

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

Jan 28, 2014

Lay groups seek to offer input on bishop selection

by Megan Fincher

Two East Coast Catholic groups, emboldened by the vision of Vatican II, are advocating for lay participation in the selection of bishops. The unexpected snag is figuring out how the laity are allowed to participate in this little-known process.

"I believe that people may be disinterested in the bishop search ... because they do not believe that [their participation] will make any difference given the hierarchical decision-making structure of the church," Dave Rowell, a member of the Albany (N.Y.) Bishop Search committee, told *NCR*.

Tom Severin, member of the Ambrosians of Greensburg, Pa., another lay bishop search committee, concurred. Their group is named after St. Ambrose, one of the early church bishops elected by popular vote.

"It's something completely new to people. Most people have no idea how bishops are elected," Severin said to *NCR*. "In my Bible study group, they were excited about the Ambrosians. But then they asked if it was sanctioned by the diocese. You could see the fear on their faces."

Albany Bishop Howard Hubbard turned 75 last October, and Greensburg Bishop Lawrence Brandt will turn 75 this March -- the age that a bishop must submit his letter of resignation to the pope. In response to those events, the Albany and Greensburg search committees were formed to encourage the people of their dioceses to make known the qualities that they desire in their next bishop. Both groups have websites with information about the process of selecting bishops, the contact information for the apostolic nuncio and a form where people can publicly write their aspirations for the next bishop.

The official procedure for selecting bishops is outlined in the Code of Canon Law: Using suggestions from other bishops, the apostolic nuncio recommends three candidates to the pope, who has ultimate authority over bishop appointments. However, Canon 377, Paragraph 3 offers this caveat: "The pontifical legate ... if he judges it expedient, is also to seek individually and in secret the opinion of others from both the secular and non-secular clergy and from laity outstanding in wisdom."

Both the Albany Bishop Search and the Ambrosians want to take advantage of that caveat, but they don't want to wait around for the apostolic nuncio's call, nor do they feel a need to keep their opinions secret.

"Vatican II stressed that the laity should become more active in all areas of the church. We shouldn't wait for the clergy to approach us to get more involved -- we should approach them," Severin said.

The Minnesota-based Catholic Coalition for Church Reform drafted a position paper in November 2012 titled "People's Participation in Selection of Bishops." The paper explains how the laity were involved in electing bishops during the time of the early church: "Bishops John Chrysostom, Ambrose of Milan and

Augustine of Hippo, the great bishops of the Patristic era, were selected with the people's involvement." During the Middle Ages, however, noble families and civil rulers began to control bishop selection, and it wasn't until "the Code of Canon Law of 1917 ... [that] the Church was able to declare that no rights in the selection of bishops were granted to civil authorities," the paper states.

While the church was "justified in centralizing the power to appoint bishops in secret" as the modern nation-state was developing, currently "that process works against the freedom of the Church's own members to express their spiritual needs through a voice in the nomination of their bishops," the position paper says.

Rowell, speaking on behalf of the Albany Bishop Search, agrees. "Based upon Canon Law 212 ... we believed that the involvement of the laity in making their views known in this [bishop selection] process is not only authorized but perhaps even required by the spirit of this statute."

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The second paragraph of Canon 212 states, "The Christian faithful are free to make known to the pastors of the Church their needs, especially spiritual ones, and their desires." The third paragraph says the laity "have the right and even at times the duty to manifest to the sacred pastors their opinion on matters which pertain to the good of the Church and to make their opinion known to the rest of the Christian faithful."

International lay organization Voice of the Faithful created a Web portal in 2012 that Catholics can use when their diocese has a vacant bishop's seat. There is a simple form to fill out at www.votf.org/bishop where a person can list the ideal qualifications and qualities of the next bishop, and with a click, the form is sent to the apostolic nuncio.

When Chicago Cardinal Francis George turned 75 in 2012, "nearly 200 Catholics utilized this portal," according to Voice of the Faithful. The *Chicago Tribune* reported that George would not allow parish bulletins to advertise Voice of the Faithful's Web portal because "the creation of a clearinghouse for communication taints the process," a spokeswoman for the cardinal told the Tribune.

Voice of the Faithful wrote to Archbishop Carlo Maria Viganò, the apostolic nuncio, for clarification. On Feb. 10, 2012, they received a response from him: "The Apostolic Nuncio would willingly receive any expression of a lay Catholic in regard to his or her own concerns in regard to a new bishop or recommendation(s) that he or she might propose. Members of the Voice of the Faithful are, therefore, free to encourage such communications to be addressed to the Apostolic Nuncio."

Viganò verified this letter for *NCR*, but he added a stipulation: "I stress to you, however, that any initiative to organize group responses constitutes a parallel procedure that would not be a part of the canonical selection process."

In an email to *NCR* on behalf of Hubbard, the Albany diocese's spokesman said, "The consultation among clergy, religious and laity is conducted on a confidential individual basis in order to avoid, as far as possible, the specter of politicking."

The Catholic Coalition for Church Reform organized a group effort to recommend bishop candidates to the nuncio in January 2012. The coalition wrote to Viganò in April, but he sent the letter on to St. Paul and Minneapolis Archbishop John Nienstedt.

In 2011, Nienstedt had cautioned Catholics in his archdiocese not to attend events sponsored by the coalition for fear that they might receive "confusing and inaccurate information about the teaching of the church, and thereby be led astray" (*NCR*, Aug. 5, 2011).

Nienstedt's brief response to the coalition's letter to Viganò in 2012 chastised them for listing, and encouraging people to use, the confidential Vatican questionnaire on episcopal candidates -- "the form that is used by the Nunciature for their own investigation is only used for internal purposes and is not shared with outside publics."

Nienstedt also wrote, "The Apostolic Nuncio expressed his willingness to receive recommendations from any lay Catholic at any time regarding the nomination of a bishop to a diocese or archdiocese."

"Even if we only accomplish getting people to think about participating, we've accomplished something," Severin said. "The change is in the wind."

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