

## Glossary of Church Terms

Here is a brief glossary of terms often used in the Catholic Church that may not be entirely familiar for journalists who have not had a great deal of experience in covering church matters. One may hope that even more, experienced journalists will find one or two new insights here. Terms are capitalized only if they are always capitalized. For example, *archbishop* is capitalized only when used as a title before a name, but *College of Cardinals* is a proper name in all uses – so the archbishop entry is lowercased, but the other is capitalized.

**administrator** – In Catholic ecclesiastical usage, when a diocesan bishop dies, retires or is transferred, a *diocesan administrator* is named to govern the ordinary affairs of the diocese until a new bishop takes office. The Code of Canon Law and the Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches spell out the rules for selection of an administrator and the limits on his power.

When a pastor dies, retires or is transferred and is not immediately replaced, a *parish administrator*, usually a priest, is named to govern the parish's ordinary affairs. In Latin-rite dioceses without enough priests to provide residential pastors for all parishes, a parish may have its day-to-day governance given to a *parish administrator* who is not a priest, with a nonresident priest named pastor. A deacon, layperson or nonordained religious who administers such a parish is often called a *parish life coordinator*.

**annual audit** – Dioceses and eparchies submit to a yearly assessment of their implementation of the *Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People*.

**annulment** – In the practice of Catholic marriage courts, an annulment is a decision that the apparent marriage was null from the start. It declares that since there was no sacramental marriage, there is no marriage bond. The court document conveying such a judgment is called a *decree of nullity*. Do not refer to an annulment as a church-granted divorce. Civil law varies from country to country, but most nations, including the United States, require a separate civil action of divorce or annulment to release the couple from the civil marriage bond.

**anointing of the sick** – Note the single *n* in anointing. In the Catholic Church this sacrament, formerly known as *extreme unction* and formerly given only to those in danger of death, can now be administered to anyone who is seriously or chronically ill. The minister of the sacrament must be a priest. It is also known as the *sacrament of the sick* or the *sacrament of the anointing of the sick*. Other rites such as penance, absolution or Communion may at times accompany the anointing of the sick, but they are not part of that sacrament.

**apostolic nuncio** – Church term for the Vatican ambassador to another country and the papal liaison with the church in that country. An apostolic nuncio, also called a papal nuncio, is always an archbishop, and it is his religious title that is capitalized as a title before his name, e.g., Archbishop Christophe Pierre, apostolic nuncio to the United States, not Apostolic Nuncio Christophe Pierre.

**archbishop** – The title given automatically to bishops who govern archdioceses. It is also given to certain other high-ranking church officials, notably Vatican ambassadors (apostolic nuncios), the secretaries of Vatican congregations and the presidents of pontifical councils.

**archdiocese** – The chief diocese of an ecclesiastical province. It is governed by an archbishop.

**Archdiocese for Military Services** – A national ecclesiastical jurisdiction established to assure the spiritual assistance of Catholics who are in military life or involved in work closely linked to the armed forces. Before the Vatican modified norms for them in 1986, these jurisdictions were called *military vicariates*.

**auxiliary bishop** – A bishop assigned to a Catholic diocese or archdiocese to assist its residential bishop. Whether in a diocese or archdiocese, his title is bishop.

**bishop** – The highest order of ordained ministry in Catholic teaching. Most bishops are diocesan bishops, the chief priests in their respective dioceses. But some (auxiliary bishops) are the top assistants to their diocesan bishops, and some priests are made bishops because of special posts they hold in the church, such as certain Vatican jobs. Diocesan bishops and their auxiliaries are responsible for the pastoral care of their dioceses. In some cases, diocesan bishops are assigned a coadjutor bishop, who is like an auxiliary except that he automatically becomes the diocesan bishop when his predecessor resigns or dies. In addition to their diocesan responsibilities, all bishops have a responsibility to act in council with other bishops to guide the church.

**bishops' conference** – A national (or in a very few cases regional) body of bishops that meets periodically to collaborate on matters of common concern in their country or region, such as moral, doctrinal, pastoral and liturgical questions; relations with other religious groups; and public policy issues. It is also called an episcopal conference. In the U.S., it is called the *United States Conference of Catholic Bishops*, or *USCCB*.

