



Fr. Francis G. Morrissey,
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THE ROLE OF

Does the diocesan bishop coordinate the apostolate in his diocese?

Editor's Note: Leaders of Catholic health care organizations differ from leaders of other-than-Catholic ones in that their work is bound by both civil law and the canon law of the Catholic Church. Because this is so, leaders of Catholic organizations should know something about canon law.

Toward this end, Health Progress is offering its readers a series of articles on canon law. These articles, each of which will be the work of a different writer, is under the general editorship of a well-known expert in the field, Fr. Francis G. Morrissey, OMI, PhD, JCD, professor of canon law, Saint Paul University, Ottawa, Ontario.

The simple answer is "yes." But what is "the apostolate" and what does "coordinate" mean? A brief look at the church's teaching and the principles of canon law might help us appreciate the richness of that "yes."

When a bishop is appointed to a particular diocese, he is given all the power and



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authority needed to carry out his pastoral ministry and to exercise his pastoral leadership (canon 381). He does not act alone. He fulfills his responsibilities in collaboration with the priests, religious, and lay faithful of the diocese. The diocesan bishop is said to be the "visible source and foundation for unity" in the diocese.

The Second Vatican Council describes three general roles through which he fosters this unity: The bishop must be a "teacher of doctrine, a priest of sacred worship and a minister of governance."¹ Much power and authority is given to him, not for himself, but so that he can be a servant. A major part of his service is to ensure the good order of the church's apostolate throughout the diocese.

An earlier article pointed out that canon law deals with order and discipline rather than with doctrine and dogma.² When he promulgated the revised Code of Canon Law in 1983, Pope John Paul II

put it this way: "[t]he purpose of the code is not to substitute for faith, grace, charisms, and especially charity in the life of the Church or of the Christian faithful. On the contrary, its very purpose is to create an order in the ecclesial society so that, while giving priority to love, grace and charism, their ordered development is facilitated in the life of the ecclesial society as well as in the lives of the individuals who belong to it."³

Relying on the teaching of the Second Vatican Council in the *Decree on the Office of Bishops in the Church*,⁴ canon 394 calls on the diocesan bishop to promote various forms of the apostolate in the diocese and to coordinate all the apostolic works throughout the diocese. The canon goes on to exhort him to urge all the faithful to participate in the works of the apostolate according to their vocation and to make sure that the various needs of the diocese are being met. This is a recognition of the many different gifts that exist within the church. The purpose of such diversity is not to fragment, but to build up the unity of the Body of Christ. This is why the diocesan bishop has the task of coordinating the apostolate. He is supposed to find ways of fostering such diversity as a harmonious fulfillment of the church's unified mission.

An important aspect of the bishop's coordination is to be sensitive to the rights and duties of the faithful in building up the Body of Christ. The role of the faithful in carrying out various components of the church's apostolate is recognized several times in the canons on the

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rights and responsibilities of the Christian faithful (canons 208-223). For example, the faithful are to work to spread the Gospel to people of every age and place (canon 211). They have the right to exercise this individually or to found and direct associations and to pursue charitable and religious works (canons 215-216).

This kind of coordination is not an easy task. Achieving good order, however, is essential in order to safeguard the unity of the apostolate. In pursuing this goal, the bishop must consider the proper character of each work of the apostolate, that is, whether it is an undertaking initiated by the lay faithful, or possibly a work founded by men or women religious, or perhaps a diocesan ministry that has been entrusted to a group of lay persons or religious. Such coordination usually requires the development of channels or structures of communication and collaboration to facilitate and encourage a healthy exchange of information and experience. As things become more complicated, bringing people and groups together helps to avoid duplication of services and overlap of responsibilities, always respecting the nature, purpose, and identity of each entity.

Does the diocesan bishop coordinate the apostolate in his diocese? Absolutely. It is one of the most important tasks he is given. His special ministry of coordination is essential to preserve and promote good order—that wonderful diversity of graces, ministries, and works that serve the church and the people of God. The overarching principle for

such coordination is the unity of the church's mission. When this kind of coordination is carried out in a spirit of harmony and openness, it enhances the effectiveness of all apostolic endeavors as instruments of the church's mission and, at the same time, builds up the communion between the bishop and the faithful he is called to serve. ■

CHA's Canon Law Committee would be pleased to receive questions concerning canon law from association members and will try to reply to them.

Questions should be addressed to Sr. Teresa Stanley, CCVI, PhD, senior director, Sponsor Services, Catholic Health Association, 4455 Woodson Road, St. Louis, MO 63134; or tstanley@chausa.org.

NOTES

1. "Lumen Gentium," in Austin Flannery, ed., *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post-Conciliar Documents*, vol. 1, Costello Publishing, Northport, NY, section 20.
2. Paul Golden, "Canon Law and Health Care Ministry," *Health Progress*, July August 2005, p. 6.
3. Pope John Paul II, *Sacrae Disciplina Leges*, 1983, para. 16; available at www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_constitutions/documents/hf_jp-ii_apc_25011983_sacrae-disciplinae-leges_en.html.
4. "Christus Dominus," in Flannery, pp. 564-590.

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