

CHAPLAINS IN CANON LAW AND CONTEMPORARY PRACTICE

Canon law defines a chaplain as “a priest to whom is entrusted in a stable manner the pastoral care, at least in part, of some community or special group of Christ’s faithful, to be exercised in accordance with universal and particular law” (Canon 564). The law establishes the chaplain as a canonical figure in the person of a priest who is accountable to the diocesan bishop. A deacon cannot be named a chaplain in the canonical sense.



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“Stable manner” implies the formal appointment to a particular group associated with various apostolates such as educational institutions or services with long-standing social traditions such as prisons or hospitals. The office is no longer linked to foundations or non-parochial churches as was the practice in the past. “Pastoral care” refers to the role of

the priest having a canonical office for full care of souls, which includes preaching, sacramental minister of baptism, penance, anointing of the sick, marriage, Eucharist and celebration of the Mass. “At least in part” implies that a priest chaplain may exercise other clerical duties or assignments.

Eight subsequent canons, 565-572, specify a number of other conditions, or requisites, that provide guidance for Catholic institutions in providing a program of pastoral care. These pertain to:

- The appointment or confirmation by the local ordinary of one who has been presented or elected (565)
- The bestowal of all the faculties necessary for full pastoral care (hearing confessions, preaching, administering viaticum and anointing of the sick and conferring confirmation if there is danger of death) (566)
- The absolution from sanctions and other penalties depriving one of some spiritual or temporal good, but only in hospitals, prisons and on sea voyages (566)

- Consultation between the local ordinary and a religious superior in a house of a lay religious institute before appointing a chaplain for the purpose of directing liturgical functions (567 gives the superior the right to propose a particular priest)

- Appointment of chaplains for those who are not able to avail themselves of the ordinary care of parish priests, e.g. migrants, exiles, fugitives, nomads, seafarers (568) and armed forces (569) which must take into account state relationships with armed forces

- Circumstances in which a non-parochial church is attached to a center of a community or group (570)

- The requirement of the chaplain to maintain a due relationship with the parish priest (571)

- The removal of a chaplain (563, 572)

ROLE OF THE DIOCESAN BISHOP

The diocesan bishop is responsible for oversight of sacred worship, the care of souls and ministries within his jurisdiction. In summary, the bishop’s explicit approval is required for appointing and removing priests in collaboration with the administration of the institution, and bestowing faculties to clerics for sacramental functions. The bishop must consult with religious superiors when assigning an ordained chaplain to a religious house.

CHAPLAINCY AND PASTORAL CARE MODELS TODAY

In canon law, the title of chaplain is ascribed only to priests. However, for more than 20 years the title “chaplain” has been used by lay persons, women religious and deacons serving in various roles of pastoral care. Although other titles such as *faith life animator* or *campus minister* may be

used, the service retains its participation for all in the healing ministry of Christ with certain sacramental functions requiring the services of an ordained priest.

In 2004 the National Association of Catholic Chaplains requested that the designation of “lay ecclesial health care ministry” be endorsed in order to provide a greater inclusion of lay persons in the delivery of pastoral care services. The national chaplains’ association itself continues to certify lay persons as “chaplains” for the sake of the profession and the hiring institutions.¹ This occurred as a response to the 1997 Vatican Instruction *On Certain Questions Regarding the Collaboration of the Non-Ordained Faithful in the Sacred Ministry of Priest*.²

The importance of chaplaincy services is articulated in the *Ethical and Religious Directives for Catholic Health Care Services* (Part Two, Nos. 10-22). Priests, deacons, religious and laity are affirmed in the exercise of diverse and complementary roles in pastoral care. Directive 22 notes the necessity of the development of a diocesan policy regarding the appointment of other-than-Catholic chaplains to the pastoral care staff and for the appointment of a non-cleric as director of the department.³

Given the unavailability of priests to fill sacramental roles as well as the diverse populations served by health care institutions, pastoral care frequently demands broad and creative applications. Pastoral care must be composed of professional chaplains and support personnel responsible for providing and facilitating an effective, compassionate response to the spiritual needs of a community of persons. Spiritual care must be integrated into the fabric of all services provided by a health care system.

Although patients are the primary recipients of care, family members and friends of patients as well as employees/staff are included in today’s provision for pastoral care. Services may be offered to all regardless of their affiliation, or lack of affiliation, with any particular religious denomination or sect. Worship services must be offered in the Roman Catholic tradition as well as ecumenical services on a routine basis. Staff chaplains provide for sacramental ministry by arranging this with clergy in the area. Staff chaplains are occasionally called upon by the families of un-

churched patients to perform funerals.

Unique pastoral ministry such as the *No One Dies Alone* program is common in many health care settings. Staffed by volunteers, vigil programs such as this provide comfort, support and compassionate presence to dying people who don’t have friends or family or whose loved ones can’t make it to their bedside at the time of death. Some programs require that vigil companions go through special training.

PASTORAL CARE IN THE COMMUNITY

Pastoral care departments may support community efforts by serving as a liaison to religious congregations of all denominations in the community. Examples include:

- Notifying a patient’s clergy upon being admitted, if the patient gives permission
- Providing educational programming to the staff and members of a religious congregation
- Providing an educational center accredited by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops offering clinical pastoral education and training to professionals and para-professionals.

Such is the range of a chaplain’s ministry in the contemporary world. It includes persons from all vocational states in life. It functions as a microcosm of the church with persons in the various roles of laity and clergy and with representatives from many religious denominations who work in mutual support for the good of those served. Chaplains provide worship, sacraments, liturgy, prayer, counseling, catechesis and personal presence while engaging significantly with individuals and the institution they serve; that is, the church.

NOTES

1. Bishop Dale J. Melczek, “Use of the Title ‘Chaplain’ in Pastoral Care Ministry,” *Vision* (July 2004).
2. http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/laity/documents/rc_con_interdic_doc_15081997_en.html
3. <http://www.usccb.org/bishops/directives.shtml>

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