

Features

# Freelance bishops populate an ecclesiastical underground

**EDITOR'S NOTE:** In a recent *Courier-Journal* article, Father Robert F. McNamara discussed the chains of episcopal succession that unite the bishops of Rochester with the Twelve Apostles. In this article, Father McNamara attempts to shed some light on the illicit chains of succession that have given rise to "freelance bishops" throughout Church history and in present-day Rochester.

By Father Robert F. McNamara

The term "bishop at large," for those who have never heard it used, was coined by English writer Peter Anson in reference to people who have been consecrated as bishops by genuine but "unauthorized" sources. On receipt of their episcopal orders, these "bishops" have usually set themselves up as independent leaders of minuscule sects that profess patchwork creeds.

The discovery that such an ecclesial underground exists comes as a shock to many Catholics. Yet throughout the history of the Church, individuals have sought to become bishops in this illicit manner and, unfortunately, have managed to induce legitimate prelates to grant their requests. One of the earliest cases occurred in 251 A.D.

In his 1985 book *Bishops Irregular*, Alan Bain catalogues more than 900 such persons in various countries over the course of the past three generations. Bain admits, moreover, that his figures are incomplete. The principal reason for underestimation is that these unusual prelates maintain low profiles and are hard to track down. In addition, they maintain little allegiance among themselves, and have no unifying organization that could provide information about them. Once they have received episcopal orders, in fact, they tend to act as popes unto themselves.

What legitimate bishops would think of consecrating a bishop without proper Church authorization? Generally, the consecrators are bishops who are for some reason at odds with Church authorities. Few contentious bishops would go this far, but when one performs even a single illegitimate consecration, he opens the floodgate; the person he has now ordained can go out and consecrate as many others as he chooses, usually with decreasing quality control.

What type of people would seek illicit holy orders? First of all, they are almost exclusively men, as only the Polish Mariavites and a few more recent sects have ordained or consecrated women. They are Christians of varied backgrounds, through few are Protestants, for the average Protestant is not interested in hierarchy or high ceremonial. Some of the illicit bishops began in Eastern rites; a good many are Anglicans/Episcopalians; and a large part are ex-Catholics.

These bishops tend to be strongly traditional in outlook and to oppose — to the point of superstition — even superficial change. On the spectrum of personality, they may range from the terribly earnest on one extreme, to the dilettantish on the other. Some of the dilettantes



**EPISCOPAL SUCCESSION** — Jesus commissions the Twelve Apostles to go out and evangelize the world. Today's "bishops irregular" claim valid — albeit illicit — succession to this episcopal heritage.

seem to regard episcopal orders as "collectibles," continually seeking re-consecration from several irregular bishops.

Perhaps the best description of these freelance bishops and the churchlets they lead is that given by the English Dominican Father Henry St. John: "In all this (underground movement) there is a queer mixture of the irrepressible, the ridiculous, and the pathetic; naive goodness and sincere idealism, unconscious vanity and, at times, conscious roguery: its promoters frequently unstable to a degree, eccentric in some cases to the point of craziness, moving in a dream world of reality. A marked characteristic of this dream world is a *folie de grandeur* of high-sounding titles and more than extravagant pretensions; these generally in inverse ratio to the number of their adherents and the size of the conventicles (assemblies) in which they worship with elaborate ritual and ceremonial."

The study of these sacramental vagaries is morbidly fascinating, but leads nowhere. Yet one chain of irregular episcopal orders has direct and immediate relevance to the Diocese of Rochester. Known as the "Musey Succession" this episcopal chain derives from the Most Rev. Pierre-Martin Ngo-dinh Thuc of Vietnam (1897-1984).

The story of Bishop Thuc is a sad one. A member of distinguished Vietnamese family, he was named vicar-apostolic of Vinh Long in 1938 by Pope Pius XI. On May 4, 1938, Bishop Antonin Drapier, a French Dominican, consecrated Thuc in his hometown of Phu-cam.

And, in the quiet days before the Vietnamese revolution, Bishop Thuc came to Rochester on at least one occasion and visited St. Bernard's Seminary.

South Vietnam was declared a republic in 1955 and, in 1960, Pope John XXIII established its national hierarchy, appointing Thuc to the important post of archbishop of Hue on the Perfume River.

The new archbishop was very close to the Vietnamese government led by his brother, President Ngo-dinh Diem. But war and revolution resulted in the assassination of President Diem and another brother in 1963. The archbishop was in Rome at the time, attending the Second Vatican Council. Forbidden by the new government to return to his homeland, Archbishop Thuc remained a European exile for a decade after the council had closed. In 1968, Pope Paul VI transferred him to the titular archiepiscopal see of Bulla Regia, and the archbishop subsequently moved to Toulon, France.

Then on Jan. 11, 1976, to the surprise of his Vietnamese friends, 78-year-old ailing exile turned up in the southern Spanish city of Palmar de Troya, where he consecrated five men associated with a Carmelite religious community located there. It is unclear why Thuc decided to perform the illicit consecrations, but it seems possible that he was manipulated.

The order to which the five new bishops belonged was not approved by the Church, nor

were their consecrations. Consequently, on Sept. 17, 1976, the Holy See declared Archbishop Thuc suspended from any future exercise of his episcopal powers and automatically excommunicated. After an apparent gesture of resistance, Thuc asked Pope Paul VI to remove the excommunication. The petition was granted, but the suspension was upheld.

On the death of Pope Paul XI, Clemente Dominguez y Gomez, the leader of the five Palmar "bishops at large," declared that he had been chosen pope by Jesus Himself. He took the name Gregory XVII and excommunicated John Paul II as a "Marxist spy." Anti-pope Dominguez has been busy ever since, defiling dogmas, canonizing scores of people — including Charlemagne, Christopher Columbus and General Francisco Franco — ordaining priests and consecrating bishops galore.

Despite his earlier reconciliation with the Vatican, in 1981, Archbishop Thuc resumed performing consecrations without papal license. Of the three or four he ordained at Toulon, two were elderly Mexican clerics — Moises Carmona and Adolfo Zamora. This, combined with Archbishop Thuc's 1982 declaration that the Holy See was vacant, led Pope John Paul II to reinstate in 1983 the archbishop's excommunication.

Once more, however, Thuc made his peace with Rome. He died in a Catholic religious house in Carthage, Missouri, on Dec. 12, 1984, at the age of 87. At the end, his mind was clear, although he had earlier labored under some mental confusion. Some have speculated that the trauma he suffered from the Vietnam events of the 1960s had jarred his whole personality.

Nevertheless, the episcopal succession he had established continued to grow. On returning to Mexico, Moises Carmona began to consecrate others to the episcopate. One of these was George Musey of Houston, Texas, a former Catholic priest of the Galveston diocese, who received episcopal orders at Acapulco in 1982.

The Musey succession was formally introduced to the United States in 1982 when Bishop Musey, assisted by Bishops Carmona and Zamora, visited Buffalo to consecrate — without papal authorization, of course — Father Louis Vezelis.

Father Vezelis, a Rochesterian, had been a Franciscan missionary in Korea for 18 years. But then he returned to Rochester and opened a "traditionalist" church, later acquiring for his followers the former Sacred Heart Church in Buffalo.

For canonical reasons, Father Vezelis' Franciscan superiors had declared him suspended from priestly functions and expelled him from the Franciscan Order in 1978. Since 1979, he has operated his ministry from a Mt. Read

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