

THE SELECTION OF CANDIDATES FOR THE OFFICE OF BISHOP

A PROPOSAL BY VOICE OF THE FAITHFUL IN THE DIOCESE OF BRIDGEPORT

April 29, 2006

PREAMBLE

The election of bishops by the clergy and people of the diocese is hallowed by usage from the earliest times, by canons enacted by Church Councils, and by repeated papal affirmation. However, the history of episcopal elections is sadly marked by a progressive disenfranchisement of the laity and the rank and file of the clergy.

Since the Second Vatican Council theologians, canonists, and church historians have argued for a restoration of the ancient tradition of episcopal election. In 1972, in response to Pope Paul VI's directive that episcopal conferences should annually and in secret propose candidates for the episcopacy to the papal nuncio, the Vatican's Council for the Public Affairs of the Church published "Norms for the Selection of Bishops." The Norms were subsequently embodied in *The Code of Canon Law* of 1983.

Noting that the Norms lacked any means of implementation, the Canon Law Society of America in 1973 proposed the establishment of a standing Diocesan Committee for the Selection of Candidates for the Office of Bishop, consisting of representatives of priests, women religious, men religious, laymen and laywomen. The Committee's tasks would be threefold: (1) to consider the needs of the diocese; (2) to determine the qualifications desired in a prospective bishop; and (3) to identify priests who meet those criteria.

Anticipating the Canon Law Society's proposal, the Second Synod of the Diocese of Bridgeport in 1971 declared: "The basic Christian principles of corresponsibility, the dignity and freedom of persons, and the rights of Christians have traditionally dictated broad participation in the process of selecting bishops. With this in mind the Diocese of Bridgeport will work to develop means whereby priests and laity may have a voice in nominations of candidates for the Episcopal Office" (2:26). However, nothing further seems to have been done to implement that decision.

Voice of the Faithful in the Diocese of Bridgeport, Connecticut, hereby presents a revision of the Canon Law Society's proposal (now more than thirty years old) for a Diocesan Committee for the Selection of Candidates for the Office of Bishop. The revision takes into account the laity's increasing sense of responsibility for the Church, the realization that neither the laity nor the rank and file of the clergy have any significant say in affairs touching their spiritual well-being, and the demand for greater accountability and transparency in the governance of the Church. The establishment of the proposed Diocesan Committee could be an initial step toward renewal of the Church in this very troubled time.

A DIOCESAN COMMITTEE FOR THE SELECTION OF CANDIDATES FOR THE OFFICE OF BISHOP

1. Composition of The Diocesan Committee. The Committee shall consist of nineteen persons, namely, five laywomen and five laymen, five priests, one deacon, one woman religious, one man religious, and one person appointed by the bishop.

a. Election of Members.

- 1. Election of Lay Members: Stage One.** Two Candidates (preferably one man, one woman) shall be elected by each of the 87 Parishes to attend a Council in each of the five diocesan Vicariates from which they are elected. All registered parishioners who have received the sacraments of initiation (Baptism and Confirmation) are eligible to elect and to serve.
- 2. Election of Lay Members: Stage Two.** Prior to each Vicariate Council meeting any elected parish representative from that Vicariate who wishes to be considered as a candidate for service on the Committee shall submit to all the other members a short biography and a statement explaining his or her reasons for serving on the Committee.
- 3. Election of Lay Members: Stage Three.** The Council meetings of each of the five Vicariates shall be held simultaneously on a Saturday in April. In each Council the members shall form four or more working groups to discuss the needs of the diocese and the qualities desirable in a bishop.
- 4. Election of Lay Members: Stage Four.** Following discussion, each of the working groups shall nominate two candidates for election to the Diocesan Committee, so that there are at least eight. Each candidate shall have the opportunity to speak to the entire Vicariate Council. The members of the Vicariate Council shall then elect one man and one woman as representatives from the Vicariate to serve on the Diocesan Committee.
- 5. Election of Priest Members.** Priest Members of the Committee shall be elected by a meeting of the priests of each Vicariate so that there is one representative from each of the five Vicariates.
- 6. Election of Deacons.** The deacon member shall be elected by a meeting of all the deacons in the diocese.
- 7. Election of Religious.** The representatives of the women religious and

men religious shall be elected in a manner to be determined by the members of the religious communities present in the diocese.

- b. Appointment of a Member by the Bishop.** The bishop shall appoint one member of the Committee from either the clergy, religious, or laity.
- c. Term of Office.** Aside from the bishop's appointee, who shall be named annually, the normal term of office shall be four years. In order to ensure continuity, two of the elected priests and four of the elected laypeople representing two of the five Vicariates, shall be determined by lot from among those first elected, and shall initially serve only for two years. Prior to the expiration of such members' initial two-year term, and every four years thereafter, the two Vicariates represented by those members shall follow the procedure described in Paragraphs 1.a.1. through 1.a.4. to elect new members for a term of four years to replace them. Prior to the expiration of the term of those members initially serving a term of four years, and every four years thereafter, the remaining three Vicariates whose members' terms are expiring shall follow that same procedure to elect new members.

2. Purpose of the Committee. The purpose of the Committee shall be to assess the current needs of the diocese; determine the qualities desirable in a prospective bishop; and identify diocesan priests who meet those criteria.

