

BACKGROUND:

THE PROCESS FOR THE APPOINTMENT OF BISHOPS

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In the Roman Catholic Church, the office of Bishop holds a key place in its structure and theology. Because he is a successor to the Apostles, the Chief Shepherd of a diocese and the visible source and foundation of unity in a diocese (cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC), 886 and 1560), the appointment of a bishop to a particular diocese is of great importance. The process is regulated by canon law, the internal legal system of the Catholic Church, in *Code of Canon Law*, canons 377-380. The following is a brief overview of the process for the selection and appointment of a bishop.

THE SELECTION AND APPOINTMENT

It is for the Pope freely to appoint bishops. This shows the bond of communion that is shared between the dioceses of the world and the universal Church, of which the Holy Father is the visible sign of unity. When there is need to appoint a bishop to a diocese, the Papal Nuncio, the Pope's representative to a particular country or territory, consults with various people for the names of qualified individuals. Canon Law prescribes that he consult with the Metropolitan Bishop (i.e. the Archbishop) of the province, other bishops of the province, the President of the national bishops' conference and some members of the diocesan College of Consultors, a group of priests selected from the diocesan Priest Council. In addition, the Papal Nuncio is free to consult with others, including laity and religious.

The Papal Nuncio then reviews the suggestions, including background information on each, and selects a group of three names, called a *turnus*. He then communicates the *turnus* to the Vatican, and more particularly to the Congregation for Bishops, the office that assists the Holy Father in matters pertaining to bishops. The Congregation for Bishops then closely reviews the three candidates and their

qualifications. If the Congregation for Bishops rejects the three names, the process begins all over again. If not, the Congregation for Bishops then selects one of the three names to recommend to the Pope. The Pope can either accept the recommendation and, through the Nuncio, contacts the candidate for appointment, or he can ask for a new group of recommendations. He is also free to appoint his own choice outside the *turnus*.

The entire process is done under strict confidentiality so as to avoid lobbying, undue pressure on those involved or those being considered, and unnecessary jealousies that could only do harm to the people of the dioceses being considered.

Canon Law also spells out the required qualifications for becoming a bishop in canon 378 §1. The person is to be outstanding in solid faith, good morals, piety, possess a zeal for souls, and other such qualities, including a good reputation. He is to be at least 35 years old and must have been a priest for at least 5 years. He is to possess a doctorate, or a pontifical licentiate degree, in Sacred Scripture, Theology, or Canon Law. If not, he must be at least truly expert in one of these fields.

THE INSTALLATION

If he is already a bishop, once the man is appointed, he becomes the “Bishop-Elect” of the diocese. If he is priest and not yet consecrated a bishop, he is referred to as the “Bishop-Designate.”

Before a bishop can exercise the rights and duties of his office, however, he must be installed officially as the diocesan bishop of his diocese. The technical term for this is taking “canonical possession” of a diocese (cf. canon 382 §§1-4). If the Bishop-Elect is already a bishop, he must take canonical possession of the diocese within two months of the date of appointment. If he is a priest, then he must receive episcopal consecration (i.e. be “made a bishop”) within three months and must take canonical possession of the diocese within four months of the date of appointment.

The installation ceremony is a solemn liturgical ceremony usually done at the Cathedral Church of the diocese. In the ceremony, the Papal Nuncio (or another delegate) shows to the College of Consultors, in the presence of the Chancellor of the diocese, the Pope’s Apostolic Letter of appointment. The Bishop-Elect is then seated in the *cathedra* or the bishop’s chair, at which moment he formally takes possession of the diocese. This prayerful and joyous event is a special moment in the life of a diocese.