

Why a Broader Participation In Helping Choose a Bishop

BY DR. GLENN KIST

Most Catholics would never think of the possibility of having any part in the selection of their bishop because the practice of episcopal selection with which we are all most familiar has always excluded the laity and most of the clergy. The bishops of an archdiocese submit names of worthy candidates for the office of bishop to the Pope, who, when a need for a new bishop arises, selects from among the names that have been presented to him. This method of selection of the chief leaders and teachers of Christian communities was the result of historical developments and needs rather than of any scriptural or doctrinal command.

In the days of the apostles, leadership of Christian communities emerged from within the community to be served. For centuries following the death of the apostles, there is ample evidence to indicate that this popular selection of bishops continued. This is particularly true in the western church. For example, St. Cyprian, Bishop of Carthage in the late third century, wrote: "It comes from divine authority that a bishop be chosen in the presence of all the people before the eyes of all, and that he be approved as worthy and fit by public judgment and testimony." Both St. Ambrose, bishop of Milan (374 A.D.), and St. Augustine, bishop of the small north African city of Hippo (396 A.D.), were selected in this fashion. Ambrose, in fact, was still a catechumen when, at the behest of the Christian community of Milan, he was selected for this exalted office. Finally, writing in the late sixth century, Pope St. Gregory the Great noted, "He who governs all should be selected by all."

Why then did the practice of the people selecting their own bishop die out? Actually it did not end everywhere at the same time. It was in the Eastern part of the Roman Empire that the voice of the people first ceased to be considered. After Christianity was recognized as the official religion of the Roman Empire in the fourth century, the role that the bishop played in the community began to change. To his position as leader and teacher, a role rooted in the community itself, was added a secular dimension. As spokesman for the Christian community, the bishop was viewed by the imperial government as an important person whose alliance with or control by the government would be desirable. Hence, the bishops began concerning themselves with secular matters as well as religious. There was a clear trend for the imperial government to dominate and ultimately control

the episcopal selection process, with the result that the popular participation in the process ended.

In the Western part of the Empire, the practice of local and popular participation continued much longer. But here too change was beginning to appear, brought about to a large extent by the disintegration of the Empire resulting from the barbarian invasions. By the sixth century, the community retained only the right to veto an unpopular candidate. The most important role in selecting a bishop was played by the clergy of the city concerned and by the bishops of the area. In the West too the prince argued that he had a right to have a say in the selection of the man who would fill the important office of bishop, an office which by now had secular as well as religious functions. By the ninth century the selection process was clearly controlled by the clergy with the frequent interference of the local prince. Furthermore, by the second half of the century, the papacy began to intervene in the selection of bishops outside of Italy. This intervention, which reached its peak by the eleventh century, was motivated by a desire to keep an ecclesial relationship with the bishops as well as a desire to protect the office of bishop from abuses such as the buying and selling of the position and manipulation of the selection process by the secular princes. These praiseworthy aims resulted, by and large, in the end of the Christian community's involvement in the selection of its leaders. The overall effect was a centralizing of the selection of the bishops in the hands of Rome.

Rome's right to select bishops was frequently challenged by the secular princes who saw numerous political advantages in controlling the episcopal office. When the state did choose the bishop, the men who were selected were not necessarily incompetent or evil; in fact, were saintly. Nevertheless, there was always the danger, and this too happened, that where the secular and religious roles of the bishop became so closely connected it was impossible to disentangle them.

There are incidents in the past when the clergy of an area have exercised a decisive role in the selection of the bishop. One such case was the selection of John Carroll as the first bishop in the United States. In March 1788, the priests in this country petitioned Pope Pius VI, to erect a diocese in their newly independent country and also to allow them to select the man who was to fill the position of bishop. Both requests were granted by the Pope.

... The Nitty-Gritty

By FATHER JOHN MULLIGAN

Bishop Hogan named Father James Marvin as his personal liaison. Fathers Robert Miller and John Mulligan were chosen by the Priests Council. The Sisters Council chose Sisters Mary Wintish and Marie Brown. The Religious priests on the Priests Council selected Father Joseph Dorsey.

