



Your pastor is leaving. Maybe he is retiring, or maybe he is being transferred to another parish. No matter what the reason, you are probably experiencing a roller coaster of emotions.

Your initial feelings might be shock or disbelief: “No! This can’t be happening!” As reality sets in, you might feel angry with the bishop or the priest personnel board: “How can they do this to us?” You might worry about what will happen to the parish: “What if the new pastor tries to change things?”

YOUR NEXT STEP

While it is important to recognize the emotions connected with the loss of your pastor, the more important issue is how those feelings affect your behavior. St. John of the Cross offered the following words of wisdom: “I am not made or unmade by the things which happen to me but by my reaction to them.”

How are you reacting to all of this?

Your first impulse might be to fight the transfer by writing letters, gathering petitions, or going to see the bishop. But, in the end, no matter what you do to resist the change, you’re probably not going to be able to reverse the decision. What you can do at this point in the



process is get answers to some of the questions that arise when an announcement is made that a pastor is leaving the parish. For example, you might want to know:

Why is this change necessary?

If your pastor is retiring or leaving because of health reasons, the answer is obvious. As much as you will miss him, you can see that the decision was made for his benefit. It’s a different story when a pastor is moved because his term has expired. Canon law, the body of laws that govern the Catholic Church, originally stated that a pastor should be appointed for an indefinite period of time. But that rule changed when canon law was revised in 1983, allowing term limits for pastors. Many dioceses throughout the United States and Canada have adopted six-year terms for pastors with the option of one or more renewals.

Can a pastor say no?

When a diocesan priest is ordained, he promises obedience to his bishop. There may be some circumstances where a pastor can negotiate with a bishop over a transfer, but, for the most part, priests trust the wisdom of their bishop.

Why are term limits imposed on pastors?

In some diocese, bishops have determined ‘term limits’ for a priest to serve as pastor for a parish. There are benefits to term limits. Many priests will tell you that changing pastors instills new life into a parish and eliminates the sense of “sameness” that can set in with a long-term appointment. Term limits also allow a bishop to remove ineffective pastors and provide an easy exit for a priest who is unhappy in a parish for whatever reason.

What Is a Pastor?

According to canon law, a pastor is entrusted with a parish by the local bishop and shares in the ministry of Christ. A pastor is called to exercise pastoral care for the people of the parish by teaching, sanctifying, and governing with the assistance of other priests, deacons, and laypeople (see Canon 519).



NO ONE IS IRREPLACEABLE

Pope Francis warns that it is a great temptation to think of Church leaders as irreplaceable. However, “the only irreplaceable one in the Church is the Holy Spirit, and Jesus is the only Lord.... It is appropriate that every service in the Church have an expiry date; there are no lifelong leaders in the Church” (Address to Charismatic Movement leaders, July 3, 2015).



When you begin to recognize that your parish belongs to Christ and not to any individual, a transformation can take place in your thought process. You can surrender to Christ your sadness at the loss of your pastor and cling to the belief that the Holy Spirit will guide your parish in ways that you may never have dreamed possible. With newfound hope for the future, letting go of the past is a little easier.

“And I will give you shepherds after my own heart, who will feed you with knowledge and understanding.”
(Jeremiah 3:15)

SAYING GOODBYE

Even when you understand and accept the reasoning behind your pastor’s transfer, it’s not always easy to say goodbye. Here are suggestions for bidding farewell to a beloved pastor:

- Do everything you can to help your pastor leave the parish gracefully. Try to stay positive. Make it a point to refrain from angry or unkind remarks. Find ways to help other parishioners transform negative feelings into positive actions. Start by acknowledging your own sadness, but point out that you have chosen to be hopeful and helpful in the transition.



- Get involved in planning your pastor’s final Mass and goodbye reception. Use creative ideas — such as photo boards, skits, songs, memory books, or storytelling — to acknowledge the many ways your pastor has made an impact on the people of the parish.
- Pray for your pastor, the people in your parish, and the people at your pastor’s new parish.
- Write a letter to your pastor letting him know the ways he brought you closer to God.
- Consider giving your pastor a goodbye remembrance. Gift cards and checks are always appreciated — especially when a pastor is faced with the logistics of moving to a new area where nothing is familiar.
- Don’t make the mistake of trying to follow your pastor to his new assignment. It will only make his transition to the new parish more difficult. There’s a very good chance the new parishioners will resent your intrusion and your pastor will have to find a way to smooth over your unwanted presence.



“Dear lay faithful, be close to your priests with affection and with your prayers, that they may always be shepherds according to God’s heart. And pray for those whom God is calling to be priests that they may respond to this call with humility and joy.”

(Pope Francis, Chrism Mass 2013)