Second Third and Fifth Councils of Orleans (533, 538, 549); the third, fourth and fifth Councils of Paris (556, 561-562, 614); the Council of Chalons-sur-Saone (647-653).

- ¹⁶. Walter M. Abbott, S.J., General Editor, *The Documents of Vatican II*, Guild Press, New York, 1966; Decree on the Bishops' Pastoral Office in the Church, 389-433
- ¹⁷. See Abbott, *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, no.37
- ¹⁸. Pope John Paul II, *Apostolic Letter on the New Millennium Now Beginning*, January 6, 2001
- ¹⁹. Pope Benedict XVI, *Discourse to the Staff of La Civiltà Cattolica*, February 17, 2006
- ²⁰. Homily of Pope Francis, April 17, 2013, Vatican city, Zenit.org

Furthering the New Evangelization

Prepared for VOTF by John P. Doyle, Chair of the Bishop Selection Committee

With assistance of Committee members:

James Beyers

Paul Culhane

James D. Rooney

Edward Wilson