

VICAR FORANE

What is it?

What Is a Vicar Forane? During my time here at Little Flower, I have been asked that question many times. A vicar forane, sometimes called a dean, is a priest appointed by the bishop in order to promote a common pastoral activity in a region of the diocese and to provide spiritual and pastoral counsel to the other priests in that region. Some people notice the signature block at the end of official letters “Very Reverend ... VF” The “Very” and “VF” are associated with my appointment in 2011 as Dean of the Springfield Deanery. This designation is simply to distinguish this position as Dean and disappears when the appointment is completed—usually a term of five years renewable at the discretion of the Bishop and the priest. The position of Vicar Forane is in addition to my other duties a Representative on the Priest’ Personnel Board and ex-officio member of the Priests’ Personnel Board and ad-hoc subcommittees as directed.

History of Vicars Forane

The term “vicar forane” comes from Latin, meaning a representative (*vicarius*) who is outside (*foras*), because these priests were considered representatives of the bishop outside of the cathedral city. The office of vicar forane probably dates back to the fourth century when Christianity began to spread beyond the major cities to rural areas. Seeing the need to send representatives to these communities which had embraced the faith, bishops would send an “archpriest” with special delegation and responsibilities to act as a kind of overseer in the region who also was in charge of communication between the bishop and the local priests.

The 1917 Code of Canon Law mandated the establishment of vicars forane in every diocese. However, the understanding of this office experienced a pastoral renewal in the period following the Second Vatican Council. The fathers of the Second Vatican Council saw the vicar forane as a preeminently pastoral office, as a way to bring presbyters (priests) together in order to promote and direct a common pastoral activity in their territory. The 1973 directory for bishops likewise affirms the pastoral nature of the office and speaks of the vicar forane as one who animates and enlivens the local presbytery (priests’ group) in pastoral action.

Vicariates Forane

A vicariate forane is a region of the diocese over which a vicar forane exercises his office. Though these regions are sometimes referred to as “deaneries”, this term never appears in the 1983 Code of Canon Law. Rather, these regions are called “vicariates” or even on occasion “districts” (cf. canon 555). Whereas the 1917 Code of Canon Law required a diocese to be divided into vicariates, canon 374 of the current Code makes it optional. Though facultative, vicariates forane serve a noble purpose and for this reason are common. Canon 374 §2 states that their purpose is to “foster pastoral care through common action.” In other words, they render the coordination of pastoral activity easier by improving the efficiency of pastoral initiatives in order to better provide for the needs of a given part of the diocese. Thus we can see that the purpose of the vicariate is not the division of the diocese, but rather the unity of parishes for the purpose of collaboration in pastoral action.

Vicariates in the Diocese of Springfield in Illinois

In the Diocese of Springfield in Illinois, there are a total of seven “deaneries” (vicariates forane), most of which follow closely the county lines. These seven are named generally for a major city of the parishes which comprise them. The seven vicariates in the Diocese of Springfield in Illinois are: Alton, Decatur, Effingham, Jacksonville, Litchfield, Quincy, and Springfield.

Duties of the Vicar Forane

The canonical duties of the vicar forane are listed in canon 555 of the Code and are commonly classified under three aspects: 1) promotion and coordination, 2) vigilance, and 3) support and counsel. His duty of promotion and coordination chiefly pertains to his responsibility to oversee and assist in uniting the other presbyters in his vicariate in a common pastoral activity. This includes all aspects of ministry, including liturgical, catechetical, missionary, charitable, social, cultural, educational, etc.

His duty of vigilance ought to be understood in a pastoral sense, that is, a way of providing support and fraternal assistance to the other presbyters. This would include assisting presbyters in matters such as ensuring that liturgies are beautifully celebrated, churches properly maintained, parochial registers accurately inscribed, and the funds of the parish carefully administered.

His duty of providing support and counsel includes taking the initiative to organize ongoing formation for the priests of his vicariate. This formation would include theological lectures and spiritual retreats, often done in coordination with diocesan programs. For priests who are sick, he is to supply them with spiritual aid and pastoral assistance, often in coordination with the Vicar for Priests of a diocese. The vicar forane is also to visit all the parishes of his vicariate, which is to be an occasion of solicitude, assisting the local presbyter in many ways.

So, now you know.