

'The Swag' article – 26 April 2016

'Selecting nine new Australian bishops this year - involving the faithful'

Peter Johnstone, President, Catholics for Renewal Inc.

This year, nine new Australian diocesan bishops could be appointed – NINE! including a new archbishop of Melbourne. All the faithful have a vital interest in these selections. This is an opportunity for inspiring leadership with the help of the people of each diocesan community. Catholics for Renewal is developing a proposal for including the people of God in the selection process and we are seeking views on how best to do this.

As detailed in Peter Wilkinson's articles in *The Swag*, a role in the selection of bishops was key to the commitment of earlier Christian communities, and is critical today. Vatican II (*Lumen Gentium*) stressed the role of the people of God and the *sensus fidei fidelium* (the sense of faith of the faithful), teaching that:

The entire body of the faithful, anointed as they are by the Holy One, cannot err in matters of belief. (n.12)

In 2011, Catholics for Renewal Inc published an Open Letter jointly addressed to our bishops and to Pope Benedict XVI, and signed by more than 8,000 Australian Catholics. Those signatories sought renewal of the Church, including:

"a return to a more accountable and consultative process for the appointment of bishops."

Our Open Letter was delivered to Monsignor Wells, then *Assessore* of the Secretariat of State, by the then President of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference. We received no acknowledgement despite many follow-ups. An inclination to ignore the perceptions of the people of God is a common approach of the institutional Church, betraying a lack of respect for the faithful's discernment, and is reflected in the closed shop for the selection of bishops.

The key leadership role of our bishops in the renewal of the institutional Church requires accountability, transparency and a respectful dialogue with the people of God. Good leaders identify needs and listen to their people in determining directions. Many dioceses lack the structures endorsed by Vatican II, such as diocesan synods, pastoral councils and pastoral plans, in addressing the grave challenges facing Christ's Church throughout the world. These are structures that would also greatly assist in identifying the leadership needs of a diocese.

The relevant canon law (Can. 377) provides that, when a new diocesan bishop is required, the apostolic nuncio of a country is:

to seek individually and to communicate to the Apostolic See together with his own opinion the suggestions of the metropolitan and bishops of the province . . .

and, in his discretion,

the opinion of others from both the secular and non-secular clergy and from laity outstanding in wisdom.

Canon 378 requires that a candidate have high moral attributes and appropriate qualifications, and also be "*endowed with other qualities which make him suitable to fulfil the office in question.*"

The canonical provisions require the nuncio to prepare a '*terna*', a list of three candidates. This role for the local nuncio is clearly intended to ensure that the Holy See receives local

advice informed by an understanding of leadership needs in the diocese and the world. A closed-shop consultation with the hierarchy cannot provide that understanding.

It is surprising that the process is to be conducted “in secret”, presumably to save embarrassment for some, hardly a concern of the early Church or selections for public office in the secular world, and arguably an inappropriate concern for those wishing to be humble leaders in the likeness of Christ.

In *Evangelii Gaudium* in 2013, Pope Francis observed that a bishop should:
encourage and develop the means of participation proposed in Canon Law, and other forms of pastoral dialogue, out of a desire to listen to everyone and not simply to those who would tell him what he would like to hear. (n.31)

Catholics for Renewal intends to encourage the expression of the views of the people of God as to the needs of each relevant diocese, essentially selection criteria, in order to assist the nuncio and the Holy See in selecting an appropriate bishop “*suitable to fulfil the office in question.*” The focus would not be on the naming of candidates, to avoid any notion of a popularity contest; names could of course be suggested to the nuncio for consideration.

Catholics for Renewal sought a meeting with the nuncio, Archbishop Adolfo Tito Yllana, to discuss these matters. The nuncio ignored our very respectful letter and when eventually contacted by phone, advised through his staff that he would not meet with us, a regrettable response in light of Pope Francis’ counsel in *Evangelii Gaudium*, but sadly another indication of a general lack of accountability in the Church and, ironically, the need for careful and informed selection of bishops. We trust the nuncio will come to see the value of consultation with the people of God.

The clergy of the relevant dioceses could provide valuable leadership in the proposed process to discern diocesan needs for episcopal leadership. Engaging the people of God in the selection of our bishops is critical to the renewal of the institutional Church, to the Church becoming more transparent and accountable in its Christian mission, to realising Pope Francis' vision for our Church, and providing moral leadership in the world. The appointment of nine new Australian diocesan bishops is both a challenge and an opportunity for the Church.

Catholics for Renewal welcomes views on the proposal as we finalise its development. Comments can be addressed to Catholics for Renewal Inc (www.catholicsforrenewal.org) at: info@catholicsforrenewal.org.au