

# Glossary of Church Terms



Here is a brief glossary of terms often used in the Catholic Church that may not be completely familiar to journalists who have not had a great deal of experience in covering church matters.

## A

**apostolic nuncio** – a papal ambassador representing the Roman Pontiff (Pope) to the Catholic Church of a nation, as well as before the civil authorities of a nation. Also called *papal nuncio*. See also *pontifical representative*.

**archbishop** – title given to a diocesan bishop who is the chief shepherd of an archdiocese. An archbishop may also preside over an ecclesiastical province, or may be a chief shepherd of an archdiocese but hold another, high-ranking Church office, such as an *apostolic nuncio*.

**archdiocese** – The *archdiocese*, headed by an *archbishop*, is typically the largest or oldest diocese in an *ecclesiastical province* and takes on an additional administrative role for the whole *province*.

**archeparchy** – the equivalent of an archdiocese in the Eastern Catholic Churches that is entrusted to an *archeparch* (equivalent of an archbishop) of an Eastern Catholic *ecclesiastical province*. There are two Catholic archeparchies in the United States: the Byzantine Catholic Archdiocese of Pittsburgh and the Ukrainian Catholic Archdiocese of Philadelphia.

## B

**bishop** – a cleric who through episcopal ordination is a successor to the apostles and who shares in the threefold ministry of Jesus Christ (sanctifying, teaching, and governing). A bishop exercises these in hierarchical communion with the Roman Pontiff (Pope) and the College of Bishops. Most *bishops* are *diocesan bishops*. the chief

priests in their dioceses. The Eastern Catholic equivalent to a diocesan bishop is an *eparchial bishop*. In addition to *diocesan bishops*, there are *auxiliary bishops*, *coadjutor bishops*, and *archbishops*.

**bishops' conference** – see *episcopal conference*.

**brother** – a non-ordained man who is a member of an institute of consecrated life or a society of apostolic life, and who seeks to live a life consecrated through the profession of poverty, chastity, and obedience by vow or some other bond.

## C

**canon law** – ecclesiastical laws governing the Catholic Church. In the Latin Church, the governing code is the 1983 *Code of Canon Law (CIC)*. A separate but parallel *Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches (CCEO)* governs the Eastern Catholic Churches.

**cardinal** – the highest-ranking Catholic clergy below the pope. According to Church law, *cardinals* are regarded as the pope's closest advisors. Most cardinals are archbishops or prefects of major departments at the Vatican. Those *cardinals* (79 years of age or below) are tasked with the responsibility of electing a new pope by gathering at a conclave in Rome.

**celibacy** – the condition of living chastely in the unmarried state. At ordination, a diocesan priest or unmarried deacon in the Latin Catholic Church makes a *promise* of celibacy.

**chastity** – is the virtue of correctly ordering one's own sexual conduct and desires.

**Church** – The *local* or *particular church* normally refers to a diocese or an eparchy. The universal Church refers to the entire Catholic communion of the Latin Church and the Eastern Catholic Churches.

**clergy** – a collective term referring to ordained bishops, priests, and deacons.

**congregation** – a term used for some Vatican departments responsible for important areas of church life, such as worship and sacraments, the clergy, and saints' causes.

**curia** – the offices through which a bishop administers a diocese. The *Bishop of Rome* (the pope) administers the universal Church through the *Roman Curia* while a bishop administers a diocese through a *diocesan curia*.

## D

**deacon** – The first of three ranks in the ordained ministry. Deacons preparing for the priesthood are called *transitional deacons*. Those not planning to be ordained priests are called *permanent deacons*. Married men may be ordained as *permanent deacons*. Single men are ordained with a commitment to celibacy either as *transitional* or *permanent deacons*.

**delict** – an act which is a crime under canon law, the governing law of the Catholic Church. Acts considered to be a crime are articulated in the *Code of Canon Law* (for the Latin Church) and in the *Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches* (for Eastern Catholic Churches).

**diocesan bishop** – A bishop who heads a diocese. He may be assisted by *auxiliary bishops* or a *coadjutor bishop*. See also *auxiliary bishop* and *coadjutor bishop*.

**dicastery** – an administrative unit in the Holy See's Roman Curia, which includes *secretariats*, *congregations*, *dicasteries*, *tribunals*, *pontifical councils*, and other offices.

In the context of the Apostolic Letter *motu proprio Vos estis lux mundi*, the *competent dicastery* refers to one of several congregations of the Roman Curia. The *competent dicastery* is the particular office with authority and responsibility to review and respond to the case at hand.

