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Pope John Paul II and Archbishop Desmond Connell

PRESS WATCH - Vatican keeps a tight grip on the bishoprics

In recent decades, popes have reinforced centralised control of the Catholic Church by influencing who gets promoted in each country, writes TP O'Mahony in the Irish Examiner

In his determination to implement his policy of "restoration", Pope John Paul II, throughout his

26-year pontificate (the second longest in the history of the Catholic Church), assiduously used the appointment of bishops throughout the world as a key mechanism to achieve his objective.

His aim was to “restore” the Church to where it had been before the reforms introduced by the Second Vatican Council (1962-65), reforms that alarmed him, not least because they created what the late Peter Hebblethwaite, one of the very best Vatican-watchers, memorably called “a runaway church”.

John Paul II saw it as his mission to bring this runaway institution back under firm centralised control, and he used the appointment of conservative bishops across the globe as a central element in this process.

The key criterion that all new bishops had to meet was this: Absolute fealty to him and his vision of what he wanted the Church to be in the aftermath of Vatican II. So strictly was this policy insisted upon that one American bishop, emerging from a meeting with John Paul II, was heard to complain: “He treats us like messenger boys.”

Hebblethwaite, author of acclaimed biographies of Pope John XXIII and Pope Paul VI, noted that

the appointments of bishops remained firmly in the hands of Rome.

He explained the modus operandi: “Talk of consultation made little practical difference, and the role of papal nuncios or apostolic delegates remained decisive. The appointment of bishops remained the principal means of control over the local churches.”

From the time in the early 1980s that John Paul II rolled out his “restoration” blueprint, the system of appointing safe but often mediocre candidates — men who were content to be managers rather than leaders — became one of its defining characteristics. And Ireland was no exception.

The policy was continued by Pope Benedict XVI and, surprisingly, has not significantly changed under Pope Francis, despite his reputation as a “great reformer” (the sub-title of a book by one of his biographers).

The preference for loyal bishops who could be relied upon to do the bidding of the Congregations of the Roman Curia (they have what canon lawyers call the “power of governance”) sometimes led to the elevation of people clearly unsuited to be bishops.

Two glaring examples of this were the appointment of John Magee to Cloyne in 1987, and that of Desmond Connell (who died recently at the age of 90) as Archbishop of Dublin in 1988.

The Magee appointment was also a blatant example of the bureaucratic indifference to the consequences of a decision made in Rome: The good of the Diocese of Cloyne was not the primary consideration when that appointment was made.

Those of us in the media who were in Rome for Magee's episcopal ordination believed that, because he had been English-language secretary to three popes (Paul VI, John Paul I, and John Paul II), Cloyne would be a stepping-stone to Armagh.

We were wrong. Magee was, in effect, being banished from Rome by the Polish mafia around the Pope; they were tired of his sanctimoniousness, and the vacancy in Cloyne happened to provide a convenient excuse, and so he was shipped out.

You don't have to believe everything about the Vatican and papal court in a book such as The Power and the Glory: Inside the Dark Heart of John Paul II's Vatican by David Yallop, but, at the

same time, it would be naive to believe that all episcopal appointments are made for the best of motives. They most assuredly are not. And it was ever thus.

Bishops are appointed by the Pope; Canon 377 of the Code of Canon Law stipulates that “The Supreme Pontiff freely appoints bishops...” Section 5 of that canon also states: “For the future, no rights or privileges of election, appointment, presentation or designation of Bishops are conceded to civil authorities.”

Such rights and privileges were indeed conceded in the past, so to say that bishops were always appointed by the Pope is historically incorrect.

Even today, in appointing bishops, the Pope, in perhaps 95% of the cases, merely rubber-stamps the nominations prepared by the Congregation for Bishops, one of the key Vatican departments. This shouldn’t surprise us.

With almost 3,000 diocesan bishops in the world, no pope can be expected to have first-hand or even third-hand knowledge of leading candidates when vacancies occur. Popes have a myriad other matters to attend to, so they must rely on the bureaucrats of the Roman Curia. And

that's where the power and influence of papal nuncios comes into play.

