

The Bishop's Visitation: Diocese of Tennessee

The Bishop's Visitation has its origins in the pastoral care of a diocese, in regard to both temporal and spiritual affairs. In the history of the Church, as dioceses developed and grew, and as parishes multiplied within a diocese, the bishop of the local church was no longer the celebrant of the Eucharist in every place, and this responsibility was delegated to priests along with "the cure of souls." Ongoing pastoral care exercised by the diocesan bishop required the separate visitation of different congregations in different areas. The Visitation is an expression of the bishop's ministry as the "chief pastor" (BCP, p. 513) of the diocesan Church, in its congregational manifestation in each different place.

The Bishop's Visitation is an expression of the mission and ministry of the Church. It is an extension of the charge given to the bishop at ordination to "encourage and support all baptized people in their gifts and ministries, nourish them from the riches of God's grace, pray for them without ceasing, and celebrate with them the sacraments of our redemption" (BCP, p.518).

The Bishop's Visitation is an important sign that the fellowship we share as Christians goes beyond any individual congregation but encompasses the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church of Christ. It is a living sign of the life of the Diocesan Church.

The Bishop's Visitation is part of a larger context of oversight and accountability for temporal and spiritual affairs that includes the Annual Parochial Report, other reports required from time to time, pastoral letters issued by the bishop, and gatherings of the clergy and lay leaders called by the bishop.

As outlined in Canon III.12.3, at every visitation of a congregation, the bishop presides at the Holy Eucharist and at the Initiatory Rites, as required, preaches the Word, examines the records of the congregation as required by Canon III.9.5(c), and examines the whole life and ministry of the clergy and congregation as required by Canon III.9.5.

Canon III.12.3 requires the bishop to visit each congregation at least once in a three year period. In the Diocese of Tennessee the Bishop's Visitation is an annual event. The bishop also accepts invitations to be present at other times for parish events, but these are distinct from the Annual Visitation.

Canon II.9.5 (b)(5) requires the Rector or priest-in-charge to give notice to the congregation of the Bishop's Visitation.

Canon III.9.5(b)(4) requires the preparation and the presentation of persons for Confirmation, Reception, and the Reaffirmation of Baptismal Vows to the Bishop. In the Diocese of Tennessee the presentation of candidates for these sacramental rites is normally a part of the Annual Visitation.

General Provisions

The bishop will be present for the entire Sunday morning and for as much of the afternoon as desired. He will be present to celebrate and preach at all morning liturgies. On occasion he has another commitment in the afternoon and will need to depart on schedule, and he will let you know if this will interfere with what is planned.

Because of the calendar for Annual Visitations, on occasion two congregations will share a Sunday morning Visitation. Depending on circumstances this may be accommodated by a joint liturgy at one location, or by liturgies following each other at each location as the morning progresses.

Again, because of limitations of the calendar, weekday evening visitations may be scheduled as needed.

“The Visitation Form” (see attached) is a primary tool for planning the Visitation. It tells the bishop the basics of “who, what, where, and when” that are important to him as he plans arrival and departure.

At the Annual Visitation, the bishop is available for other duties apart from the liturgies. Please indicate on the “Visitation Form” what is desired.

- 1) Teach a Christian Formation class.
- 2) Meet with Confirmands and/or Baptismal Candidates.
- 3) Meet with the vestry/mission council.

If there are subjects you want the bishop to specifically address during the Visitation, either with the Vestry/MC or in a class or with an individual, please speak to him in advance.

It is customary in the Diocese of Tennessee that the loose offering be designated for the Bishop’s Discretionary Fund. Please make a prior announcement in the bulletin and a follow-up announcement on the Sunday of the visitation. The funds should be deposited by the church and a check written to the Diocese of Tennessee, noted for the Discretionary Fund and mailed to the Diocesan Office. Please don’t hand the bishop cash to take with him!

The bishop expects that there will be a parish reception and opportunity to connect with parishioners in the course of the morning.

The bishop at present is not normally accompanied by his wife when making the Annual Visitation.

Liturgical Guidelines

1)The liturgical color for the Visitation is of the day on the Calendar, and should not vary because of the Bishop’s Visitation. Please instruct your Altar Guilds accordingly.

2)On Sundays, the Proper of the Day is used, including the indicated Proper Preface. Where there is provision for choice in readings from the Lectionary, the rector, vicar, or priest-in-charge determines the choice. Clergy are reminded that in the Season after Pentecost, where there are two Lectionary tracks in the RCL, they should choose one track at the beginning of the Season and continue with it to the end.

3)When there is a weekday Visitation, the bishop will consult with the Rector, Vicar, or Priest-in-charge about the Proper to be used.

4)The Eucharist is celebrated at all Visitation liturgies.

5)A chaplain to assist the bishop may be designated by the rector, vicar, or priest-in-charge.

6)The bishop will wear the parish's chasuble and stole along with his own miter and staff. If necessary he will bring his own Eucharistic vestments.

Baptism/Confirmation/Reception/Reaffirmation

1)When Baptism and Confirmation/Reception/Reaffirmation are celebrated, congregations should have ample instruction through the bulletin or from prior practice about the distinctive beginning of the liturgy of the day (BCP, p.299 or p.412). Likewise, those being baptized, baptismal sponsors, and those to be confirmed/received/reaffirmed should be instructed as to their own responses to the questions addressed to them so that they may approach them with confidence.

2)Those to be confirmed/received/reaffirmed should be presented to the bishop with a clearly displayed card or tag with their first name or names in large letters and an indication of the sacramental rite to be received.

3)The bishop lays hands on the head of all being confirmed/received/reaffirmed, using the pertinent formula. In Confirmation he always uses the formula, "Defend, O Lord...". When receiving, he first takes the right hand of the person being received before the laying on of hands.

4)The rector, vicar, or priest-in-charge determines whether candidates are presented for confirmation or reception. The bishop is available for consultation on this matter if there is any question.

5)Pre-signed certificates will be sent to you prior to your visitation. Please have these filled out and ready to distribute to your candidates on the morning of the visitation, or afterward as convenient.

Parish Registers

The bishop will wish to examine and sign the Service Register as well as the Baptism/Confirmation Register.

Photographs

The bishop encourages a photo of the bishop, confirmation class, and clergy or lay leaders of the class, to be taken soon after the liturgy, and then forwarded to the Diocesan Office. Organization and expedition of this are very helpful and appreciated. The bishop is available for additional photos at this time, but he asks that the rector, vicar, or priest-in-charge bear in mind that photos with individuals immediately after the liturgy may not be practical given the constraints of the morning, and perhaps not the best use of the time.

Christian Formation

The teaching office of the Episcopate is an ancient and primary task for this ministry. The bishop is available to teach a congregational class on Sunday. At the Annual Visitation he prefers to lead a discussion about his ministry and present work in the diocese. By special arrangement he can address other topics on Sunday that may be part of a Christian Formation series. He is also available in Lent and at other times to teach on weekdays or evenings, and welcomes the opportunity.