**brother** – A man who has taken vows in a religious order and is not ordained or preparing for the priesthood is a brother. If a man is ordained, he is identified as a priest and the title before his name is Father: If he is a student for the priesthood, no title should be used, but the religious order to which he belongs should be identified.

**canon law** – A code of ecclesiastical laws governing the Catholic Church. In the Latin or Western Church, the governing code is the 1983 Code of Canon Law, a revision of the 1917 Code of Canon Law. A separate but parallel Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches, issued in 1990, governs the Eastern Catholic Churches. That document was the first comprehensive code of church law governing all Eastern Catholic churches.

**canonization** – The Catholic Church's process leading to canonization involves three major steps. First is the declaration of a person's heroic virtues, after which the church gives him or her the title *Venerable*. Second is beatification, after which he or she is called *Blessed*. The third

step is *canonization* or declaration of sainthood. At various steps in the canonization process, evidence of alleged miracles is presented to church authorities. In general, two miracles need to be accepted by the church as having occurred through the intercession of the prospective saint. When referring to these, say: “a miracle was attributed to the intercession of a new saint” or a similar phrase.

**cardinal** – Highest-ranking Catholic clergy below the pope. By church law, cardinals are regarded as the pope’s closest advisors, and when a pope dies, those who are not yet 80 years old meet in a conclave in Rome to elect a new pope. Most cardinals are archbishops; canon law since 1983 says they must at least be bishops, but exceptions have been made in several cases where a noted priest-theologian over the age of 80 has been named a cardinal to honor his theological contributions to the church.

**Catholic Bishop Abuse Reporting Service (CBAR)** – Established in May 2019 by Pope Francis in his apostolic letter, *Vos estis lux mundi*, to address the issue of sexual abuse and bishop accountability in the global Catholic Church. The service is operated by Convercent, Inc., an independent, third-party entity that provides intake services to private institutions for reports of sensitive topics such as sexual harassment through a secure, confidential and professional platform. Individuals may go to [www.ReportBishopAbuse.org](http://www.ReportBishopAbuse.org) to make a report. Complaints can also be reported by calling (800) 276-1562.

**celibacy** – Refers to a decision to live chastely in the unmarried state. At ordination, a diocesan priest or unmarried deacon in the Latin rite Catholic Church makes a promise of celibacy. The promise should not be called a “vow.”

**celebrant** – Use *celebrant* only for the priest or minister who leads a religious rite, especially the one who presides at the Eucharist: Father Smith was the celebrant, but *Father Jones gave the homily*. In Catholic usage, if two or more priests celebrate Mass together, they are called *concelebrants*, not co-celebrants. The concelebrant who leads the group usually is called the *chief celebrant* or *principal celebrant*.

**Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People** – A comprehensive set of procedures originally established by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) in June 2002 for addressing allegations of sexual abuse of minors by Catholic clergy. The *Charter* also includes guidelines for reconciliation, healing, accountability, and prevention of future acts of abuse. It was revised in 2005, 2011 and 2018.

The *Charter* directs action in all the following matters:

- Creating a safe environment for children and young people.
- Healing and reconciliation of victims and survivors.
- Making prompt and effective response to allegations.
- Cooperating with civil authorities.
- Disciplining offenders.

- Providing for means of accountability for the future to ensure the problem continues to be effectively dealt with through the Secretariat of Child and Youth Protection and the National Review Board. <http://usccb.org/issues-and-action/child-and-youth-protection/charter.cfm>

**chastity** – In its general sense, chastity does not mean abstinence from sexual activity as such, but rather moral sexual conduct. Marital chastity means faithfulness to one’s spouse and moral conduct in marital relations. The religious vow of chastity taken by brothers, sisters and priests in religious orders is a religious promise to God to live the virtue of chastity by not marrying and by abstaining from sexual activity. When diocesan priests and unmarried deacons make a promise of celibacy, they are not taking religious vows; their commitment or live chastely in an unmarried state should be described as a promise, not a vow.

**civil authorities** – Refers to the local law enforcement agency, whether it be the city police department, the sheriff’s department, the state police post or an area child protection agency. It is distinguished from religious authority.