Members of the Diocesan Pastoral Council were asked to nominate lay people for the committee and 16 names were submitted along with their qualifications.

Three men and three women were selected with the primary qualification being that they were individuals who get the job done. Some criticism arose that certain minorities and certain viewpoints were not represented. Our response was that the committee never claimed it could or would represent all possible views, just that we were a group of laity, sisters and priests who would try to listen to everyone and work together.

The full committee was first convened in January 1978. It began functioning when there was no thought of the ordinary stepping down and it was exciting to be on a committee that could take its time and get the job done right.

The Canon Law Society of America wanted us to keep them posted on how we went about doing the job. Bishop Hogan was very supportive throughout and more than once sent us a clipping of an article stating that the work of other such committees in the United States was being honored. It was as if he knew the task seemed overwhelming and he wanted us to know that he was with us.

When the subcommittee in charge of developing the questionnaire tried to determine what to ask we decided that the thoughts of eight were just not enough. In June we sent questionnaires to more than 200 persons, asking them their thoughts about the future. Receiving responses from more than 40 of them we then asked for input and extracted some 280 areas of concern that we could ask about. Throughout the summer we worked for a questionnaire that would touch as many of those 280 concerns as possible.

We wanted to avoid a form that would be overwhelming in length or complexity. At the same time the computer people told us that we should not ask for more than 100 answers.

Early in September we were told that the questionnaire

would be used either in the last two weeks of October or the first two weeks of November. But then when Father Marvin announced that the questionnaire was being delayed we were discouraged — we didn't realize that Bishop Hogan had been advised by his doctors to resign.

The committee owes a great deal to many people. I would single out Tony Costello and the staff of the Courier-Journal who treated the entire process as a real priority. Father Peter Bayer who designed the format so that it would be readily computerized and who is going to get the results out during Christmas week and Bishop Dennis W. Hickey who has quietly encouraged the process and helped us out after we heard from the apostolic delegate, Archbishop Jean Jadot.

But the most credit must be given Bishop Hogan who insisted that we get the process going and who indicated his dissatisfaction with the trouble we had getting started in 1977. The committee might have died two years ago but he would not let it. He was strongly committed to consultation throughout his episcopacy and wanted this diocese consulted about the qualifications of his successor.

From the very beginning many of us felt that hearings were essential. We wanted them after everyone had a chance to see what the results were — the result would help to focus and specify the hearings and make them more useful. The hearings will be scheduled in mid-January. We want everyone to have the opportunity to be heard because you never know through whom the Holy Spirit is going to speak.

Only a small percentage of the people are getting the questionnaire, so the hearings are very important. We now are thinking of having as many as 13 — one in each of 10 regions and one each with the three consultative bodies — priests, sisters and diocesan pastoral councils. We also are considering one in Spanish.

The committee will divide into two groups in January; eight members will be involved with the hearings and four will supervise the writing of the report for the apostolic delegate. As the hearings are completed, reports will be communicated to the writing group to be incorporated into the final report. This should go to the delegate early in February.

I am happy that the questionnaires will be distributed to parish council members throughout the diocese. They have been selected as leaders by their individual communities and have gained insight into the problems of the post-Vatican II Church.



FATHER MARVIN



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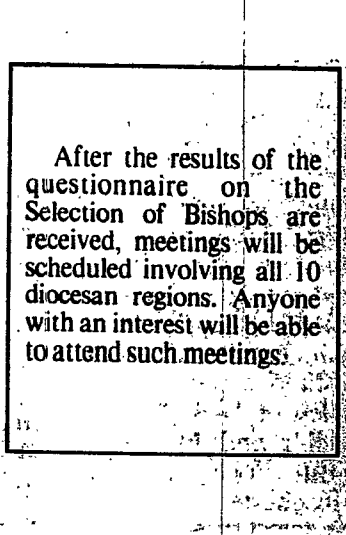
SISTER WINTISH



EDWARD GUTMAN



SISTER BROWN



DENNIS MCGUIRE

After the results of the questionnaire on the Selection of Bishops are received, meetings will be scheduled involving all 10 diocesan regions. Anyone with an interest will be able to attend such meetings.