



Office of the Bishop

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EPISCOPAL VICARS A Canonical Reflection

The term 'diocesan curia', which is often heard today, is used to refer to a collection of organizations, councils, committees and individual offices which contribute to the practical running of a diocese. Vatican II Council stipulated that the 'diocesan curia should be so organized that it may be a useful medium for the Bishop not only for diocesan administration but also for pastoral activity.' By legislation in the Code of Canon Law published in 1983 the institution of Episcopal Vicars was introduced.

Episcopal Vicars are not just another bureaucratic level, for their work is not restricted exclusively to administrative and bureaucratic tasks. Every administrative activity in the church has an apostolic content which must receive some juridical framework at the governing level, so that the acts of governance might be objective and subjective rights be safeguarded. The salvation of souls, and how best to achieve that goal, is always the primary objective.

In accordance with the norms of Canon Law the power of Episcopal Vicars for governing is essentially one with that of the Bishop: he exercises episcopal power proper to the diocesan bishop, in its ordinary form, as something attached to the office of vicar, not as something proper to the person. When the law speaks of the 'diocesan bishop' rather than the 'local Ordinary' a Vicar can act only if he has a special mandate from the Bishop. When the law speaks of 'local ordinaries', it refers to episcopal vicars and vicars general as well as the diocesan bishop. Yet even in these actions, an Episcopal Vicar must bear in mind that in all his decisions he must have before his mind, the will and mind of the Bishop himself.

There are many references in the Code of Canon Law to the powers of the 'Ordinary' but in point of fact many of the duties and powers listed will not be items referred to the Episcopal Vicar. Matters that pertain to the priest personally are properly those which will involve the Episcopal Vicar for priests, while those which refer to parish life and ministry will involve the Episcopal Vicar of the area.

Episcopal vicars are permitted to make a visitation throughout, or in any part, of the diocese in behalf of the Bishop (can. 396 s1). Vicars are encouraged to promote common pastoral activity in their respective regions by participating in the regional meetings of various people in ministry when such attendance would be helpful.

The Vicars are to keep records of all their juridic acts for the records to have any validity (can. 474). For example, Vicars may grant the faculty to hearing confessions to priests residing in the area. If visiting priests are in the area for more than one month, the Episcopal Vicar is to be notified. Likewise, Episcopal Vicars are to exercise prudent vigilance in matters pertaining to the teaching office of the Church.



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Episcopal Vicars are empowered to grant dispensations in their respective areas, keeping in mind that the subjects of the dispensations must be from the area in which the Episcopal Vicar enjoys his power. Again, a record of this should be recorded and forwarded to the Chancery.

In the Code of Canon Law, there is an extensive listing of the powers of the 'Ordinary'. Many of them will normally lie outside the ambit of Episcopal Vicars. Should issues arise which cause an Episcopal Vicar to have concerns as to whether he might act, referral should be made to the Bishop or to his Vicar General.