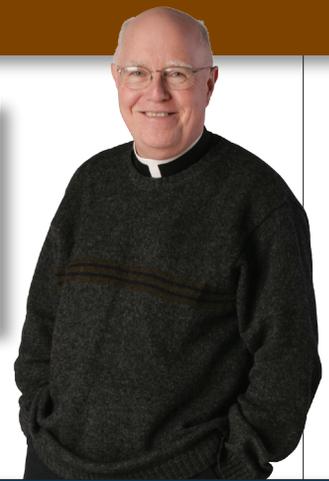


# Dear Fr. Kerper

## Why do we have a diocese?



►► **Dear Father Kerper:** To me, the Catholic Church seems like a gigantic corporation with all sorts of titles, offices, rules, and structures. When I read the gospels, I never see Jesus making dioceses, bishops, parishes and all that. How did these things come about? Are they really necessary? Can they be changed?

If you would like to ask Father Kerper a question, please e-mail [dearfrkerper@parablemag.com](mailto:dearfrkerper@parablemag.com).

I agree with you! On the surface, the Roman Catholic Church appears to be enormously complex, with a top-heavy institutional structure that can seem alien to the simple ways of Jesus Christ. Like you, some people wonder how the Church got this way and whether the current structure is in any way changeable.

Let's begin with the issue of change. Without doubt, some organizational arrangements in the Church come *entirely* from the early Christians and not directly from Christ. For example, the Roman Curia – the network of officials who advise and serve the Holy Father – is never mentioned in Scripture. Likewise, things like national conferences of bishops, marriage tribunals, and canon law do not appear in the Bible. All of these things could be altered, at least theoretically.

However, Scripture does show forth a *minimal structure*, notably the threefold ordained ministry (bishop, priest, and deacon) and the linkage between *one bishop* and *one specific community*.

To discover the biblical basis for bishops and dioceses, we need to do a little history work. Scholars know that the early Church had some organizational diversity at the outset, but fairly soon – at least by the middle of the second century – the “one bishop/one location” model became almost universal among orthodox Christians. Two factors – one sociological and one theological – produced this situation.

First, as the Church grew and became legal within the Roman Empire, it began to imitate the successful patterns of Roman governance. After all, why reinvent the wheel? Just copy it.

Hence, the Church adopted many Roman institutions, like judicial tribunals, basic legal concepts, and consultative bodies such as senates. Moreover, the Church took to herself some trappings of the Roman system still familiar to anyone who worships in a Catholic Church today. Two common items are the stole worn by the priest and the presidential chair in the sanctuary, especially the *cathedra* used by the bishop.

We also see this connection with Roman practice in the word *diocese*, which is the Latinized form of the Greek word *dioikesis*. This Greek word simply means administration or management of a political body. The Romans used *diocese* to designate a large administrative territory under the direction

of *one* ruler appointed by the Emperor.

Originally, dioceses with their own specific bishops existed only in cities. Indeed, the diocese and the city had exactly the same boundaries. As the Church grew rapidly and spread throughout Europe and Asia Minor, dioceses overflowed their original boundaries and virtually the entire world, including areas with few people, was carved up into dioceses. Though a diocese usually has the name of a city, such as Manchester, Boston, or Philadelphia, its territory typically spreads far beyond the specific city.

This brings us to the second factor, the *theological*. The Church adopted the Roman model of governance because it seemed to fit perfectly with the Lord's own principal image of his relationship with believers: the model of *one shepherd/one flock*. Gradually, Christians came to believe that the structure of the local church, whether at the diocesan or parish level, should replicate the relationship of the Good Shepherd/one flock. This is why each diocese has only one bishop, called the ordinary, with total pastoral responsibility. The same is true of parishes, which have only one pastor at a time.

Likewise, the same principal is at work in our understanding of the papacy. The Bishop of Rome, the successor of St. Peter, is the sole *universal pastor* of the entire Church, not just Rome.

Now, we must immediately acknowledge that no pope, bishop, or pastor is a perfect duplicate of Christ. Far from it. Nor are Church leaders ever meant to govern in the authoritarian and sometimes oppressive manner of Roman rulers of “dioceses.” Not at all. Church leaders, from highest to lowest, need to hear the voices of the “flock,” entrust certain responsibilities to competent collaborators, and always imitate Christ, the Good Shepherd.

When Church leaders act this way, people will see that the essential structure of the Church truly emerges from the Lord and is not a curious fossil of Roman antiquity.

– Father Michael Kerper is the pastor of Corpus Christi Parish in Portsmouth