

Bishop's Customary for Pastoral Visitations

INTRODUCTION

The regular pastoral visitation of all parishes and worshipping communities of the diocese is among the principal responsibilities of the bishop's ministry. It is also one of the great delights of the episcopal office. It is desirable for the pastoral visitation to be at once both business as usual and a special occasion in the life of the parish. In a liturgical-sacramental church such as ours, these are not competing interests. The bishop's visitation ought not to be "unusual" no matter how infrequent. The central act of every visitation is the preaching of God's Word and the joint celebration of the Holy Eucharist with the clergy and people of the parish. All other aspects of the visitation are auxiliary and must never be allowed to overshadow this central purpose. Although confirmations, receptions, and reaffirmations will continue to take place during visitations, these rites are not the principal reasons for the Bishop's Pastoral Visitation. The availability of persons for confirmation or reception need not play any part in the scheduling of the visitation.

SCHEDULING

Pastoral visitations will be scheduled in such a way as to balance the following priorities:

- the length of time since the last pastoral visitation;
- the need to schedule episcopal rites: major parish anniversaries, dedications of new buildings, groundbreaking, etc. (Some of these will of necessity be scheduled on days other than Sunday);
- particular pastoral needs of the parish;
- the celebration of the feast of title or other significant event in the life of the parish;

The scheduling of visitations may be initiated by the Rector or Vicar of the parish,

or by the Bishop's Office. As a general rule, a parish will not receive a second regular pastoral visitation until all other parishes have been visited. In order to facilitate planning, the visitation schedule is created to cover the upcoming six months, and is normally available in late November and late May. You may request upcoming dates, but normally we will not make final commitments more than six months in advance.

Even with great care given to my visitation schedule, there will still be some need for flexibility. There will be parish emergencies, personal illness, travel delays, and a host of other things that may require last minute rescheduling. It is my commitment that such changes will be kept to a minimum, but from time to time they will occur.

When it is necessary or requested to schedule another bishop to assist me, all such invitations should come from my office. I do not consider the mere convenience of parish confirmations and receptions to be adequate reason for scheduling another bishop.

THE DAY OF THE VISIT

I will arrive 30 minutes before the service.

Where space is available to merge the morning liturgies into one, that is my preference.

An occasional opportunity to merge the whole parish together is good, and there is perhaps no better time than the Bishop's visitation. This also means there is more time to be flexible with adult forums, meetings with youth and children, spending time with the Vestry, etc. I am happy to meet with any configuration of parishioners during the education hour. We can have an open forum, teach the Scriptures and Prayer Book, or I can do a presentation on another subject. I can also simply use the time enjoy fellowship with members of the parish. Staying through the coffee hour/reception after the final liturgy is figured into my Sunday schedule.

THE LITURGY OF THE DAY

I anticipate that all visitations will be celebrations of the Holy Eucharist.

When there are no baptisms, confirmations, or receptions, the liturgy on the day of the bishop's visitation should include the renewal of baptismal vows. This should be substituted for the Nicene Creed at all services, even those that are otherwise Rite I.

The Proper of the Day will be used, even when initiation rites are to take place, and normally the liturgical color will be that of the day. Any departure from this should be discussed before the day of the visitation. For visitation during "ordinary time" that will include one or more of the rites of initiation, any of the following texts may be substituted for the second (epistle) reading: Romans 6:3-5 (6-11); Romans 8:14-17; Romans 12:1-8; Galatians 5:16-25; Ephesians 4:7, 11-16. If these substitutions are made, please inform the Bishop's Office no less than one week before the visitation.

The Revised Common Lectionary (Episcopal Edition) is the norm in the Diocese of Atlanta. If it seems appropriate to use other readings, this must be cleared with the Bishop well in advance of the visitation.

I do not do children's sermons, but I am always happy to spend time with the children in the parish in other contexts. It is not my practice to sing the liturgy. As regard vestments, I typically wear Rochet and Chimere and carry my pastoral staff.

Because every liturgical space has its own challenges, I will generally preside from the place/chair from which it is normally done. I prefer to stand for confirmations and receptions, so the bishop's chair need not be front and center except in unusual circumstances.

If the parish has a deacon (or two), they should be prepared to assist me.

The details will vary, but will normally include such things as:

- holding the Prayer Book so that my hands are free for liturgical gestures;
- holding the pastoral staff when we are not in procession;
- assisting with chrism at baptisms;
- etc.

