

## Why don't we elect our bishop?

**D**ear Father Kerper: I often wonder why Catholics aren't allowed to elect their own local bishops. I read somewhere that long ago people did have a say in picking their bishops. Why is everything now so centralized and controlled entirely by the Pope?

Living in a democratic society like ours, many good Catholics naturally ask questions like yours. After all, it seems perfectly proper and reasonable for people to choose their own leaders. Almost every group, public and private, elects its top leaders. Why not the Catholic Church?

For starters, the state and other organizations differ from the Church in two basic ways. First, they were created by human beings whose free consent established — and maintained — their very existence. Remove the consent and they instantly dissolve. Second, all these “democratic entities” are local, not universal.

The Church is entirely different. As Catholics, we believe that the Church is the living Body of Christ, not an

organization founded by a group of people. Christ, not anyone else, is the sole “founder” of the Church. From the very outset, Jesus took the initiative of selecting certain men as designated leaders. He did this without elections and without any self-nomination by prospective leaders. For sure, as the Gospels admit, some sought self-advancement; but Jesus always gently quashed such efforts.

The New Testament refers to these original leaders as “Apostles” and the “Twelve.” The first word comes directly from Greek, the language of the New Testament, and means “one who is sent on behalf of another.” In English, “ambassador” is a good equivalent. Ambassadors are never elected but chosen by a superior.

“Twelve” is more than a number. It signifies that the Apostles operated as a collective group, not as individuals. Though some Apostles became closely identified with specific places, such as Rome, Jerusalem, and Antioch, these young Christian communities never elected their “resident” Apostle. Rather, they received the Apostle as someone sent by the Lord. Even those who settled in local places always understood themselves to be part of the “Twelve,” not as independent leaders concerned only about a single community.

This pattern of Church leadership, as described by the New Testament, has replicated itself down through the centuries to the present time. We call this “Apostolic Succession,” which means that the original Apostles continued to send forth new leaders to replace those who eventually died, mostly by martyrdom.

Of course, these “second generation” leaders never claimed the title “Apostle.” Rather, they came to be called bishops, which comes from the secular Greek word for “supervisor.” From ancient times, these bishops identified themselves as true successors of the Apostles, not by direct “descent” from a specific apostle but through their membership in the collective group that replaced the Twelve. This leadership group primarily served the universal Church, not just the local community.

This theological and historical background helps us to understand the current procedure for selecting bishops, which combines and balances universal and local considerations. We see the universal dimension in the fact that the Holy Father — the Pope — appoints every bishop in the Catholic Church. In doing this, he exercises his authority as the pastor of the entire Church, not just Rome. The Pope, then, is the one who “sends forth” a specific bishop to a diocese, which “receives” him.

To many, of course, this seems very undemocratic. And it is! But we must always remember that the Church is not a self-created organization like all others. Hence, the Church's mode of governance differs markedly from the "democratic style" that we so greatly value.

Though certainly not democratic, the selection process is not dictatorial either. For sure, the Pope makes the final decision, but he also seeks and receives much guidance from a variety of people, especially bishops located near the diocese that needs a new bishop. The process also involves priests and lay people who are invited to suggest candidates and to express their views about the needs of the diocese.

These "universal" and "local" considerations intersect in the person of the Papal Nuncio, the bishop "sent forth" by the Pope as his representative to Catholics in a specific country. After extensive consultation, the nuncio presents a list of three candidates to the Holy Father, who then chooses one. He can, however, choose someone else. Surprises do happen.

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The current "mechanics" of Apostolic Succession are far from perfect. Indeed, as is well known, many bishops in the past were chosen in other ways, including popular election and appointment by secular rulers. Even today, Eastern Catholic Churches, such as the Melkites and Ukrainians, use a very different process.

On the whole, the procedures currently in place seem to work fairly well. Differing radically from our "secular" democratic ways of choosing leaders, they compel us to renew our faith in the power of the Holy Spirit. We must always trust that somehow the breath of the Holy Spirit penetrates and guides the Church, perpetually fostering refreshment, renewal, and revival.



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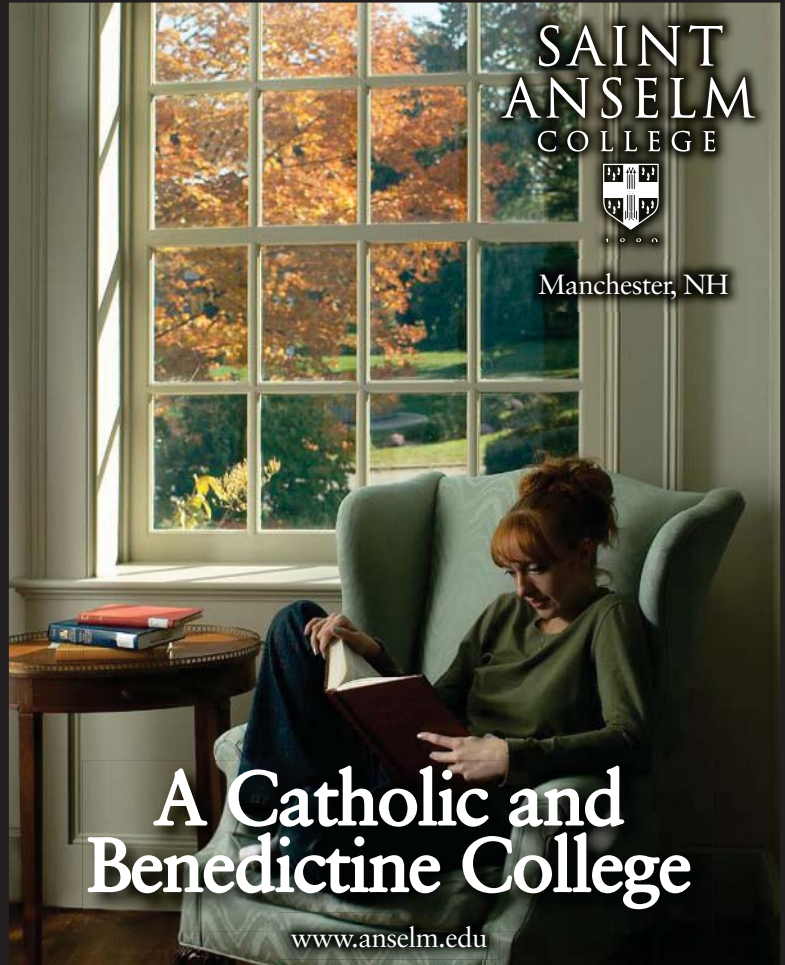
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