Opinion
Vatican

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The bishop died.

But the ordinary means of providing a new ordinary — the church's term for a head bishop — became far from ordinary.

The timing of such a transition, as well as the selection of a new bishop, is by custom, up to the pope. In this case, it took 26 months complete the formal process, but that came nowhere near filling the vacancy.

What ensued became a striking example of conflicting aims and the sometimes malleable limits of papal authority in the ongoing struggles to govern a mammoth labyrinth of 1.4 billion Catholics around the world. NCR was among the first news sources to portray this yearslong drama, offering a glimpse of confrontation and backtracking behind a surface reputation for well-oiled conformity and unchallenged hierarchical authority.

The actual scene was the Ahiara Diocese in southeast Nigeria, a Catholic stronghold of 450,000 parishioners. Pope Benedict XVI appointed a new bishop, Peter Ebere Okpaleke, to fill the vacancy at the close of 2012.

But his elevation didn't take place in Ahiara. When word of the new bishop spread through the diocese, a defiant contingent of its priests and lay people paraded in the streets to renounce the pope's choice. A squad of young people locked the doors of the cathedral to keep him out. They bore signs declaring "We reject Okpaleke." Prudently avoiding a clash, the bishop-in-waiting stayed away and was consecrated as bishop in a neighboring diocese presumably to wait it out.

The cause of the outrage against Okpaleke was primarily ethnic and cultural factors rather than personal. Simmering resentment had built among the Mbaise people that the Vatican had long ignored and neglected them by, among other things, failing to choose bishops from their tribe. More specifically, they demanded that a prelate from their region take charge of their diocese this time. Okpaleke's profile poured gas on that fire: He came from afar and spoke neither the language nor shared their culture, they said.

The president of the Mbaise Catholic Priests Association, Fr. Augustin Ben Ekechukwu, called the pope's choice an "injustice and malicious conspiracy against the Mbaise people."

The showdown was on. Refusal to accept the new bishop showed no signs of abating in the weeks that followed, and the Vatican stuck to its claim of full authority to decide the matter. Official church policy played down tribal identity as a factor in selecting bishops; several previous openings in Nigeria had been filled by outsiders. But the grievances of Ahiara's people stiffened resistance to new heights, and the papal office refused to grant them an exception to his right to decide.

Meanwhile, Okpaleke bided his time in exile.

Benedict XVI, who'd picked Okpaleke, famously retired in early 2013 before the going got rough. Pope Francis had barely settled in when the Ahiara rebellion blockaded the would-be bishop. As hopes for a quick resolution sank, Francis plugged the leadership gap by assigning an apostolic administrator in July 2013, to mend fences and administer the diocese.

Francis' involvement in this dispute evoked a side of him that stood in contrast to his soaring reputation as a laid back pastor with a penchant for mercy and tolerance, a

generous interpreter of church mandates. Faced with rebels in Nigeria, he was called to practice his role as an authority and precedent setter. In doing that, he would demonstrate a degree of flexibility, a blend of conscience and reverence for church law that incurs mistakes and uncertainties. The ideal of perfect fits and exact results gives way to conscientious policies marked by uncertainties.

The perfect, as they say, is the enemy of the good. Francis' actions in the Ahiara story would prove telling, not of an exemplary pope but a real one in the flow of complex existence. Compromise comes to mind as a staple of such negotiations.

Four years of Francis' pent-up frustration over the ongoing rift exploded in his cold threat to the dissident Ahiara priests. They must "totally" submit to his overall authority, especially by accepting their assigned bishop, or face immediate suspension from the priesthood. They had 30 days to submit their compliance — or else.

His demands were dispatched in 2017 to the holdout priests in a stinging letter, which Francis previewed to a visiting delegation of Ahiara church officials. The content was released by the Congregation of Evangelization of Peoples that oversees the conflict

"Whoever was opposed to Bishop Okpaleke taking possession of the Diocese wants to destroy the Church," the pope charged. "This is forbidden. … The Pope cannot be indifferent." He continued in more intimate terms: "The Church is a mother, and whoever offends her commits a mortal sin, it's very serious." Refusal to accept the pope's decision meant the "people of God are scandalized." Those guilty of such damage should remember Jesus' warning that "whoever causes scandal must suffer the consequences."

Thirty days later, most priests had vowed loyalty to the pope but with a major reservation that was summarized by the oversight congregation as "a psychological difficulty collaborating with the bishop after years of conflict."

That less than full endorsement effectively stalled progress. On Feb. 14, 2018, Okpaleke gave up the fight, resigning from the diocese he'd been appointed to serve five years earlier but never occupied. He bitterly blamed opposing priests for his rejection. The pope, absorbing a rare repudiation, released Okpaleke from his assignment five days later.

Okpaleke reappeared last month at the helm of a brand-new Nigerian diocese, Ekwulobia, carved out of his home Awka Diocese where a rapidly growing Catholic population argued for another diocese. It was an exuberant new start.

Ahiara was sent another administrator but still lacks a resident bishop of its own. The pope suspended no one, indicating that he accepted the protesting priests' pledge of papal loyalty as valid penance but recognized that half-hearted nature of their compliance left him less than fully satisfied. Gone was the harsh rhetoric.

Opinion differs on whether Francis backed down from legitimate insistence on complete compliance or exhibited higher consciousness by recognizing a bigger spiritual picture. However he balanced factors in this instance, he seems drawn by both mercy and order in deciding how to proceed. He's prompted by mercy and called to unity by training and invested authority.

At this rumbling point in the church's life, illusions that a vast conglomeration of Catholics equaling the population of China can be governed uniformly or equitably (from a patch of land smaller than most golf courses) are crumbling fast. Secrecy, which helped preserve the illusion, has succumbed to the tentacles of modern media, provides reliable cover. The disclosure of sexual crime and other hypocrisies crumbles credibility of consistent behavior or policies.

The upheaval in the Ahiara Diocese also underscores the power of pushback. Under some circumstances, resistance can be effective. Influence from various unhappy sectors has always made a difference. In this age, many Catholics aren't occupied enough by church affairs to care, or they simply walk out the door rather than push. The sex abuse crisis produces both varieties as does the continuing injustice toward women.

Catholics in America tend to get angry at the church and simply stay away. If the church means more to Catholics in Ahiara, they may be feeling the pangs of disruption but also inspired by the still tangled efforts to uplift their dignity.

[Ken Briggs has reported on religion for Newsday and The New York Times, contributed articles to a variety of publications, written five books and taught for 18 years as an adjunct professor at Lehigh University and Lafayette College. He lives in Indiana and continues to be a freelance writer.]

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