

II. THE PARISH: MEMBERSHIP, STRUCTURE, & LEADERSHIP

1. Overview

As defined by Canon law, the law of the Roman Catholic Church, a Parish is “a certain community of Christ’s faithful stably established within a particular Church [diocese], whose pastoral care, under the authority of the diocesan Bishop, is entrusted to a parish priest as its proper Pastor” (Canon 515).

A Parish is the community where the faith life of each member is nourished. It is a family where, under the leadership of the Pastor, each member contributes to the success of the whole, of the building up of the Kingdom of God in the local community, as part of the Universal Church.

There are 87 Parishes in the Diocese of Bridgeport. In addition to being an ecclesial body, each Parish is also incorporated under the laws of the State of Connecticut.

Each Parish comprises the following:

- **Parishioners** are the lay members of the Parish. They partake of the Sacraments and are encouraged to play an active role in the Parish mission, volunteering in many capacities. They are relied upon to financially support the Parish as their means permit.
- **Parish Clergy.** The head of the Parish is the **Pastor** or, in some cases, the **Parish Administrator**, appointed by the Bishop. He is the spiritual and administrative leader of the Parish. Additional clergy assigned to a Parish may include **Priests** (Parochial Vicars or Resident Priests), **Priests in Residence**, and **Deacons**, who assist the Pastor in fulfilling the Church’s mission.
- **Religious Women (Sisters) and Men (Brothers)** may work in the Parish and assist, for example, in Parish religious education programs, the Parish nursery school or child care, etc.



- **Lay Employees** of the Parish assist the Pastor in fulfilling the Parish mission. Employees can include the Director of Religious Education, Youth Minister, Music Minister, Parish Secretary, Bookkeeper, Business Manager, Accountant, Custodian, Cook, Housekeeper, and so forth.
- **Parish Pastoral Council** (commonly referred to as the Parish Council). This advisory body, comprised of parishioners and Parish clergy, meets regularly with the Pastor to offer advice and assistance on the short-and-long-term needs of the Parish.
- **Parish Finance Council.** This advisory body, required by Canon law, is comprised of parishioners and Parish clergy. It, too, offers counsel to the Pastor on all Parish financial matters, including budgets, investments, capital expenditures, and reporting to parishioners.
- **Two Lay Members of the Parish Corporation** are chosen to serve as representatives on the governing body that manages the affairs and exercises the powers of the Parish Corporation.



2. The Parishioner

Every Catholic is a member of a Parish. Every Parishioner is encouraged to register in his/her Parish and play a full and active role in Parish life. In addition to the proper reception of the Sacraments, including Sunday Eucharist, and ongoing catechesis, parishioners may volunteer to help as catechists in religious education, organize youth ministry and adult events, assist in charitable activities in the community, and so forth. They may be invited to serve as, among other roles, Extraordinary Ministers of the Eucharist, Lectors, Altar Servers, and Ushers.

Parishioners are encouraged to offer their talents and expertise to further the Parish mission by serving on the Parish Pastoral Council and Parish Finance Council.

Parishioners have a responsibility to offer financial support to their Parish, according to their means. They rightly expect to be informed, each quarter, of the financial affairs of their Parish through a financial report of the Parish Corporation, prepared by the Pastor with the assistance of the Parish Finance Council.

They are also obliged, through the Parish Finance Program (*see the Appendix at the end of this chapter*), to express their concerns about Parish finances by meeting with their Pastor.

God calls all of us to holiness, especially the laity, manifested in their work and activity and nurtured by participation in the life of the Church. This effort helps to bring about the sanctification of the world and assist in its evangelization.

In his 1988 Apostolic Exhortation *Christifideles Laici* (“The Lay Members of Christ’s Faithful”), Pope John Paul II issued a timely reminder to every parishioner of this vocation, which is achieved through participation in the life of the Church:

“The whole Church, Pastors and lay faithful alike . . . ought to feel more strongly the Church’s responsibility to obey the command of Christ, ‘Go into all the world and preach the gospel to the whole creation’ (Mark 16:15), and take up anew the missionary endeavor. A great venture, both challenging and wonderful, is entrusted to the Church – that of a re-evangelization, which is so much needed by the present world. The



lay faithful ought to regard themselves as an active and responsible part of this venture, called as they are to proclaim and to live the gospel in service to the person and to society while respecting the totality of the values and needs of both.”