**clergy** – In Catholic usage, a collective term referring to all those ordained – bishops, priests and deacons – who administer the rites of the church.

**College of Cardinals** – A group of men chosen by the pope as the chief advisers. Most are heads of major dioceses around the world or of the major departments of the Vatican or are retired from such posts. In the interregnum following the death of the pope, the College of Cardinals administers the church, and those under the age of 80 meet in a conclave to elect a new pope.

**conclave** – The gathering of the world’s Catholic cardinals, after the death of a pope, to elect a new pope. Only cardinals under the age of 80 are allowed into a conclave under current church rules.

**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.

**deacon, diaconate** – In the Catholic Church, the diaconate is the first of three ranks in ordained ministry. Deacons preparing for the priesthood are transitional deacons. Those not planning to be ordained priests are called permanent deacons. Married men may be ordained permanent deacons, but only unmarried men committed to lifelong celibacy can be ordained deacons if they are planning to become priests.

**delict** – The church term for a crime. Church crimes are spelled out in the Code of Canon Law for the Latin rite and in the Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches for Eastern Catholic churches.

**dicastery** – A 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** – The standard term in the Catholic, Orthodox and Anglican churches for an ordinary territorial division of the church headed by a bishop. The chief diocese of a group of dioceses is called an archdiocese.

**Diocesan Review Board (DRB)** – A local board of lay professionals that functions as a confidential consultative body to the bishop. The board provides advice to the bishop in his assessment of allegations of sexual abuse of minors and in his determination of a cleric’s suitability for ministry. Before 2002, the DRB was referred to as the Response Team in the Diocese of St. Augustine.

**Eastern Catholic churches** – The 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 15 Eastern church dioceses and two Eastern church archdioceses. In addition, there is one non-territorial Eastern church apostolate in the United States whose bishop is a member of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

**eparchy** – Eastern Catholic equivalent to a diocese in the Latin Church. It is under the pastoral care of an eparch (bishop). Unless some legal distinction between a Latin rite diocese and an Eastern Church eparchy is relevant to a news report, in most cases it is appropriate to refer to an eparchy as a diocese and to its leader as a bishop.

**ephebophile** – A term used to describe a person who desires to have sexual contact with children between the ages of 14-17, with the victim being at least 5 years younger than the perpetrator. (see **pedophile**)

**episcopal** – Refers to a bishop or groups of bishops, or to the form of church governance in which ordained bishops have authority.

**faculty** – Church authorization, given by the law itself or by a church superior, to perform certain official church acts. In some rare cases a member of the clergy will be denied certain faculties, such as hearing confessions or preaching during the liturgy, because of public positions taken that are not in accord with church teaching. When a priest has one or more

faculties suspended or withdrawn, it does not mean he has been suspended from all priestly ministry. Report which specific faculties were suspended: Bishop Jones has ordered Father Smith not to preach or hear confessions. For suspension from all priestly ministry. (see **suspended priests.**)

**hierarchy** – In Catholic usage, the term is used most commonly to refer collectively to the bishops of the world or a particular region. In technical uses, however, it may refer to all those who are ordained: deacons and priests as well as bishops. In the canon law of Eastern Catholic churches, hierarchy is a term regularly used to describe the bishops of a church when describing their collective authority and function.

**Holy See** – The primary official term of reference for the Diocese of Rome, as the chief diocese of Catholic Christendom; used to refer to the pope and the Roman Curia – congregations, tribunals, and various other offices – in their role of authority over the service to the Catholic Church around the world. In most news uses, Vatican is synonymous with *Holy See*: A Holy See representative is a Vatican representative, a congregation of the Holy See is a Vatican congregation, etc.

**incardination** – A legal term in the Latin Church for the attachment of a deacon or priest to his diocese, religious institute or society, personal prelature or (in some cases) secular institute. Church law forbids “unattached or transient clerics.” A cleric who transfers from one jurisdiction to another must be simultaneously *incardinated* in the one he transfers to and *excardinated* from the one he leaves.

