NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Swiss abbot urges change in how bishops are selected

Christa Pongratz-Lippitt | Jan. 15, 2013

A leading Swiss abbot is calling for a change in how bishops are selected, saying that the nomination process should include greater local input, and he wants bishops and theologians to join him in pressing for the change.

"We are faced with serious systemic problems in our church. For me, as a canon lawyer, solving these systemic problems has absolute priority, as our other problems can only be solved if the structures are consistent and the procedures transparent," Benedictine Abbot Peter von Sury of Mariastein said in an interview with the Swiss Catholic press agency Kipa/Apic last month.

Von Sury, 62, was elected abbot of the Mariastein Abbey, considered Switzerland's second-most important monastery, in 2008.

Von Sury said that during the first millennium, three authorities were decisive in nominating a new bishop to a diocese, namely the local faithful, the local clergy and the neighboring bishops, which today would be the equivalent of the local bishops' conference.

"That is a procedure that makes sense," he said. But from the 11th century onward, bishops have steadily relinquished more and more power to Rome.

Dioceses are now considered papal administrative units and treated as such, von Sury said.

Nowadays, in the appointment of a bishop, church-political motives often outweigh the well-being of the diocese concerned, he said. "And that is exactly what is wrong and what bishops and theologians must doggedly resist."

Excluding the local church from episcopal nominations is particularly tragic because it furthers indifference, he said. Bishops appointed in the present system have no interest in calling it into question and so the church has become a closed system, von Sury said. A closed system is not capable of accepting criticism or correction from outside.

"Perhaps it will have to break down one day or disintegrate before something happens. Or it will run out of money and then it will automatically come to a standstill," he said.

From a theological point of view, bishops, as successors of the apostles, are of particular importance in the church.

The Second Vatican Council introduced the bishops' synod at which bishops from all over the world came together in Rome to discuss matters of concern to the universal church, he said, but as long as the pope alone determines the agenda, the synod remains a "one-way road."

"This is where the bishops must put up a fight and stand up and defend themselves. It is in point of fact a matter of power," he emphasized. It is most important for a number of bishops or bishops' conferences to put items on the agenda of the bishops' synods so that important questions are not simply shelved, he said. Both mandatory priestly celibacy and women's ordination had been discussed but were shelved at the 1972 synod, he said.

Asked why episcopal nominations are so important, he replied: "The bishop has a pivotal position in the church. He is a 'pontifex,' that is, a bridge-builder, and must have a personality that integrates. Unfortunately, we have again and again experienced the opposite, as, for instance, at the moment in the diocese of Chur. There the bishop is obviously not a bridge-builder, but someone who sows discord, and that is disastrous.

"In my opinion, a bishop who sows discord is morally obliged to step down. The same applies to an abbot or a parish priest. If they sow discord, they destroy a part of the church. It is not a case of blame. There are simply situations when people sow discord -- perhaps even without meaning to do so, and then they must step down."

"Church institutions, including the papacy, should have an opposite number as it were. In economics or politics we speak of checks and balances," von Sury said. Parishes have parish councils, dioceses have priests' councils, which the bishops are supposed to listen to. "But for the bishops' conference level and the world church level there is nothing similar. This is a great mistake," he said.

According to canon law, the faithful have the right and sometimes even the duty to make their position plain to their bishop, he said. That is a good declaration of intent but because there are no implementary regulations, that particular canon "is of no use whatsoever," von Sury said.

Another abbot, Martin Werlen of Einsiedeln Abbey, attracted widespread attention late last year when he made a fiery appeal for church reform (*NCR*, Dec. 21-Jan. 3), that was welcomed by the future president of the Swiss bishops' conference.

Among the reforms that Werlen, himself a member of the Swiss bishops' conference, advocated was for local churches to have more say in episcopal nominations.

Meanwhile, members of the Swiss Parish Initiative, which was founded in September 2012 and is modeled on the Austrian Priests' Initiative, is calling for far-reaching church reforms, such as intercommunion. The group and its supporters were to rally in front of the cathedral in Chur Jan. 13.

Bishop Vitus Huonder of Chur has said that he will sanction members of the initiative in his diocese. The other members of the Swiss bishops' conference have called for dialogue with the initiative's 460 members.

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Source URL (retrieved on *03/07/2014 - 22:43*): http://ncronline.org/news/theology/swiss-abbot-urges-change-how-bishops-are-selected