

The Bishop's Vicar: How Does It Work?

BY SR. MARLENE
WEISENBECK, FSPA,
Ph.D., JCL



Sr. Weisenbeck is president and chairwoman, leadership council, Congregation of the Sisters of the Third Order of St. Francis of Perpetual Adoration, La Crosse, Wis.

A diocesan bishop may assign his oversight for particular apostolic activities to persons called episcopal vicars. Canon 476 articulates the conditions for appointment, and the vicar's duties and authority. "As often as the good governance of the diocese requires it, the diocesan bishop can appoint one or more episcopal vicars. . . . The competence of an episcopal vicar is limited to a determined part of the diocese, or to a specific type of activity, or to the faithful of a particular rite, or to certain groups of people."¹ A vicar is a priest at least 30 years of age, well-versed in the discipline pertaining to his appointment, and known for sound doctrine, integrity, prudence and practical experience.² An episcopal vicar has executive authority pertaining only to the type of appointed activity and the faculties granted a diocesan bishop by the Apostolic See.³ He must report to the diocesan bishop on more important matters and never act against the will and mind of the diocesan bishop.⁴

Also, a diocesan bishop may delegate similar authority over certain activities to persons called delegates, directors or liaisons. For example, it is not uncommon for bishops to appoint a bishop's liaison for health care affairs or for consecrated life in the diocese. Such titles have no formal articulation in canon law, but an analogous function is described in canons 137-138 where the bishop's executive power is delegated and intended to be interpreted widely.

Practically speaking, a diocesan bishop's liaison for health affairs serves to assist in ensuring effective communication between the bishop and the health care ministries in the diocese. The liaison or delegate helps to facilitate dialogue between the bishop and the leaders of the respective health care systems as well as the religious congregations, who sponsor health care facilities in the diocese. Areas of communication can include, but are not necessarily limited to, the following:

- Canonical status related to assets, mission and ministry.
- Fidelity to ethical and religious directives for Catholic health care services.
- Appointment of ordained Catholic chaplains.

- Sacramental ministry being carried out in the health care facilities.

The diocesan bishop's liaison executes the responsibilities at the direction of the bishop, such as:

- Consult with individual health care facilities, as well as the system leadership and sponsoring congregations.
- Set meeting date and place for annual meetings with the bishop and institutional systems and congregational leadership, pastoral care directors and priest chaplains.
- Participate in meetings of the diocesan health care advisory committee or represent the bishop at dedications or blessings at hospitals, or other occasions when the bishop is unable to be present himself.⁵

Likewise, a diocesan director for the office of consecrated life (sometimes referred to as "Vicar for Religious") can carry out similar administrative objectives of the diocesan bishop in relationship to institutes of consecrated life ministering in the diocese. Such an individual need not be a cleric. Today, a large majority of directors of consecrated life are women religious. They represent the bishop to religious institutes and vice versa. They collaborate with major superiors on issues that relate to the presence and ministry of religious in the diocese. Frequently, they implement direction from the Tri-Conference Office regarding the retirement fund for religious appeal. Other principal activities might include:

- Reporting to the diocesan consultative bodies about members of institutes of consecrated life and persons following other forms of consecrated life serving in the diocese and the ministries which they provide.
- Providing assistance to those members of religious institutes interested in living and ministering in the diocese.
- Recommending members of institutes of consecrated life to serve on diocesan and deanery

councils and commissions.

- Consulting on canonical matters concerning persons who follow a vocation of consecrated life; this may include consecrated virgins, hermits or religious who are on excommunication or who are seeking a dispensation from their vows, particularly in the case of diocesan institutes.

- Representing the diocesan bishop to various state and national organizations for consecrated life.

- Providing information on the vocation of consecrated life in its different forms as well as information on third orders and programs of association or affiliation with religious institutes.

- Promoting the vocation of the consecrated life by speaking at schools, religious education classes, and other events that are deemed appropriate for the office of consecrated life.

- Conducting canonical visitations when appropriate, particularly in regard to institutes that are directly subject to the diocesan bishop, such as autonomous monasteries of contemplatives.

A director of an office of consecrated life might well be involved in communications between the diocesan bishop and religious sponsors of their ministries of health care, education or various social works carried out in the name of the church. Ideally, this could be of mutual benefit to the bishop as well as the major superiors of religious institutes. ■



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NOTES

1. Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, *The Code of Canon Law*, (London: Collins, 1983), Canon 476.
2. Canon 478.
3. Canon 479.
4. Canon 480.
5. These examples are gleaned from the Diocese of La Crosse personnel policies and position descriptions.



A Shared Statement of Identity For the Catholic Health Ministry

We are the people of Catholic health care, a ministry of the church continuing Jesus' mission of love and healing today. As provider, employer, advocate, citizen—bringing together people of diverse faiths and backgrounds—our ministry is an enduring sign of health care rooted in our belief that every person is a treasure, every life a sacred gift, every human being a unity of body, mind, and spirit.

We work to bring alive the Gospel vision of justice and peace. We answer God's call to foster healing, act with compassion, and promote wellness for all persons and communities, with special attention to our neighbors who are poor, underserved, and most vulnerable. By our service, we strive to transform hurt into hope. 🌿

As the church's ministry of health care, we commit to:

- Promote and Defend Human Dignity
- Attend to the Whole Person
- Care for Poor and Vulnerable Persons
- Promote the Common Good
- Act on Behalf of Justice
- Steward Resources
- Act in Communion with the Church

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