**John Jay College of Criminal Justice** – A senior college of The City University of New York that emphasizes criminal justice, fire science, and other public service-related fields. They were commissioned to do two studies for the National Review Board on the causes, context, nature and scope of sexual abuse of minors by Catholic priests in the U.S. (1950-2010).

**laicization** – The process by which a priest is returned to the lay state. It is sometimes used as a penalty for a serious crime or scandal, but more often it comes at the request of the priest. A laicized priest is barred from all priestly ministry with one exception: He may give absolution to someone in immediate danger of death. Usually he is also dispensed from the promise of celibacy and all other priestly obligations. If he is a member of a religious order, he also is dispensed from his religious vows. The letter of laicization usually contains restrictions against holding certain jobs or leadership functions in the church, but the former priest remains a Catholic in good standing.

Since 1989 the Vatican Congregation for Divine Worship and the Sacraments had handled voluntary requests for laicization, which must ordinarily be sought on grounds that the ordination was invalid for some reason, and for dispensation from clerical duties.

Since 2001, the Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith has had jurisdiction over penalties, including laicization, for clergy who have committed certain grave church crimes, including violation of the seal of confession and sexual abuse of minors. The pope personally had to approve every laicization for any reason until 2003, when the doctrinal congregation

received authority to laicize for certain serious crimes and to do so without a trial in certain “grave and clear cases.” Published cases since then indicate, however, that Pope John Paul II continued to approve each case personally until his death.

A laicized priest also may be referred to as a former priest or resigned priest. Use inactive priest only for those who have left active ministry without being laicized. Do not use the title Father for a man who has been laicized or who has left active ministry. When a priest is laicized without his consent, for a crime such as living in concubinage, committing child sexual abuse, or using the confessional to solicit sex, it is sometimes called defrocking or unfrocking. Those terms, which are not used in church law, should be restricted to forcible laicizations, since they connote a penalty.

**laity/lay** – In canon law, anyone who is not ordained a deacon, priest or bishop is a layperson. In this legal sense women religious (sisters) and unordained men religious (brothers) are laity. 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 is the one usually intended in most discussions of laypeople and their role in the church.

**last rites** – Not a sacrament, but the collective term for those sacramental rites and prayers that may be used in whole or in part in pastoral care for the dying. Sacramental rites may include penance, anointing of the sick and Communion, which is called viaticum when it is given to someone approaching death.

**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.

**magisterium** – While the church’s teaching authority is almost always an adequate explanation, be aware that in Catholic thought the term can refer both to the authority that the pope and bishops have to teach and to the content of what is authoritatively taught.

**metropolitan** – A metropolitan see is an archdiocese that is the chief diocese of an ecclesiastical province. The archbishop who heads that province is called the metropolitan, but usually only in contexts referring to him in his capacity as head of the *province*. With the new law set down in *Vos estis lux mundi*, a metropolitan may be authorized by the Holy See to undertake responsibilities for investigating reports involving bishops pertaining to sexual abuse in the church. In the Province of Miami, the metropolitan is the Archbishop of Miami – Archbishop Thomas Wenski.

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

**National Review Board** – A board instituted by the *Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People* whose purpose is to collaborate with the USCCB in preventing the sexual abuse of minors in the U.S. by persons in service to the church.

**norms** – Particular law for all the dioceses and eparchies of the United States of America.

**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.

**order, congregation, society** – A *religious order* or *religious congregation* in the Catholic Church refers to an institute of men or women who take vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, living under a common rule in what the church calls a consecrated life. In general news reporting these usually can be referred to as *religious orders* without reference to technical distinctions between orders and congregations. The basic technical distinction, if it must be made, is this: Members of an order take solemn vows. Members of a *congregation* take simple vows.

**ordinary** (n., adj.) – In Catholic ecclesiastical usage ordinaries are diocesan bishops or their equivalent, their vicars general and episcopal vicars, and major superiors of clerical religious orders, congregations or societies. Always treat as a job description, never as a title before a name.

