

Role of Priests and Pastors: Canon Law

(Taken from **The Code of Canon Law: A Test and Commentary**. James A. Coriden, Thomas J. Green, and Donald E. Heintschel, editors. New York: Paulist Press, 1985.)

The Pastor as Teacher and Sanctifier

Canon 218 - § 1. The pastor is obliged to see to it that the word of God in its entirety is announced to those living in the parish; for this reason he is to see to it that the lay Christian faithful are instructed in the truths of the faith, especially through the homily which is to be given on Sundays and holy days of obligation and through the catechetical formation which he is to give; he is to foster works by which the spirit of the gospel, including issues involving social justice, is promoted; he is to take special care for the Catholic education of children and of young adults; he is to make every effort with the aid of the Christian faithful, to bring the gospel message also to those who have ceased practicing their religion or who do not profess the true faith.

§2. The pastor is to see to it that the Most Holy Eucharist is the center of the parish assembly of the faithful; he is to work to see to it that the Christian faithful are nourished through a devout celebration of the sacraments and especially that they frequently approach the sacrament of the Most Holy Eucharist and the sacrament of penance; he is likewise to endeavor that they are brought to the practice of family prayer as well as to a knowing and active participation in the sacred liturgy, which the pastor must supervise in his parish under the authority of the diocesan bishop, being vigilant lest any abuses creep in.

This and the following two canons deal with the obligations and functions of pastors. Although they are not exhaustive, the lists contained in the law provide a rather comprehensive job description, which is also used for team minister (c. 543), temporary administrators of parishes (c. 540), and parochial vicars (c. 549).⁷⁸

The conciliar teaching on pastor (CD 30, LG 28) emphasizes that their ministry is intrinsically bound up with that of their bishop and that they cooperate with him in a special way and make him present in a certain sense to the individual local congregations as far as possible. Hence, priests in parochial ministry assume practically the same duties and functions as their bishop in their part of his larger mission. The threefold teaching, sanctifying, and governing functions (munera) of the bishop are applicable to the pastor *mutatis mutandis*.

The present canon highlights the teaching and sanctifying roles of the pastor. Both roles were treated in the 1917 Code (CIC 467-469), but now they are nuanced by conciliar ideas and expressions (CD 30, LG 28). The pastor's role as teacher begins with announcing the word of God, which, in turn, is to penetrate his homilies, his efforts at catechetical formation, and other magisterial projects. The pastor is to be especially attentive to the education of children and young adults as well as lapsed Catholics and

⁷⁸ It should be noted that when a parish is vacant a parochial vicar is not obliged to offer the "Mass for the people" (c. 549).

non-Catholics. In the spirit of Vatican II (AA 6), it is recommended that he employ the Christian faithful in his ministry

The second paragraph of the canon highlights the pastor's sanctifying role. Here the emphasis is on the Eucharist as central to parish life. Besides celebrating the sacraments for his people, he should encourage participation in the liturgy and his parish so that it is authentically celebrated (SC 19).

The pastor's magisterial and cultic roles are further explicated in Books III and IV of the 1983 Code.

Pastoral Obligations: Governance

Canon 529 - §1. In order to fulfill his office in earnest the pastor should strive to come to know the faithful who have been entrusted to his care; therefore he is to visit families, sharing the cares, worries, and especially the griefs of the faithful, strengthening them in the Lord, and correcting them prudently if they are wanting in certain areas; with a generous love he is to help the sick, particularly those close to death, refreshing them solicitously with the sacraments and commending their souls to God; he is to make a special effort to seek out the poor, the afflicted, the lonely, those exiled from their own land, and similarly those weighed down with special difficulties; he is also to labor diligently so that spouses and parents are supported in fulfilling their proper duties, and he is to foster growth in the Christian life within the family.

§2. The pastor is to acknowledge and promote the proper role which the lay members of the Christian faithful have in the Church's mission by fostering their association for religious purposes; he is to cooperate with his own bishop and with the presbyterate of the diocese in working hard so that the faithful be concerned for parochial communion and that they realize that they are members both of the diocese and of the universal Church and participate in and support efforts to promote such communion.

This new canon clarifies the pastor's role of governance, again borrowing conciliar ideas and expressions (CD 30, PO 6). The first paragraph of the canon stipulates that the pastor must get to know his people. This includes visiting their homes; seeking out the poor, sick and disturbed; counseling married people; and promoting family life in general.

The second paragraph of the canon refers to the pastor's duty to consider the needs of the broader Church beyond the parameters of his parish and to help his people do the same. This section is firmly grounded on the principle of *communio*.⁷⁹ The pastor is supposed to cooperate with his bishop and his fellow priests through such structures as the presbyteral council. He is also to promote lay involvement in the Church's mission by fostering their religious associations⁸⁰ and encouraging their participation in the life of the parish and of the diocese as individuals and as members

⁷⁹ See Hertling, *Communio*. This work discusses the history of *Communio (koinonia)* in the Church and shows its many implications and applications at the local and universal level. *Communio* was one of the basic principles underlying the major documents of Vatican II; see also J 36 (1976), for a series of articles on *communio*.

⁸⁰ These associations, private and public, universal and local, are now delineated in a new section of the Code (cc. 298-329).

of consultative bodies such as the parish council, the parish finance council, and the diocesan pastoral council. The pastor is supposed to enable the people to see themselves as concerned members both of a parochial community and also of larger communions at the diocesan and universal levels.⁸¹

⁸¹ This part of the canon is taken almost verbatim from *CD 30,1*.