

No Two Days Are Alike

“No two days are alike,” say many priests when speaking of their day-to-day work. Ask an older priest to reflect on the history of his priestly ministry, and the likelihood is that you’re in for an interesting story.

Because priesthood is a vocation, not a job, the work of a priest can vary greatly. While all priests are dedicated to preaching the Gospel and celebrating the sacraments, their daily duties can range from having a “desk job” to being embedded in an army platoon!

You may remember a previous e-newsletter discussing the difference between diocesan priests and religious priests. Let’s take a look just at the variety of assignments among diocesan priests.

Most of the 26,000 diocesan priests in the U.S. serve within parishes. About 14,000 serve as pastors, meaning that the bishop has given them the care of souls for a certain geographical area, and they have the authority to make decisions for how the parish will be run. Larger parishes sometimes have parochial vicars, often younger priests who serve under the pastor and help care for the people.

Many Catholics don’t realize the various possibilities of priestly ministry. That is, while all priests celebrate Mass, hear confessions, etc. (all of which keeps them very busy), at times their ministry may be based on their abilities and interests. For example, a priest may teach in the parish school, act as the chaplain for the local police force, serve on the board of a non-profit agency, work with troubled youth, lead pilgrimages—and the list goes on. And he may do *all* of these things at different times of life. The life of a parish priest can be extremely rich and rewarding!

But diocesan priests aren’t always parish priests. The bishop of a diocese also needs priests to work in specialized assignments in the chancery (diocesan headquarters) or at other Catholic institutions. When a position needs to be filled, he looks at the talents of his priests to make a good appointment. Because diocesan priests promise to obey their bishop, he is perfectly free to assign the priest wherever he chooses, without consulting him. However, in practice, many bishops will “float” the idea to the priest to get his feedback before making a final decision.

Here are some special assignments for diocesan priests:

- **Vicar General:** Principal deputy of the bishop who works in the chancery.
- **Episcopal Vicar:** The bishop’s appointee to head a specific geographical or pastoral area of the diocese.
- **Judicial Vicar:** A specially trained expert who handles matters of canon law for the diocese, especially the diocesan marriage tribunal.
- **Chancellor:** The principal record-keeper of the diocese (sometimes appointed to other tasks as well)
- **Vicar for Clergy:** A priest who serves as a liaison between the bishop and the priests of the diocese.

- **Vocation Director:** In charge of promoting vocations and assisting others in discovering God's vocation plan for their lives, including overseeing the formation of seminarians.

Other assignments include:

- Prison chaplain
- Hospital chaplain
- High school chaplain
- College administrator
- Seminary professor
- Military chaplain
- Foreign missionary
- And many more...

While in seminary, men are preparing for the basic realities of parish life, not specialized ministry. They expect to become parish priests. But the Lord works in mysterious ways! That is why seminary formation must focus on forming good, holy men of strong character, docile to their bishop, and open to the Holy Spirit to lead where He may.