In the absence of a deacon, these duties may be performed by a senior acolyte or assisting lay minister. Except under unusual circumstances these duties are not to be performed by presbyters. A "Bishop's Chaplain" is a liturgical anachronism born of the era when the diaconate had been suppressed and is generally unnecessary.

The Rector, Vicar, or Priest-in-Charge should make the necessary parish announcements. **While it is always pleasant to be greeted, my preference is that you not use the language of “welcome.” Such language tends to imply that I am an alien from some foreign place not the chief pastor of the diocese. I am not a guest.**

It is important to remind the congregation that the undesignated offering goes to the bishop’s discretionary fund for support of emergencies and non-budgeted ministries that arise in the course of the year.

I shall resume the presidency of the liturgy with the offertory sentence.

WHEN THERE ARE BAPTISMS

The Pastoral Visitation of the Bishop is one of the principal times for baptism and every effort should be made to make the visitation a baptismal feast, in contrast to an occasion for confirmation and reception alone. Unless the space militates against it, the baptismal liturgy should unfold as follows:

- + the presentation of the candidates, interrogation, and the baptismal covenant will be conducted from the chancel steps (or the equivalent);
- + during the litany (the prayer for the candidates) we will process to the font in the following manner:
 - o the deacon or acolyte bearing the paschal candle; o the bishop;
 - o presbyters, deacons, and assisting clergy;
 - o baptismal candidates and sponsors;
 - o the congregation where practicable;
 - the bishop will bless the water and normally say the thanksgiving over the water;
 - the altar book should be available for the water blessing;
 - one or more of the presbyters should do the water bath;
 - the newly baptized (or their sponsors in the case of babies and small children) are given a candle lighted from the paschal candle for the procession back to the altar;
 - the procession back before the altar takes place in the same order as above;

- the prayer for the gifts of the Holy Spirit and the chrismation will take place before the altar;

Please make the chrism available in some sort of vessel worthy of the public celebration of the liturgy. Oil stocks are for pastoral, not liturgical use.

CONFIRMATION, RECEPTION, REAFFIRMATION

We will continue to schedule diocesan-wide liturgies for confirmation and reception. These liturgies will be scheduled no less than twice a year, at the Cathedral of St. Philip. Although I will continue to do these rites at visitations when requested, it is my preference that we continue to disconnect the visitation of the bishop from confirmation and reception, and instead to emphasize the Sacraments of Holy Baptism and Holy Eucharist. Many in the diocese, lay and clergy, have spoken positively of their experience of the diocesan-wide liturgies and have expressed their hope that they will continue. I believe one of the real benefits of such services is that it helps to erode the notion that we are a congregational church and helps to underscore that in committing to this Church, one is related to and committed to the Body of Christ beyond the local parish.

The question of who should be confirmed, who should be received, and who should be reaffirmed is not as complicated as it once was. Changes made in the canons with respect to church membership by the General Convention of 1985, and refined in 1988, have made this fairly simple in practical application:

- Confirmation is for children who were baptized in the Episcopal Church or who came to this church with their families before making a “mature commitment;”

- Confirmation is also appropriate for those of any age who are making a mature commitment for the first time;

- Reception is for those who have previously made a mature commitment in any other Christian church, regardless of the pedigree of the minister. The previous practice of receiving Roman Catholics and Orthodox Christians, and confirming everyone else, no longer applies. The requirement of Called to Common Mission, that we receive ELCA Lutherans and not confirm them, is not an exception to the canonical position, but is consistent with it. Since the canons require that all persons come “under the hands” of the bishop, persons who are received are, for canonical purposes, understood to be confirmed. When there is to be confirmation,

reception, or reaffirmation at a parish visitation, candidates may come in the most convenient order. Name tags are preferable to cards to identify the names of candidates. Chrism is not used for confirmation. In the New Testament, anointing is associated with Baptism. In the Prayer Book, the use of chrism occurs only in the baptismal liturgy, while the laying on of hands is associated with confirmation. In order to comply with the changes in the canons on church membership, the laying on of hands will be used for reception and reaffirmation as well as confirmation. It is my observation that we are still confirming far too many adults who are coming to us from other Christian traditions. In speaking with new members informally after the liturgy, I sometimes inquire about where they are from and I discover that most of them come to us as mature believers. Under the present canons such persons should be received, not confirmed. If you are continuing to abide by the “old tradition” (it was never a canon or a rubric!) that we receive only Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox, and that we confirm everyone else, you should know that the Prayer Book and Canons laid that aside more than a generation ago. If there are aspects of this you do not understand, please ask.

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