

THE SELECTION OF BISHOPS

Topic: The Selection of Bishops
Moderator: Mark Yenson, University of St. Michael's College
Presenters: Myriam Wijlens, University of Erfurt
Jon Nilson, Loyola University, Chicago

This session comprised two perspectives on the selection of bishops in the Catholic Church and on possibilities for reform. In the first presentation, "A Canonical Perspective on the Selection of Bishops," canonist Myriam Wijlens raised the issue of the selection of bishops against the backdrop of cases where the appointment and functioning of bishops has been problematic. Since Vatican II there have been increasing calls for changes to the selection process with greater involvement of the people of God as a whole. In light of the doctrinal shift concerning the bishop at Vatican II, the Holy See issued new norms in 1972, which together with the norms of the Code of Canon Law are still applicable today. They provide for both a periodic identification of possible candidates as well as for concrete provision for a vacant see. In both cases the norms foresee the possibility of broad consultation among the people of God. Such consultation, however, is a discretionary matter. When these norms are applied, the ecclesiological understanding of the relationship between a bishop and a diocese will determine to a large extent how this discretion is exercised. The vigilant norms do allow for a much wider consultation than is currently practised, but require reflection on the ecclesiology of Vatican II by those who apply the law.

In his paper "A Theological Perspective on the Selection of Bishops," Jon Nilson emphasized the importance of the selection of bishops to the life and mission of the local church and to the unity of the universal church. The selection of bishops is a cause of concern ecumenically, since the perception of autocracy creates an obstacle to church unity. Responses to the sexual abuse scandals have also included demands for reform of the process of selecting bishops. Drawing on the work of Thomas Reese, Nilson reviewed the criteria for selecting candidates for the episcopacy and the steps in the selection process from consultation at the local level, through assessment and advisement by the apostolic nuncio and Roman curia, up to the decision of the Roman Pontiff. It was noted that breadth of consultation and the influence of advice from metropolitans, apostolic nuncios, and curial officials varies widely in practice from case to case, and that while the process appears highly autocratic, the Roman curia and the pope depend a great deal on information gathered from the local church. By way of comparison, the Episcopal Church in the United States has a highly participatory selection process, although recent controversies in that church have resulted in calls for a more robust exercise of centralized authority. Nonetheless, the present procedures for selecting bishops in the Catholic Church involve minimal consultation and depend excessively on the theological and pastoral judgment of the pope, and are thus in need of structural reform and prayerful renewal.

Among the points raised in the ensuing discussion, concern was expressed that consultation regarding candidates for episcopacy is secretive as well as burdensome

to those questioned. A distinction was drawn between secrecy and confidentiality, and it was noted that confidentiality was necessary to protect reputations as well as to avoid undue factionalism and pressure on decision making. A suggestion was made that a reform in the selection of bishops might draw lessons from the processes for electing leaders undertaken by religious communities.

MARK YENSON
University of St. Michael's College
Toronto, Ontario