3. The Pastor

According to Canon law, the Pastor “exercises the pastoral care of the community [Parish] entrusted to him under the authority of the Diocesan Bishop, whose ministry of Christ he is called to share, so that for this community he may carry out the offices of teaching, sanctifying, and ruling with the cooperation of other priests or deacons, and with the assistance of lay members of Christ’s faithful, in accordance with the law” (Canon 519).

3.1 Leadership

The Pastor is the spiritual leader of the Parish community. He is also the person directly responsible for the daily administration of the Parish, including oversight of clergy, employees, and volunteers, and stewardship of all financial matters – all matters pastoral and financial of his Parish.

The Pastor should lead by example, always calling forth a good and faithful effort from Parish clergy, religious, lay employees, and volunteers. Pastors recognize that the lay faithful must play an important role in assisting them in the administration of the Parish, contributing their time and talents to further the mission of the Church. One of the most important ways to help is through the Parish Finance Council, where members can share their professional advice and expertise.

The Pastor is expected to serve as mentor and coach of the clergy assigned to his Parish. He is to involve them in administrative matters and encourage their participation in meetings of the Parish Pastoral Council and the Parish Finance Council, as well as attend meetings of the Parish Corporation.

3.2 Pastoral Responsibilities

According to Canon law (Canons 528-529), the Pastor’s pastoral responsibilities include:

- Ensuring that the Word of God and all the Truths of the Faith are proclaimed to the people of the Parish through preaching, teaching, and catechesis.
- Ensuring that the Eucharist is the center of life in the Parish, and making certain that all of the other Sacraments are offered and faithfully administered through sound and systematic catechesis, preparation, and instruction. The Pastor must “strive to ensure that



Christ's faithful are nourished by the devout celebration of the Sacraments."

- Getting to know the people under his care, offering the consolation of God's love and supporting family life. The Pastor "is to be especially diligent in seeking out the poor, the suffering, the lonely, those who are exiled from their homeland, and those burdened with special difficulties."
- Recognizing and promoting the role of the laity and their specific vocation in the Church. The Pastor "is to endeavor to ensure that the faithful are concerned for the community of the Parish, that they feel themselves to be members both of the Diocese and the Universal Church, and that they take part in and sustain works which promote this community."
- Encouraging vocations to the priesthood and the religious life.
- Maintaining Sacramental records.
- Creating and overseeing various Parish organizations such as the Parish Pastoral Council, the Parish Finance Council, and other evangelization and social societies.

3.3 Financial and Stewardship Responsibilities

The administration of the goods of the Parish is to be carried out by the Pastor under the vigilance of and in accord with instructions of the Bishop, who retains the right to intervene in case of negligence (canon 1276; 1279§1).

The *Code of Canon Law* (canons 1284-1287) contains some general norms for Pastors on the administration of Parish property, goods, and finances. These include:

- Overseeing the implementation of all Parish policies, procedures, and guidelines as defined by the Diocese of Bridgeport.
- Making certain that the Parish is in compliance with all civil laws.
- Overseeing the use of Parish assets, properties, and buildings.
- Developing short-term and long-term financial budgets.
- Maintaining Parish bank accounts and all investments.



- Maintaining adequate insurance for the protection of all Church properties.
- Implementing financial controls and the monitoring of such controls.
- Creating and administering Parish spending policies.
- Archiving the documents and records on which the property rights of the Church are based, and deposit authentic copies of them in the archive of the Diocese.
- Administering the lay personnel policies of the Diocese (hiring, terminating, performance evaluations).¹

In addition, the Pastor is expected to:

- Hold the annual Parish Corporation meeting in January (to appoint Lay Members and officers of the Parish Corporation and to conduct other business) and additional meetings as necessary or appropriate, including one to review the findings of the annual Parish Financial Review.
- Enlist the help of the Parish Finance Council in the preparation of budgets and quarterly and annual financial reports to be issued to the Parish.

The Pastor is assisted in his administrative duties by the Parish Finance Council (*see Item 4 below*).