**diocese** – usually a geographic territory. It is governed by a bishop. A list of the 178 Latin Church (arch)dioceses

of the United States is available on the USCCB website ([www.usccb.org/about/bishops-and-dioceses/all-dioceses.cfm](http://www.usccb.org/about/bishops-and-dioceses/all-dioceses.cfm)).

## E

**Eastern Catholic Churches** – Catholic Churches with origins in Eastern Europe, Asia, and Africa that have their own distinctive liturgical, legal, and organizational systems and are identified by the national or ethnic character of their region of origin. Each is considered fully equal to the Latin tradition within the Church. In the United States there are 16 Eastern Catholic Church eparchies and two Eastern Catholic Church archeparchies. In addition, there is one non-territorial Eastern Catholic Church apostolate in the United States. See also *eparchy* and *archeparchy*.

**eparchy** – an Eastern Catholic Church equivalent of a *diocese* in the Latin Church. An *eparchy* is governed by an *eparchial* bishop who is the *local hierarch* (ordinary) of the Church in that territory. There are 18 eparchies and archeparchies in the United States ([www.usccb.org/about/bishops-and-dioceses/all-eparchies.cfm](http://www.usccb.org/about/bishops-and-dioceses/all-eparchies.cfm)).

**episcopal** – referring to a bishop, a group of bishops, or to the form of Church governance by which bishops have authority.

**episcopal conference (bishops' conference)** – a national or regional body of bishops that meets periodically to collaborate on matters of common concern in their country or region. The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) is the *bishops' conference* in the United States.

## H

**Holy See** – refers often to the pope and the offices of the Roman Curia, the governing and administrative offices for the universal Church. In general use, the term *Vatican* is synonymous with *Holy See*.

## L

**laicization** – A word used historically to refer to the current process by which a priest is dismissed from the clerical state. Sometimes used as a penalty for a serious crime, but more often it comes at the request of the priest. A priest who was dismissed from the clerical state is barred from priestly ministry with some exceptions when someone is in immediate danger of death. The pope must approve all requests for dismissal from the clerical state.

**laity/lay** – in canon law, anyone not ordained a deacon, priest, or bishop is a layperson. In this legal canonical sense, women religious (sisters) and nonordained men religious (brothers) are essentially lay. In the documents of the Second Vatican Council, however, the laity are those who are neither ordained nor members of a religious order. The Vatican II sense of the term *laity*—whereby the faithful are composed of laity, religious brothers and sisters, and ordained clergy—is usually intended in most discussions of laypeople and their role in the Church.

**Latin Church (Latin Catholic Church)** – commonly, but imprecisely, called the Roman Catholic Church or the Western Church, the *Latin Church* is the largest of the 24 Churches that have their own laws and liturgical rites recognized by the supreme authority of the Catholic Church. These 24 Churches are in full communion with the Holy Father and form the Catholic Church.

**local ordinary (local hierarch)** – an office-holder with ordinary executive power in a particular territory. For example, the diocesan bishop is the *local ordinary* of a diocese, as are any vicars general or episcopal vicars in the diocese.

## M

**metropolitan** – the archbishop of a metropolitan see. This archbishop is, by virtue of his office, the *metropolitan*. The *metropolitan archbishop* has limited responsibilities with regard to the suffragan dioceses that make up an ecclesiastical province. The archbishop is usually only

referred to as the *metropolitan* in contexts that reference his capacity as head of the province.

**metropolitan see** – the archdiocese or archeparchy under the authority of the metropolitan archbishop. It is the chief diocese/eparchy of an ecclesiastical province. *Metropolitan see* refers to the archdiocese/archeparchy itself and to the seat of authority that the metropolitan holds. The bishop ordinary of the *metropolitan see* is known as the *metropolitan*.

**motu proprio** – literally, “on his own initiative.” A papal document that expounds upon existing—or creates new—Church law or procedures.

## N

**nun** – strictly speaking, a member of a religious community of women in the enclosure of a monastery. Colloquially it has been used to refer to all women religious, who are more properly called *sisters*. Whether a woman religious is a *nun* or *sister*, it is appropriate to use the term *Sister* as the religious title before her name.

## O

**ordinary (hierarch)** – refers generally to a diocesan or eparchial bishop, or others who are placed over a particular church or community that is equivalent to a diocese/eparchy, as well as those persons who possess ordinary executive power.

