

Archdiocese of Armagh
Role of Vicar Forane in Pastoral Plan
(Canons 553-555)
and associated challenges

Consecrated persons are those who have God as their goal, His word as their light and His will as their guide (*Faciem tuam* 15)

There is a sense in which today's readings express the dilemma of the Church today:

Tuesday Week 30

1st Reading: Ephesians 5: give way to one another in obedience to Christ...the husband is the head...wives must be subject....jurisdiction issues in a different cultural context???

2nd Reading: Lk 13: the Kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed which a man threw into his garden or it is like the yeast a woman took and mixed with the flour.....the unpredictable nature of working for the Kingdom???

What I propose to cover:

- Role of VF in *CIC*
- The notion of co-responsibility since this concept has radically changed our perception of the role of laypersons in our Church
- Possible areas of conflict or confusion particularly in relation to the roles of Parish Priest and Lay Pastoral Personnel
- The significance of Particular Law in the exercise of authority
- A possible way forward

Canon 374 requires dioceses to be divided into distinct parts or Parishes but paragraph 2 says: to foster pastoral care by means of common action, several neighbouring parishes **CAN be** joined together in special groups such as Vicariates Forane. This is in reality an exercise of the **principle of subsidiarity**. This provision was mandatory in *CIC* 1917 (c. 217) but the present law leaves it to the discretion of the Bishop. The **criterion** for grouping parishes is whatever will best foster pastoral care. So there is no blueprint and perhaps it is the **lack of direction** in the law that causes difficulties, confusion, challenges. Canonists would say that it is this very lack of definition that enables experimentation, the kind of trial and error that eventually enables the best practice to become the norm: in canonical terms we would say: law **follows** life.

So the Vicariate Forane structure provides a kind of middle management structure in the Diocese.

What then is **the role of the VF**: the Code of Canon Law in cc. 553-555 describes the role in **2 ways**: there are **specific duties**:

- To promote and coordinate common pastoral action (quite vague)
- To ensure priests of his district lead a life befitting their priestly state and discharge their duties/obligations carefully
- In relation to religious functions especially the celebration of the blessed Eucharist; to ensure sacred places and furnishings are cared for, parish records, ecclesiastical goods carefully administered, Church property looked after
- Ensure that clerics engage in on-going formation and study
- Ensure provision of spiritual assistance and especially help those in difficulties, those who are ill and dying, role in relation to when priest dies
- Obligated to visit parishes in area

The **second area** of responsibility is stated at the beginning of c. 555 and relates to Diocesan Particular Law. This concerns those **faculties** given to the VF by the Diocesan Bishop. It is in this area that we find both the creativity of the individual bishop and his values in relation to the exercise of authority in a given diocese.

In your own case, the mapping of the Pastoral Areas came out of, to quote Cardinal Brady "a tremendous amount of participation, discussion, considering, questioning, listening, challenging, compromising and deliberating [...] a diocesan exercise that included the engagement of people young and old, priests, religious, and bishops." In other words, widespread consultation which has possibly created widespread expectations, some of which you will probably not be able to meet.

In addition, the description on your web page specifically states: **The VF's will be supported in their leadership by lay leaders who will share the leadership responsibilities with them.** This is a very radical, courageous and maybe for some priests, a dangerously innovative statement to make.

If all the priests of Armagh Diocese have bought into this new radical vision of Church which as you know comes from Vatican II, you are probably unique in Ireland.

When the people are insecure, they make laws: it is very important that in this time of creating and building something new that you do not take fright and try to pin ideas and structures that have not yet been fully tested, into law. To do so would have the effect of inhibiting the development of something new.

My question is: is this structure of Pastoral Areas geared towards **enabling something else to happen**, e.g., the establishment of a new model of Parish Ministry such as that envisaged in **c. 515 §1** where a group of parishes is entrusted *in solidum* or jointly to a group of priests? Or as in **c. 515 §2** where a deacon, religious, lay or group of persons are entrusted with a share in the pastoral care of a parish under the direction of a priest who has the powers and faculties of a parish priest? Or is the VF structure and the Pastoral Areas with which it is associated intended to be a **support structure for what already exists**: less and less priests being asked to do more and more: you have 61 parishes and approximately 104 priests available for parish ministry; you probably have at most 2 priests per parish and in many cases only one.

The support function is vitally important of course but I suggest that the role of the VF as the **catalyst of something new** is even more vital at this particular time in your history.