3.4 The Parish Corporation

In the State of Connecticut, the provisions of Canons 1284 §1, 2° and 3° and 1286, 1° (referenced above) are fulfilled by means of civil incorporation.²

¹ **Canon 1286:** Administrators of goods: “1° in the employment of workers are to observe meticulously also the civil laws concerning labor and social policy, according to the principles handed on by the Church; 2° are to pay a just and decent wage to employees so that they are able to provide fittingly for their own needs and those of their dependents.”

² **Canon 1284 §1.** “All administrators are bound to fulfill their function with the diligence of a good householder.” **§2.** “Consequently they must: 1° exercise vigilance so that the goods entrusted to their care are in no way lost or damaged, taking out insurance policies for this purpose insofar as necessary; 2° take care that the ownership of ecclesiastical goods is protected by civilly valid methods; 3° observe the prescripts of both canon and civil law or those imposed by a founder, a donor, or legitimate authority, and especially be on guard so that no damage comes to the Church from the non-observance of civil laws...”



Catholic Parishes are organized as non-stock, religious corporations under Sections 33-279 to 33-281 of the Connecticut General Statutes (the “Connecticut Religious Corporation Act”). The Connecticut Religious Corporation Act confirms the property rights of the Parish Corporation¹ and acknowledges that the Parish Corporation “shall at all times be subject to the general laws and discipline of the Roman Catholic Church” (CT. GEN. STAT. § 33-281). Each Parish Corporation is treated as a not-for-profit, tax-exempt organization for federal and state tax purposes.

By statute the members of the corporation are the Bishop, the Vicar(s) General, and the Pastor, as *ex officio* members, and two Lay Members.

The two Lay Members of the Parish are chosen by a majority of the *ex-officio* members of the Parish Corporation and serve for a one-year term, renewable each January. They are full voting members of the Parish Corporation. The Lay Members also serve, *ex-officio*, on the Parish Pastoral Council and the Parish Finance Council.

3.5 By-laws of the Corporation

The Corporation is to have its own by-laws by which it operates, especially the naming of officers. The officers of Parish Corporations are to be: the Bishop as President, the Vicars General as Vice-Presidents, and the Pastor as Treasurer. One member of the Parish Corporation will be appointed Secretary. This model maintains the hierarchical structure of the ecclesiastical institution.

A copy of the Parish Corporation by-laws should be sent to the Diocese with the minutes of the annual corporation meeting held in January.

3.6 Meetings of Members of the Corporation

The Members of the Parish Corporation elect the officers of the Parish Corporation and implement any other corporate directives at the annual meeting of the Members, held in January. The Members also hold regular

¹ “Such corporation may receive and hold all property conveyed to it for the purpose of maintaining religious worship according to the doctrine, discipline, and ritual of the Roman Catholic Church, and for the support of the educational or charitable institutions of that church.”
CT. GEN. STAT. § 33-280.



and special meetings to authorize significant corporate actions or to discuss the annual Parish Financial Review.

Three Members of the Parish Corporation, of whom at least one must be a Lay Member, constitutes a quorum at all meetings for the transaction of business. Such corporate actions may also be authorized by written consent signed by all of the Members of the Parish Corporation without a meeting.

The Secretary records the minutes of the meetings of the Members and has custody of such minutes and other records of the Parish Corporation. The Secretary also gives notice of all such meetings as required by law, distributes copies of the minutes to all members, and forwards a copy of the approved minutes of each meeting to the Chancellor of the Diocese of Bridgeport.

3.7 Preparing and Issuing Documents in the Name of the Parish Corporation

When preparing or issuing documents in the name of the Parish Corporation (entering into a formal contract, for example), the Parish must always be identified by its full corporate name (for example, “The Saint Gabriel Roman Catholic Church Corporation”). Parish letterhead should always be used.

On the signature line, the preferable practice is to name the Parish Corporation and have an officer sign on a line below, prefaced by “By” and with the officer’s printed or typed name and title indicated.



4. The Parish Finance Council

“Each Parish is to have a Finance Council which is regulated by universal law as well as by the norms established by the Diocesan Bishop; in the Council, the Christian faithful, selected according to the same norms, aid the Pastor in the administration of the Parish goods with due regard for the prescription of Canon 532” (Canon 537).