- a. Initial Meeting and Officers.** On the third Monday of May following the election of the members, the Diocesan Committee shall hold an organizational meeting to elect a Chair, Vice-Chair, Secretary, and a Treasurer, and to draw up any necessary procedural rules. Officers shall be elected biennially thereafter when new members begin their term.
- b. Ordinary and Extraordinary Meetings.** Thereafter the Committee shall meet in ordinary session during the course of each year. When a vacancy occurs in the see or is anticipated the Committee shall meet in extraordinary session.
- c. Ordinary Annual Meetings.** Apart from the initial organizational meeting, in order to carry out its work effectively and so that the members may become familiar with one another, the Committee shall meet at least four times a year (e.g., on the third Monday of October, November, March and April). As the Committee deems necessary, it may schedule other meetings.

1. Tasks of the Committee. At its ordinary meetings the Committee shall consider the current needs of the diocese, determine the qualities desirable in a prospective bishop, and identify diocesan priests who meet those criteria.

2. Preparation and Publication of a Report. At each April meeting the Committee shall prepare a report of its activities and make known to the bishop and people of the diocese its assessment of diocesan needs and the qualities a candidate for bishop should possess to best meet those needs.

d. Extraordinary Meeting in Case of a Vacant See. If the see falls vacant through the death of the bishop, appointment of the present bishop to another position, or if the bishop has offered his resignation and a vacancy is anticipated, the Committee shall meet no later than two weeks after the death of the bishop or the announcement of the vacancy to review its previous assessment of diocesan needs and to draw up a list of three diocesan priests whom the Committee believes are qualified to fill the office of bishop.

e. Budget. The Diocese shall allot a reasonable budget to facilitate the Committee's work.

3. Methodology.

a. Consultation and Gathering Information. In order to accurately reflect the interests and concerns of the faithful the Committee shall consult the entire Catholic diocesan community insofar as it deems that possible.

b. Publicity. For that purpose the Committee shall regularly utilize all available media to publicize its activities, including announcements in the diocesan newspaper; postings on the diocesan website; announcements in parish bulletins; direct mail to all parishioners; press releases and advertisements in secular newspapers; and television and radio stories.

c. Review of Prospective Candidates. The Committee's principal function is to propose candidates for the office of bishop, should the see become vacant. For that reason, the Committee in its ordinary sessions shall conduct an ongoing review that will allow sufficient time for the accumulation and assessment of essential information concerning candidates. Thus, when a vacancy is imminent, the Committee will have substantial knowledge of prospective candidates and will not be forced to make hasty inquiries before making its recommendations.

1. Notification of Prospective Candidates. If a candidate has been proposed, he shall be asked whether he wishes to be considered and if he responds affirmatively he shall be informed of the further steps in the process.

2. Inquiries. Discreet and confidential inquiries concerning a prospective

candidate shall be made of parishioners where he has served, priests, deacons, women and men religious who know or who have worked with him, as well as the Priests' Senate, the Diocesan Pastoral Council, and other diocesan agencies likely to be familiar with him.

- a. **Personnel Files and Recommendations.** The Committee shall be provided with an opportunity to review the personnel files of candidates who have agreed to be considered so that it may accurately assess each one. The candidates may also submit the names of persons prepared to provide written recommendations.
 - b. **Questionnaires.** Candidates shall be asked to fill out a questionnaire concerning their assessment of the needs of the diocese, and their ideas and qualifications for providing effective spiritual leadership for the people.
3. **Confidentiality.** The Committee's review of prospective candidates shall be conducted with great discretion. Therefore, the Committee shall develop appropriate guidelines for ensuring confidentiality concerning all information gathered or reviewed in the course of its work.
 4. **Evaluation of Candidates.** After completing the process of consultation the Committee shall evaluate the information gathered, determining first, whether a candidate meets the requirements of canon 378, and second, whether he would be capable of addressing the perceived needs of the diocese.
 5. **Ranking of Candidates in Case of a Vacancy.** In case of a vacancy, the Committee shall reduce the list of candidates to three and rank them according to its belief in their ability to best meet the perceived needs of the diocese at that time.
 6. **Time Limit in Case of a Vacancy.** If the diocese is vacant, it is all the more important to act expeditiously so that there will not be a prolonged vacancy. In order to accomplish this task in a responsible manner the Committee shall strive to complete its work of consultation and evaluation within a month.
- e. **Publication of a Report in Case of a Vacancy.** In keeping with the principle of transparency, the Committee shall publish a report, supported by appropriate documentation, containing its assessment of the needs of the diocese and its list of candidates for the office of bishop, ranked in order

of preference. The report shall be made available simultaneously to the following:

- 1. The People of the Diocese.** Using the various media cited above, the Committee shall inform the faithful of the diocese of its recommendations. A copy of the report shall be sent to each parish, the Priests' Senate, the Diocesan Pastoral Council, and other appropriate diocesan organizations.
- 2. Notification of Various Authorities.** The report shall also be sent directly to the administrator of the diocese during the vacancy, the metropolitan and other provincial bishops, and the president of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB).
- 3. Notification of the Congregation of Bishops in Rome.** The report shall also be forwarded to the Congregation of Bishops in Rome.

CONCLUSION

We believe the proposal offered above is a practical means of implementing the Norms for the Selection of Candidates for the Office of Bishop issued by the Vatican in 1972, as well as realizing the goal of the Second Synod of the Diocese of Bridgeport enunciated above. The principles established can be adapted for use in any diocese. If a Diocesan Committee for the Selection of Candidates for the Office of Bishop is established, it will give all the faithful an opportunity to make known their concerns and to help to identify those priests whom they believe most likely to provide effective leadership for the diocese. Knowing that their voice can be heard through the formal structure of the Diocesan Committee, the faithful will experience a greater sense of unity and common purpose in building up Christ's kingdom here on earth.