Pastoral Plan:

In presenting this to the people, Cardinal Brady said: "I have no doubt that implementing this pastoral plan will be a **learning experience** for all involved and that it will lead us in directions totally unforeseen."

The Office of Pastoral Renewal and Family Ministry website includes this statement: Pastoral Leadership in a **post authoritarian era** will adopt **processes and structures** that are inclusive, empowering and reconciling. The difficulty or challenge for those who are currently being asked to exercise ministry in a new way, is precisely the fact that some were **formed** in a more authoritarian era and have an image of Church that the lay faithful see as both clerical and hierarchical. This of course is unfair to those who do not function in this way. However, if the perception is there, such men are also affected by it.

So what does CIC say about laypersons:

Ladislav Örsy SJ the noted theologian and canonist, cautions against setting the laity apart since the laity is no more an autonomous part of

the social body of the Church than the heart is an autonomous organ in a living human body. The laity in its entirety and the hierarchy **together** constitutes the People of God. He says: "The laity comes to life and best operates when it is harmoniously blended with the hierarchy. The hierarchy simply cannot exist without the laity. They are meant to support and balance each other. They exist and work for a common purpose."

Regarding the faithful, **c. 209** expresses the obligation of always observing communion with the Church even in their method of working. **Communion** is therefore not only the **reality** of the Church but is also a **task** that must be obtained by participation in for example the various Diocesan Councils.

Canon 204: true backbone of whole Code: Christ's faithful ...constituted by baptism as People of God...and participate each in own way in 3 *munera* of Christ could be identified (according to *Exegetical Commentary*) as **the principle of co-responsibility** with 2 fundamental and complementary considerations each of which has a particular influence on the norms of *CIC*:

- **Equality** which is fundamental or radical
- **Diversity** in the People of God that might be said to be functional: diversity of juridical states and conditions, of office etc. above all there is ontological diversity from divine law based on orders so that some in addition to the common priesthood have received hierarchical priesthood with sacred power. The lay faithful can **co-operate** in its exercise as is clearly seen in the Code (c. 129 §2).

This means that the principle of co-responsibility, i.e., participation of all the faithful in the Church's mission is not understood or applied in a democratic sense. In recent years an erroneous conclusion has sometimes been drawn: **the democratic participation with deliberative function of all the faithful in the governance of the Church which is actually the proper task of the hierarchy.** Different authors use different terms when speaking of this participative co-responsibility: the Synodal principle, the principle of broadened collegiality, the principle of democratic participation or the principle of governance co-responsibility. This understanding led for example to requests to make Diocesan and Parish Pastoral Councils **deliberative** rather than consultative Councils. These proposals were not taken up by the Code Commission or the Legislator in *CIC*.

Pope Benedict XVI has spoken of the co-responsibility of the faithful for the life and action of the Parish noting that "the PP is no longer the only one to animate everything" (2007/2009).

There have been many discussions about the meaning and relationship between co-responsibility and collegiality: **Exegetical Commentary** description: Collegiality is the exercise of co-responsibility for decisions in the task of governance exercised in collegial acts. This can be done only by those physical persons who constitute the college. However college and collegiality are often used loosely. We must remember to differentiate the acts of a council which has no deliberative powers and those of a college. **The principle of collegiality** is applied in the Code not to the common participation of all faithful in the Church's mission (which is in the area of co-responsibility) but to certain forms of carrying out the proper mission of the Hierarchy.

Canon 208: true equality of dignity and action; all the faithful are **co-responsible for achieving the Church's mission** depending on personal conditions and offices. This doctrinal reality was enshrined in: PO 2; LG 32; AA 2 etc.

Canon 129 §2: laypersons can co-operate (*cooperari*) in the exercise of the power of governance in accordance with the law

Canon 145 §1: an ecclesiastical office is any post (*munus*) which by divine or ecclesiastical disposition is established in a stable manner to further a spiritual purpose

§2: the duties and rights proper to each ecclesiastical office are defined by the law whereby the office is established or by a decree of the competent authority whereby it is at one and the same time established and conferred

Canon 149 provides the **criteria** for appointment: communion (not full communion, see c. 205) and suitability. Of course, the law provides that an office which carries with it the full care of souls for which the exercise of orders is required, can only be held by a priest (c. 150)

These canons provide a little glimpse of the changed understanding of the lay faithful in our Church. In addition

Diocesan Institutions:

Vatican II envisioned diocesan institutions e.g. Presbyteral Council, Pastoral Council, Office of Episcopal Vicar inspired by the new

circumstances. In contrast to *CIC* 1917, the **basis for understanding** the relationship of the faithful with these entities is not today primarily the distinction produced by Orders but the **fundamental equality** of all the members because of Baptism, equality regarding “dignity and action” to co-operate in building up the Body of Christ according to one’s own condition (LG 32, c. 208). There are consequences for diocesan organisation:

1. Various entities e.g. Diocesan Synod (cc. 460 ff), Pastoral Council (cc. 511- 514), Diocesan Curia (cc. 469-494), Parish Councils (c. 536), Financial Councils (c. 494) are open to various **possibilities for lay-co-operation or co-responsibility** with clergy
2. **Distinction** in the communion of the faithful produced by Holy Orders and the unity of consecration and mission of bishop and presbyters which make them Episcopal assistants united to their bishop by the bonds of hierarchical communion (LG 28, PO 7). This also justifies institutions to foster the stable cooperation of the presbyters as advisors to the bishop in the governance and management of the diocese (PO 7, c. 384).
3. One of the challenges of some of these new entities lies in the **lack of determination of specific competencies** e.g. of the Pastoral Council c. 511 which hinders their convening and functioning and the practical temptation to interpret the consultative vote according to the division of powers in civil law and not in the context of ecclesiastical communion.

In relation to your Diocese: The Diocesan Pastoral Council together with the Parish Pastoral Councils, under the guidance of the Cardinal, must be involved **in providing leadership** to the people in the continuing development of the Diocesan Pastoral Plan. In addition, these bodies are tasked with working in close liaison with the Office of Pastoral Renewal and Family Ministry and the other planning groups on all aspects of the Pastoral Plan; the Armagh Diocesan Pastoral Council will play its part in **supporting the work of clustering, rationalisation, new parish structures and ministries;** will have a role in facilitating the **implementation of the plan and ensuring that Parish Pastoral Councils** are both equipped and empowered to promote the new structures in their parishes

Key difficulties that have emerged in relation to new structures include the following:

- What jurisdiction has the VF vis-à-vis the Parish Priests in his Vicariate? The PP has clearly defined jurisdiction (cc. 528-530) and the authority by law to carry out the demands of his office.
- What is the relationship between Parish Priests in a Pastoral Area
- What is the authority of lay pastoral personnel and how do they fit into Parish and Diocesan structures

My question in relation to the VF in the new organisational structure is: how to avoid the situation where the VF has all the responsibility without the authority necessary to carry out his role?

The role of particular law is very important to:

- Determine competencies
- Distribute functions
- Avoid multiplication of organisations with the consequent risk of bureaucratizing diocesan structures

Your own map for the future (DPP) envisages:

- Clustering
- Rationalization
- New Parish Structures
- New Parish/Diocesan Ministries

You describe a **Pastoral Area** as “a cluster of neighbouring parishes that support each other and share the collaborative gifts and talents of each parish.” The **challenge** of this type of initiative is that it depends on the good will of the individual participant parish priest and of its nature because of the shortage of priests is a temporary situation. Eugene Duffy says that any worthwhile pastoral initiative must have a solid **theological foundation** which includes: an appropriate image of God; an ecclesiology of communion; an inclusive theology of priesthood; a spirituality of collaboration; a renewed vision of Parish. Your impressive programme of formation and the tasks you have identified certainly indicates you are on this road.

Given the current reality, you will inevitably reach the question of rationalisation; how this is done will have a large bearing on its success

Inevitably, you will have to look, in common with every other diocese in the country, at new structures; the possibilities here were referred to above in my comments about **canon 515**: entrust a group of parishes to a group of priests *in solidum*; entrust a parish to a deacon, religious, lay person or to a group under the direction of a priest. You

also have the option of what the Americans call "multiple pastoring" where one priest cares for many parishes.

This in turn will necessitate the creation of new Diocesan and Parish structures and ministries which in turn will involve the type of lay ministries already well established in other parts of the world. Indeed it may even lead to looking beyond the present Parish structures as Roch Pagé the noted Canadian canonist suggests since the Parish structure is a 12 century organism which may well have outlived its usefulness in terms of evangelisation and the mission of the Church in this 21st century.

It seems to me that you as a diocese have taken those steps which will best prepare you to undertake those innovative steps that will ensure that the mission of the Church in Armagh continues to be carried out.

I pray with St Paul that you may walk confidently on the road that has brought you to where you are.

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