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Editorial: Criteria for choosing bishops can go one step further

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Editorial

"Meek and merciful": Does that sound like your bishop or the kind of bishop you hope might be appointed to your diocese? How'd you like a local ordinary you could describe as "gentle, patient ? animated by inner poverty ? and also by outward simplicity and austerity of life"? What would you think of a bishop who was not ambitious and wasn't looking for a bigger, more prestigious see? How about a bishop without "the psychology of princes"?

This is not a wish list from progressive Catholics. These are qualities that episcopal candidates should have, Pope Francis told a gathering of papal ambassadors June 21. The papal nuncios and apostolic delegates had come from the far corners of globe for a two-day meeting. In the field, these men are the legendary papal diplomatic corps. They hold places of privilege within a nation's political establishment but are also well-connected to grassroots movements because of their ties to the local church. One of their duties, a "delicate task," Francis told them, is talent-spotting and vetting episcopal candidates.

"Be careful that the candidates are pastors close to the people," he said. As is his style, Francis used rather traditional language. He said bishops should be "married to a church," meaning that they should have strong ties to the local church and should not be "in constant search of another."

His admonishment that bishops should "watch over the flock that will be entrusted to them" and be "vigilant of the dangers that threaten it" is not an invitation to build walls against a hostile outside world. Rather, he said, bishops should "keep watch [and] imbue hope, that they have sun and light in their hearts, to lovingly and patiently support the plans which God brings about in his people."

Some have noted that missing from Francis' list of episcopal attributes are loyalty and orthodoxy, the two criteria that dominated the nomination process under Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI.

Francis told his diplomats to remember this "fundamental criterion in choosing who should govern: *Si sanctus est oret pro nobis, si doctus est doceat nos, si prudens est regat nos* -- if holy let him pray for us, if learned teach us, if prudent govern us."

It would seem that Francis is looking for pastors who have a sense of joy about them and who can share that joy with others. He is looking for listeners who can attune themselves to the "plans which God brings about in his people." (Here's a translation of the pope's talk [1].)

Our hope is that the papal ambassadors heard and received Francis' message, and that they will keep this criteria in mind as they seek out episcopal candidates.

We would add just one thing. We would suggest that besides this set of criteria, the ambassadors also check with the people the new bishop will be serving. Last December, Benedictine Abbot Peter von Sury of Mariastein Abbey in Switzerland addressed the need for greater local consultation when selecting new bishops.

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. We agree.

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