They are meant to be the eyes and ears of the pope in the countries to which they have been assigned. In his book All the Pope's Men, John Allen, now religion editor for the Boston Globe, reminds us that nuncios have "the responsibility for preparing the terna, or list of three names of candidates for the appointment of new bishops".

Allen goes on to quote Cardinal Jorge Mejia, former secretary of the Congregation of Bishops, as saying that "between 80% and 90% of the time the first candidate on the terna prepared by the nuncio ends up getting the job. This makes the nuncio's role often a decisive one."

There would, of course, be more direct papal involvement when it comes to appointments to the major sees — places such as New York, Boston, and San Francisco in the USA, Munich and Cologne in Germany, and Paris and Lyons in France, as well as key places in the Third World. And every pope has a special interest in appointments to places such as Milan, Turin, and Bologna in his own back yard.

If you are Jorge Mario Bergoglio, then you naturally have a keen interest in appointments to Buenos Aires and other major dioceses in

Argentina, just as Joseph Ratzinger had a special interest in German appointments and Karol Wojtyla in all the key Polish appointments.

The big prizes in Ireland — Armagh and Dublin — would rarely show on the papal radar, though that was probably not the case in the appointment of Diarmuid Martin to Dublin because of his previous career in the Vatican.

When Connell was appointed to Dublin in 1988, he was plucked from the relative obscurity of the philosophy department in UCD and had virtually no pastoral experience.

Not only was the appointment disastrous, but, in February 2001, John Paul II decided to make him a Cardinal at a time when Rome could hardly claim to be unaware of the scandal of clerical sex abuse in Ireland.

Indeed, on January 28, 2001 — in the gap between the announcement from the Vatican of the Red Hat for Dublin and the actual Consistory – the Sunday Tribune carried a front page story alongside a large photograph of Connell with the heading ‘Cardinal failed to move abuse priest from parish’. Yet the Red Hat went to him.

This was another example of Rome not caring one whit for local feeling or the pastoral

implications of its ultra-conservative appointments.

The late Fr Andrew Greeley, the Chicago-based sociologist, in his 2005 book The Making of the Pope, said this about episcopal appointments: “The extremely conservative bishops John Paul appointed, usually on curial recommendation, further offended many of the laity and the lower clergy. He rarely engaged in serious consultation with the bishops of the world and listened only to the laity that he knew agreed with him.”

As Hans Kung put it in his book Infallible?, “new bishops were selected preferably according to two tried and tested principles of sound moral standards and the uncritical loyalty to Rome which is called ‘obedience’ ”.

Selecting men who are “safe” often means choosing mediocrities, candidates who are conformists and assuredly will not rock any Roman boats.

Hebblethwaite once put it bluntly: “Bishops have been parachuted down on dioceses about which they know nothing and where they are doomed to unpopularity.” The frustration this can cause in the local churches can build up and occasionally boil over.

A recent example of this was the call by Fr Tony Flannery, one of the founder members of the Association of Catholic Priests, for the papal nuncio, Archbishop Charles Browne, to be removed.

Fr Flannery, who was disciplined by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith for views he expressed on aspects of Catholic teaching, said the nuncio was “doing great damage to the Irish Church by the policies by which he is appointing bishops”.

This is never going to happen, of course; in any case, even if Archbishop Browne were removed he would just be replaced by another Vatican functionary operating on the basis of the same set of instructions from Rome.

The system is the problem; and there is not much likelihood of that being changed, even under a pope as open to institutional reform as Francis. It will only change when a powerful (and wealthy) national church, such as the German church, reclaims its legitimate autonomy when it comes to the appointment of bishops.

In his book, The Making of the Pope, Fr Andrew Greeley asked the pertinent question: “Why does the Roman Curia continue to lord it over the resident bishops?”

As for the appointment of such bishops, he cited the methods prescribed by two of the most important early popes — Leo the Great and Gregory the Great — for the election of bishops for all dioceses, Rome included.

These methods were “summed up in the succinct Latin dictum ‘Qui praesidet super omnes, ab omnibus eligatur’. For those unfamiliar with the mother tongue, that means ‘who presides over all must be chosen by all’.”

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