

What is the Process for Appointing Bishops in the Catholic Church?

On Feb. 5, 2021, Bishop Felipe J. Estévez turned 75, and he submitted his letter of resignation to Pope Francis, the Holy Father. The mandatory retirement age for bishops is 75.

“I intend to give 100 percent of my energy to the care of the flock certainly until the moment the Holy Father announces the 11th Bishop of St. Augustine,” said Bishop Estévez upon reaching the age of 75.

The ultimate decision in appointing bishops rests with the pope, and he is free to select anyone he chooses to replace our beloved bishop.

So what happens next? The process for selecting candidates for the episcopacy begins at the diocesan level and works its way through a series of consultations until it reaches Rome. It is a process bound by strict confidentiality and involves several important players – the most influential being the Apostolic Nuncio, the Congregation for Bishops, and the Holy Father. It can often take eight months or more to complete.

The following information from the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) explains it further:

Bishop’s Recommendations – Every bishop may submit to the archbishop of his province the names of priests he thinks would make good bishops. Following a discussion among the bishops of the province, a vote is taken on which names to recommend. The archbishop then forwards the list of names to the apostolic nuncio in Washington. It is also submitted to the USCCB.

The Apostolic Nuncio – By overseeing the final list of names forwarded to Rome, the apostolic nuncio plays a decisive role in the selection process. He gathers facts and information about potential candidates and interprets that information for the Congregation of Bishops. Great weight is given to the nuncio’s recommendations, but it is important to remember that his “gatekeeper” role does not mean that his recommendations are always followed.

The Congregation for Bishops – Once all the documentation from the nuncio is complete and in order, and the prefect approves, the process moves forward. A cardinal relator is chosen to summarize the documentation and send a report to the full congregation, which generally meets twice a month on Thursdays. After hearing the cardinal relator’s report, the congregation discusses the appointment and then votes. The congregation may follow the nuncio’s recommendation, choose another of the candidates on the terna (list of three candidates), or even ask that another terna be prepared.

The Pope Decides – At a private audience with the Holy Father, usually on a Saturday, the prefect of the Congregation for Bishops presents the congregation’s recommendations to the Holy Father. A few days later, the Holy Father informs the congregation of his decision. The

congregation then notifies the nuncio, who in turn contacts the candidate and asks if he will accept. If the answer is “yes,” the Vatican is informed, and a date is set for the announcement. It often takes six to eight months – and sometimes longer – from when a diocese becomes vacant until a new bishop is appointed.

Bishop Felipe Estévez, the tenth Bishop of St. Augustine serves the diocese until Pope Francis has accepted his letter of resignation and the new bishop is announced.