

## Bishops follow pope's lead: This is news?

Eugene Cullen Kennedy | Jun. 26, 2014 | Bulletins from the Human Side

As America's Catholic bishops gathered for [their recent meeting in New Orleans](#) [1], *The New York Times* reported that their highest concern was not abortion, same-sex marriage, or the killing of Christians in the Middle East, but whether the great Vatican radar is tracking their every move -- a fancy far more than a fact but a measure of their anxiety that the Really Big Brother is thinking about and making notes on them every day.

How could the pope not be checking on them constantly when these bishops are thinking about what he thinks about them all the time? Just when they thought they had mastered the art of pleasing popes like St. John Paul II and Benedict XVI, along comes Pope Francis to throw them into turmoil about how to remake themselves in his image and likeness.

This concern about their image, [according to veteran religious writer Michael Paulson](#) [2], leaves them "revisiting both how they live and what they talk about in light of the new pope's emphasis on personal humility and economic justice."

This is no small challenge for these bishops, who were picked -- as they always presumed, by following the game plan on which they inched their way, not too fast but not too slow, either, across the ecclesiastical chessboard -- by behaving in just the passive, obedient way that previous popes set as the prime virtue in potential bishops.

It was a lot easier when these good men who wanted better jobs understood that if they were to be like the pope, they could never say anything to support women priests or optional celibacy. They also understood that their attitude toward the Second Vatican Council was to mirror the eagerness of John Paul II and Benedict to repeal it, bit by bit, until the church time-traveled back to the largely imagined glories of the First Vatican Council again.

Most of the bishops were, in fact, selected because they tried hard to be like these popes: loyal to the system; never questioning a papal whim, much less an order; and, should the pope ask them to jump, their only question would be, "How high?"

In [the Sheehan/Kobler study of America's Catholic bishops](#) [3] carried out at Loyola University Chicago, it was found that the principal motivation for these bright, ambitious men was that, at sunset, their actions and decisions of the completed day would be pleasing to and approved by the pope.

This internalized striving reassured these bishops that even if others criticized them, they were doing the right thing, and it would earn them papal approval. Such willingness to do what pleased those above them, whether they pleased themselves or not, was the kind of self-sacrifice Rome looked for in future bishops. By appointing such men, they strengthened the institution just as the appointment of obedient generals strengthens the military.

The late Dr. Milton Rakove, an old friend of mine, was an expert on Chicago politics and, to deepen his knowledge, he showed up at a ward office to volunteer his services one day.

"Who sent you?" the head of the office asked.

"Nobody sent me," Milton replied.

"We don't want nobody that nobody sent," the boss quickly replied, turning him down.

That is about the way the congregation that makes bishops always operated. They knew what they wanted; they desired no exceptions, no matter how holy or how charismatic. Future bishops were to preach the creed, keep theologians in their place, and follow the playbook of orthodoxy, turning a hard eye and a cold shoulder toward anybody accused of "dissent," a label so large that it could be applied to everyone from liberation theologians to those trying to bring pastoral understanding and support to the gay community.

Chance used to favor the bookkeeper, the numbers-cruncher, the "safe" man whose ideas of the church were mass-produced in the chancery factories from whose assembly lines future bishops rolled off in a make and model that never varied. These bishops lived in comfortable quarters, loved their monsignorial robes, and spent their days off with their mothers, preserving the golden haze of clerical culture's high point. They knew just what to think and how to act to continue to serve the church in a fashion that made them feel highly approved.

They must have known that Pope Francis was trouble the minute he got on the bus with the other cardinals after he was elected. And then he rejected the papal apartments and bought a secondhand car that would delight environmentalists and/or junk men. When a reporter asked him about a priest accused of homosexuality, he answered, as naturally as a man who is a pastor by nature, "Who am I to judge?"

The bishops' worry is not apparently about what the pastoral pope does or says. It is the dismay they feel at being expected to speak spontaneously like a Christian, to share the concern that lives in their hearts rather than lies dead in canon law books. Being a true Christian is all that the pope seems to expect, but nobody ever prepared the present bishops for that, and the thought never occurred to them spontaneously.

We must feel for these men trained to be one kind of bishop now searching for some way to become another. For this and other blessings already beyond counting, we may be grateful to the loving God who gave us Francis.

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[1] <http://ncronline.org/feature-series/usccb-summer-2014>

[2] <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/06/13/us/us-bishops-seek-to-match-vatican-in-shifting-tone.html>

[3] <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/1097-4679%28197607%2932:3%3C541::AID-JCLP2270320310%3E3.0.CO;2-V/abstract>

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