

PRIESTS AND PARISHES A CANONICAL PERSPECTIVE

The Code of Canon Law inextricably links the office of pastor and the concept of parish.

The Parish

The canonical definition of parish is provided in canon 515.1. "*A parish is a certain community of the Christian faithful stably constituted in a particular church, whose pastoral care is entrusted to a pastor as its proper pastor under the authority of the diocesan bishop.*"

The emphasis in Church law is on the parish as a "structured communion." By definition it is a cohesive community of persons, consisting of pastor and parishioners under the authority of the local bishop. Canonically, the parish is not only defined by its structure and personal elements, but also in terms of its *mission*, which is elucidated in the canons pertaining to the office of pastor.

The Pastor

Regardless of how parishes are structured, the underlying principles regarding the relationship between pastor and people remain the same.

- **In general, the Code's treatment of parish life presumes the model of *one pastor, one parish*.** While Canon law recognizes the need for alternative structures, these structures are clearly seen as exceptions to the rule. The Code's description of "one parish, one pastor" model (c. 526.1) is reminiscent of the "One Shepherd, one flock" imagery of scripture. Alternative models of structuring parishes need to address this essential connection between pastor and people.
- **"The whole purpose for the parochial office is the good of souls." (Christus Dominus, no. 31 Vat. II)** Canon 519 focuses on the care of the flock/care of souls by the pastor through the exercise of various teaching, sanctifying and governing functions. Over one hundred canons outline the pastor's rights and responsibilities in law. Pastors have a broad mandate to see that the gospel is proclaimed, the sacraments celebrated, and the people served. These include:

With respect to the pastor's *teaching office*, the pastor has an obligation to hold preaching in high esteem (cc. 757, 762). He fulfills this through *homiletics* (C. 767), by providing spiritual exercises and sacred missions (c. 770), evangelization, works of social justice (c. 528.1), and the use of social communications (c. 822). He is to see to it that catechetical instruction is provided to those in his parish (cc. 528, 776), and to prepare individuals for the reception of the sacraments (cc. 777, 851, 890, 914, 1063.1).

The celebration of the sacraments, particularly the Eucharist and Penance, hold primary place in the pastor's exercise of his *sanctifying office* (cc. 528, 534). But

the pastor's sanctifying ministry also includes attentiveness to family prayer, the liturgy of the hours, the imparting of blessings, and the fostering of devotion.

The pastor's exercise of his ministry *of governance* is also exercised in numerous ways. These include the faculty to assist at marriages (cc. 1109-1111), dispense from marriage impediments under some conditions (c. 1079.2), or from the obligation to observe feast days or fast or abstinence (c.1245). As the one responsible for the overall administration of the parish (cc. 532, 1279.1) he must take care that nothing is done that seriously harms the parish's temporal goods, to administer church property, deal with personnel, and maintain parish records. Failure to exercise responsible stewardship can lead to significant penalties in the law (cc.1377, 1741.5).

- **The pastor's responsibilities are profoundly personal in nature.** The law contains provisions for the direct care of the people, and for structures that protect individual rights and responsibilities. The conciliar text *Christus Dominus*, n. 30 is reflected in Canon 529.1. It states:

"In order to fulfill his office diligently, the pastor is to strive to know the faithful entrusted to his care. Therefore, he is to visit families, sharing in their cares, anxieties and griefs of the faithful, strengthening them in the Lord and prudently correcting them if they are failing in certain areas. With generous love he is to help the sick, particularly those close to death, by refreshing them solicitously with the sacraments and commending their souls to God; with particular diligence he is to seek out the poor, the afflicted, the lonely, those exiled from their country, and similarly those weighed down by special difficulties. He is to work so that spouses and parents are supported in fulfilling their duties and is to foster growth of Christian life in the family."

The second canon that underscores this principle is canon 530. This norm "especially entrusts" to pastors particular parish celebrations, including Baptism, Confirmation for those in danger of death, Marriage, the Anointing of the Sick, the administration of Viaticum, funerals, and Eucharistic celebrations on Sundays and holy days of obligation. While a pastor can at times entrust these to others, the Code's stated preference for the *pastor's* administration of them underscores the expectation that the pastor *should be personally present* to the faithful at each of the pivotal moments their lives. He should be a shepherd who truly *knows* his flock.

This principle also explains why the Code prescribes other rights and responsibilities for pastors, such as the obligation to live within the confines of the parish's boundaries (c. 533.1), the right to stability in office (c.522), and the restrictions placed on pastors for the amount of time they can be away from the parish (c.533.2). Because the law presumes that the pastor will be engaged personally with the faithful who have been entrusted to his care, it makes special provisions to facilitate his accessibility on a daily basis.

- *The fulfillment of the pastor's responsibilities is understood in law to require*

collaboration. Canon law reflects the teaching of the conciliar document Lumen Gentium that pastors, "know that they were not instituted by Christ to undertake by themselves alone the church's whole mission of salvation to the world (L.G. no. 30), and that without the assistance of the laity in particular, "the pastor's apostolate cannot generally attain its full effect" (Apostolicam actuositatem, n.10).

Canon law presumes that the pastor will enlist the assistance of the faithful in the discharge of his responsibilities (cfr. cc. 519, 851.2, 776). He is expected to rely on their counsel (c.536.1) and to foster their participation (c. 275.2). With the exception of those rights and obligations which arise from ordination or the exercise of the power of governance, nearly all the pastor's responsibilities can be broadly delegated and shared with others in the parish.

- *The pastor's authority is central and autonomous. Canon Law's view is that the pastor is at the very center of parish life. It not only details various rights and obligation. It also accords him the necessary authority to see that they are fulfilled.*
- *Church law in this area is intentionally flexible. Since the primary purpose of the parish is to care of the needs of a defined portion of God's people, canon law presumes that its provisions will be adapted to each local situation. Parishes, in other words, differ in the eyes of the law in their application of or emphasis on certain prescriptions because the pastoral needs of each local community differ.*

Conclusion

It's helpful to recall the words in article 210 of the Directory for the Pastoral Ministry of Bishops (2004) that says,

"The division of the diocese into parishes must enable the faithful to be a true ecclesial community which gathers for the celebration of the Holy Eucharist, receives the Word of God and exercises charity through the corporal and spiritual works of mercy. It should be possible for pastors to know the members of their flock personally and to offer them constant pastoral care. In particular, parish clergy must be helped to fulfill the canonical duties entrusted to them"