

# Dear Fr. Kerper

## Why do priests get moved?



►► **Dear Father Kerper:** Recently our pastor was moved to another parish after spending many years with us. Everyone loved him and we felt like we knew him very well. I don't understand why priests have to move around so much. This seems to harm parishes by causing uncertainty and too much change. A good friend of mine, a Protestant, told me that her parish picks its own pastor and decides how long the pastor stays with them. This seems like a better system. At least people get to decide.

If you would like to ask Father Kerper a question, please e-mail [dearfrkerper@parablemag.com](mailto:dearfrkerper@parablemag.com).

**T**hank you for your question. I commend you for posing this question during this difficult transition. Eventually every Catholic has an experience like yours: a beloved and respected priest suddenly moves on and gets replaced by a stranger. For a time, everything in the parish seems unsettled as people try to adjust to the new pastor's personality and leadership style. Quite naturally people will feel grief, fear, and even anger. Yet we must always recognize that the changing of pastors, though painful, is rooted in the very structure of Holy Orders, the sacrament that "produces" bishops, priests, and deacons.

Notice that the Church uses the term Holy *Orders*. When the bishop ordains a man to the priesthood, the man is never ordained for a single community, but service within the Order of Presbyters, also called the presbyterate. (By the way, "presbyter" is the Greek word for "elder." The English word "priest" comes from presbyter.)

In every diocese the whole presbyterate serves the whole body of the baptized faithful, grouped into parishes. While parishioners tend to regard their pastor as belonging exclusively to them, the pastor actually "belongs" to the diocese, not to the parish. Moreover, the priest never acts independently of the bishop and other priests. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* puts it this way: "Priests exercise their ministry from within the *presbyterium* of the diocese, under the direction of their bishop." (877) In other words, the pastor always operates as a member of a "priestly team," never alone.

This leads to your point about the common practice of Protestant congregations recruiting, hiring, and dismissing their own pastors. This approach, which surely has some appeal, reveals a fundamental difference between the Catholic and many Protestant understandings of the Church, notably the relationship between the Universal Church and the local congregation.

From the Catholic perspective, we belong *originally* and *primarily* to the Universal Church and only *secondarily* to the parish. In the standard Protestant view, a person belongs *primarily* to the local church. As such, many Protestant congregations, but surely not all, "call" and even ordain their own pastors. By contrast, Catholic pastors are never called by parishes; instead they are *sent* by the bishop.

Our practice necessarily follows from the Catholic understanding that the whole Church provides ministry to all Catholics through Holy Orders, which generates members for three

collective orders: the episcopacy (bishops), the presbyterate (priests), and the diaconate (deacons).

This, of course, has its roots in the Lord's decision to form and *send forth* a group called the Twelve Apostles. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states, "Chosen together, they were also sent out together, and their fraternal unity would be the service of the fraternal communion of all the faithful." (877) No local Catholic community ever generates its own pastors. They always come from the broader Church.

So far, I've given a theological explanation. So now, let's consider the practical reasons for changing pastors.

First, priests, like all human beings, have a great variety of personalities, backgrounds, talents, and deficiencies. As such, no single priest, no matter how good and dedicated, can meet all the pastoral needs of a specific parish, which itself undergoes constant change. For example, at some point in its life a parish may need a strong administrator rather than an inspiring preacher. At another time and place, a parish may need a priest more comfortable with young people than in a hospital setting. As the parish changes over time, sometimes drastically, it may need an entirely different kind of pastor.

Second, the regular rotation of pastors makes possible the emergence of new lay leadership. Because human beings generally avoid change, parishioners can easily fall into ruts, allowing small intertwined groups – really cliques – to occupy all positions of service and authority, thereby blocking out new people. Usually people don't intend this to happen, but it often does. This, unfortunately, can paralyze a parish.

While some peculiar circumstances may justify – and even require – the unusual longevity of a particular pastor, most parishes benefit immensely by regularly changing their pastors.

I encourage you to keep an open mind about your new pastor. Pray for him and your fellow parishioners so that everyone can move forward together, trusting that our Catholic practice of rotating pastors somehow reflects the wisdom of the Lord, who Himself gave shape to the essential structures of the Church.

– Father Michael Kerper is the pastor of Corpus Christi Parish in Portsmouth