## P

**papal nuncio** – see *apostolic nuncio*.

**priest (religious priest / diocesan or eparchial priest)** – a baptized man who has been ordained a priest by a bishop. Also called a *presbyter*. *Religious priests* are professed members of a religious order or institute. *Religious priests* live according to the

rule of their respective orders. In pastoral ministry, they are under the jurisdiction of the local bishop, as well as of the superiors of their order. *Diocesan or eparchial priests* (sometimes called *secular priests*) are under the direction and jurisdiction of their local bishop. Most serve in the parishes of the diocese or eparchy, but they may also be assigned to other diocesan/eparchial posts and ministries or be released for service outside the diocese or eparchy.

**pontifical representative** – the representative (appointed by the pope) who is sent to foreign nations or to a national Church. In countries with diplomatic relations with the Holy See, this representation is held by the papal nuncio. In the United States, the *pontifical representative* is the papal nuncio (or apostolic nuncio). The term may also include the pope's representatives in other offices as well, such as offices within the Holy See or those appointed as superior general of a religious order.

**province (ecclesiastical province)** – an *ecclesiastical province* is a territory consisting of several dioceses or eparchies (the *suffragan sees*), including at least one *archdiocese* or *archeparchy* (the *metropolitan see*), headed by a *metropolitan archbishop*. The *metropolitan* has certain responsibilities within the *province* in canon law.

**province (of a religious order)** – a grouping of communities of a religious order under the jurisdiction of a provincial superior.

## R

**region (or episcopal region)** – a territory of *ecclesiastical provinces* and their dioceses in the United States, covering one or more U.S. states. The USCCB has 15 defined *episcopal regions* (Region I through Region XV). The *episcopal regions* in the United States are as follows:

**Region I:** Maine, Vermont, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and Connecticut

**Region II:** New York

**Region III:** New Jersey and Pennsylvania

**Region IV:** Delaware, District of Columbia, Maryland, Virginia, West Virginia, Military Archdiocese, and U.S. Virgin Islands

**Region V:** Alabama, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Tennessee

**Region VI:** Michigan and Ohio

**Region VII:** Illinois, Indiana, Wisconsin

**Region VIII:** Minnesota, North Dakota, and South Dakota

**Region IX:** Kansas, Missouri, Iowa, and Nebraska

**Region X:** Arkansas, Oklahoma, and Texas

**Region XI:** California, Hawaii, and Nevada

**Region XII:** Alaska, Idaho, Montana, Oregon, and Washington

**Region XIII:** Utah, Arizona, New Mexico, Colorado, and Wyoming

**Region XIV:** Florida, Georgia, North Carolina, and South Carolina

**Region XV:** Eastern Catholic Churches *sui juris*

**Roman Curia** – the administrative offices of the Holy See, composed of various dicasteries, which assist the pope in governing the Church.

## S

**see** – another name for a diocese or archdiocese. It appears in such phrases as *Holy See*, *titular see*, *metropolitan see*, *suffragan see*, and *see city*. An archdiocese is the *metropolitan see* of a province, while the dioceses under it are *suffragan sees*. A *see city* is that city after which the diocese or archdiocese is named.

**sister** – in popular speech, any woman religious. Strictly, the title applies to women religious of those institutes, mostly formed during or since the 19th century, whose members do not profess solemn vows.

**superior** – The head of an institute of consecrated life or a society of apostolic life who exercises internal authority over members.

**suspension** – a Church penalty under which a cleric, while retaining his clerical status, is no longer permitted to perform either all or some acts of the power of orders, the power of governance, or rights or functions attached to an office.

**suffragan diocese (or suffragan eparchy)** – one of the dioceses/eparchies in an ecclesiastical province other than the archdiocese/archeparchy.

**suffragan bishop** – one of the diocesan/eparchial bishops of an ecclesiastical province other than the metropolitan archbishop.

## U

**United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB)** – the national membership organization of the Catholic bishops of the United States through which they act collegially on pastoral, liturgical, and public policy matters affecting the Catholic Church in the United States. The USCCB traces its origins to the 1917 establishment of the National Catholic War Council. In 1966, the conference was reorganized as the canonical entity known as the National Conference of Catholic Bishops and its twin civil corporation known as the U.S. Catholic Conference. Another reorganization in 2001 resulted in the USCCB.

## V

**vow** – a deliberate and free promise that is made to God and its fulfillment involves a serious religious obligation. Men and women entering religious life take *vows*, typically of poverty, chastity, and obedience.

**votum** – an authoritative written opinion, which the metropolitan archbishop submits to the competent dicastery in Rome.

**vulnerable person** – “any person in a state of infirmity, physical or mental deficiency, or deprivation of personal liberty which, in fact, even occasionally, limits their ability to understand or to want or otherwise resist the offense” (*Vos estis lux mundi*).