**papal nuncio** – See apostolic nuncio.

**pastoral letter** – A pastoral letter is a letter about Catholic teaching or practice from a bishop to his people. It also may be a joint letter by a group of bishops: the bishops of a nation, region, state or ecclesiastical province, black bishops, Hispanic bishops, bishops of rural dioceses, etc. A pastoral letter by the pope usually carries its own special designation. *Apostolic exhortation* and *encyclical* are among the most common forms.

**pedophile** – A term used to describe a person who is at least 20 years old and desires to have sexual contact with children between the ages of 1-13, with the victim being at least 5 years younger than the perpetrator. (see **ephebophile**)

**province (ecclesiastical province)** – (1) A grouping of an archdiocese, called the metropolitan see, and the dioceses under it, called *suffragan sees*. The Code of Canon Law spells out certain limited obligations and authority that the metropolitan archbishop has with respect to the dioceses within his province. (2) A grouping of communities of a religious order under the jurisdiction of a provincial superior. The Province of Miami includes the Archdiocese of Miami, and the dioceses of St. Augustine, Orlando, Palm Beach, Venice, St. Petersburg and Pensacola-Tallahassee.

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

**rector** – In Catholic practice, a term generally used to describe the chief administrator of a seminary and sometimes used for a priest in charge of a cathedral, shrine or religious house.

**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*

**religious priest/diocesan priest** – *Religious priests* are professed members of a religious order or institute. Religious clergy live according to the rule of their respective orders. In pastoral ministry, they are under the jurisdiction of their local bishop, as well as the superiors of their order. *Diocesan*, or *secular*, *priests* are under the direction of their local bishop. Most serve in parishes of the diocese, but they may also be assigned to other diocesan posts and ministries or be released for service outside the diocese.

**safe environment** – A term used to refer to a wide assortment of practices that contribute to preventing child abuse of any kind.

**SEC** – Acronym for Safe Environment Coordinator that is used to identify the individual who coordinates the Safe Environment program, which is required by the *Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People* in each diocese/eparchy.

**see** – Another name for a diocese or archdiocese. It appears in such phrases as Holy See, Titular see, metropolitan see, suffragan see, see city. The see city is that city after which the diocese or archdiocese is named.

**suffragan diocese** – 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. In the Province of Miami, the senior suffragan bishop is Bishop Gerard Barbarito of the Diocese of Palm Beach.

**superior** – The head of a religious order or congregation. He or she may be the head of a province or of an individual house.

**suspended priests** – When a priest has been suspended, he is no longer permitted by the church to perform priestly functions such as celebrating Mass, preaching or administering the sacraments. However, he remains a priest. If a priest has been laicized, he should not be identified as *Father*. If he is permanently suspended, as has happened with a number of priests found credibly accused of sexual abuse of minors, he is no longer in active ministry and should not be identified as Father.

If the suspension is temporary, as may happen because of a lesser crime or pending the outcome of the investigation of a major crime, he should be identified as Father, unless his bishop or religious superior has specified that while he is under suspension he may not be publicly identified as a priest. Mention in the story that he has been suspended: *Father John Jones, a suspended priest*; Father Jones. Or: *James Smith, a suspended priest who is forbidden to use the title “father”*; Smith.

**third-party reporting service** – See Catholic Bishop Abuse Reporting Service (CBAR).

**tribunal** – A tribunal (court) is the name given to the person or persons who exercise the church’s judicial powers. Each diocese has a diocesan tribunal used mainly to hear marriage cases. Each archdiocese has an archdiocesan tribunal – a court of first trial – and a metropolitan tribunal, an appeals court that reviews decisions of diocesan courts in that ecclesiastical province when necessary. (The Catholic Church in Canada has a slightly different system, with regional instead of metropolitan appeals court.)

**VAC** – Acronym used for the Victim Assistant Coordinator that each diocese/eparchy is required to have per the *Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People*.

**vespers** – Also called *evening prayer*.

**victim/survivor** – A person who has abuse of any kind in their background and has or is working to overcome the negative effects of that abuse.

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

**vow** – A promise made to God with sufficient knowledge and freedom. Its purpose must be a moral good that, with God’s grace, can be achieved. The promises spouses make to each other when they marry are vows. Men and women entering religious life take vows, typically of poverty, chastity and obedience. Celibacy is not a vow; it should be described as a promise.

**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*)