The Parish Finance Council is a consultative body of clergy and laity that advises the Pastor in matters pertaining to the financial affairs of the Parish. As a good steward, the Pastor is expected to invite qualified parishioners to sit on the Parish Finance Council and share their expertise and advice.

The Parish Finance Council assists the Pastor in the following ways:

- Supports the Pastor to safeguard the assets of the Parish.
- Assists the Pastor in the preparation of budgets.
- Monitors, with the Pastor, the financial performance and effectiveness of offertory collections and other fund-raising activities.
- Helps to develop, with the Pastor, long-range plans for the financing of repairs and renovations of property and purchase of equipment, as needed.
- Oversees, with the Pastor, implementation of all Diocesan policies on financial matters, spending guidelines, and long-range plans for Parish investments.
- Monitors, with the Pastor, procedures and controls to ensure that all requirements of federal and state tax and employment laws are met and accurate records are maintained.

With the help of the Parish Finance Council, the Pastor prepares and publishes quarterly and annual Financial Reports for distribution to the Parish Pastoral Council and the Parish community.

The responsibilities of the Parish Finance Council are covered in greater detail in Chapter III.



5. The Bishop

According to Canon law, “by divine institution, Bishops succeed the Apostles through the Holy Spirit who is given to them. They are constituted Pastors in the Church, to be the teachers of doctrine, the priests of sacred worship, and the ministers of governance” (Canon 375).

The Bishop is the authentic teacher of the faith in the Diocese. His mission is “to seek in every way to promote the holiness of Christ’s faithful according to the special vocation of each. Since he is the principal dispenser of the mysteries of God, he is to strive constantly that Christ’s faithful entrusted to his care may grow in grace through the celebration of the Sacraments, and may know and live the Paschal Mystery” (Canon 387).

The Bishop is also the chief Pastor and Shepherd of the Diocese, overseeing all of its activities, ministries, and Parishes which, together, seek to fulfill the mission of the Church in a particular place. He exercises his authority with the assistance of both clergy and laity. The College of Consultors and the Presbyteral Council provide advice on matters pastoral and financial. In addition, two consultative bodies comprised mainly of lay people, the Diocesan Pastoral Council and the Diocesan Finance Council, provide advice and assistance on matters.

The Bishop of Bridgeport is responsible for overseeing the proper administration and conduct of each community of faithful. He does so by appointing a competent priest as Pastor (or, in some cases, Administrator), and receiving regular reports and updates on the Parish and its mission. The Bishop, moreover, visits each Parish as often as practicable, to celebrate Mass, administer the Sacrament of Confirmation, or attend Parish activities and events.

It is not necessary, or practical, for the Bishop to attend all meetings of the Parish Corporation and the Parish Finance Council. However, major decisions regarding Parish finances, fundraising, real estate transactions, or capital expenditures do require, under civil and Canon law, the consent of the Bishop.

In terms of effective stewardship of the resources entrusted to the care of the Church, the Bishop seeks the advice and support of experienced Priests who comprise the College of Consultors, and the Diocesan Finance Council, which includes clergy as well as lay men and women with appropriate professional expertise.



In 2006, the Bishop, the Chief Financial Officer of the Diocese, and the Diocesan Finance Services Team led the expansion of the Diocese of Bridgeport's *Parish Finance Program*. The program, developed by a balanced task force of Pastors and lay members of the Diocesan Finance Council, is based on "Six Key Elements" that enhance Parish financial controls and promote transparency, accountability, and best practices (*see Appendix at the end of this chapter*).

The Six Key Elements have the following goals:

- Revise and update the 2002 *Parish Accounting & Procedures Manual* (renamed the *Parish Administration & Finance Manual*) and deliver related training.
- Provide guidance to Parishes for improved controls over income.
- Design new Parish financial reports to improve understanding and monitoring at all levels.
- Perform reviews and tests of Parish financial controls and meet with each Parish Corporation at least once a year.
- Help Pastors assess the capabilities of Parishes to maintain financial records and recommend training where needed.
- Encourage parishioners with concerns about Parish financial matters to speak directly with their Pastor. The Diocese will communicate the procedure for parishioners to communicate any unresolved concerns they have to Parish Finance Services (*see Appendix at the end of this chapter*).

