

ON THE SELECTION OF BISHOPS

I have the distinction of being an early member of “the worst body of bishops in the history of the church,” according to Fr. Richard McBrien ([NCR, May 19, 2006](#)).

A priest of the Amarillo, Texas, diocese, I was appointed its bishop by Pope John Paul II and ordained May 30, 1980. My experience may shed some light on the validity of the assessment by Fr. McBrien, for whom I have a great deal of respect.

After my predecessor died in September 1979, I was elected administrator. Upon being notified, Archbishop Jean Jadot, apostolic delegate, instructed me to send him the names and addresses of every priest in the diocese, of a representative number of deacons and religious women, and of 100 laypeople. He said he would consult them and instructed me to do the same.

He would compare the results of my consultation with his, check the names of candidates submitted by the consultees and by the bishops of Texas, and make his recommendation to Rome.

It was a heady experience for me and for the clergy, religious and laity who had been energized by the implementation of the documents of the Second Vatican Council. The Church defined and understood as the body of Christ, the people of God, gave us a feeling of family, a sense of belonging.

In the 18 years I served as administrator and bishop under Pope John Paul II, however, I witnessed the gradual abandonment of the practice of consulting parish priests, religious and laity in the selection of bishops.

Is it possible that while our Holy Father of blessed memory was becoming a wonderful, charismatic figure during his pastoral visits outside the Vatican, others at the center were reconstructing Church governance along the lines of the pre-Vatican II hierarchical model? That we are now in a restoration mode rather than the renewal mode seems to indicate that.

Small wonder that many on the parish level feel alienated and that the divide between them and the hierarchy continues to widen.

One hopes that the group of bishops appointed by Pope Benedict XVI will be given a kinder evaluation by a future observer of the caliber of Fr. McBrien.

+ *Leroy T. Matthiesen*

Bishop Emeritus
Amarillo, Texas