

“This guide is an essential companion for the journey a new pastor must make and the challenges he will face in his first few critical months. It’s a comprehensive, solidly-researched and practical resource that helps a new pastor to build strong relationships with staff and parishioners and thereby increase his own effectiveness.”

—H. Richard McCord, former Executive Director
of the U.S. Bishops’ Secretariat of Laity,
Marriage, Family Life and Youth

“Serving a faith community as its pastor is not like any other job. Transitions between pastoral assignments come with some unique challenges. Built on a strong biblical foundation, this guide offers practical strategies to help priests make that transition, whether for the first time or the fifth. This helpful and easy-to-read book should be handed out with letters announcing new assignments.”

—Mary Elizabeth Sperry, author *Scripture in the
Parish: A Guide for Catholic Ministry*

Navigating Pastoral Transitions

A Priest's Guide

Edited by
Graziano Marcheschi



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Preface

The Archdiocese of Chicago and Loyola University Chicago funded this guide through a grant from the Lilly Endowment, Inc. *Sustaining Pastoral Excellence* (SPE) program. Dedicated to finding and sustaining excellent pastoral work in several U.S. Christian denominations, SPE helped the Archdiocese and University found INSPIRE. The INSPIRE project promotes pastoral excellence in parishes of the Archdiocese. Its acronym summarizes its mission: to Identify, Nurture, and Sustain Pastoral Imagination through Resources for Excellence. Serving parish staffs throughout the Archdiocese, INSPIRE helps them develop collaborative expressions of excellence in pastoral leadership.

On behalf of the Archdiocese of Chicago Department of Personnel Services, the Office for Lay Ecclesial Ministry submitted a proposal to INSPIRE recommending a Pastor Transition Study Team to explore the challenges and opportunities inherent in pastor transitions. The task force formed the following question to express their singular mandate: Can we find better ways for priests to make their way to new parishes as pastors?

Subsequently the quest was extended to see how parish staff and parishioner leaders can best work through this difficult time in the life of the parish, and booklets were developed for these groups.

Members of the Study Team designed and implemented surveys of pastors, parish staffs, and parishioner leaders in the Archdiocese of Chicago who had recently experienced a pastor change. The team is grateful for the participation of ordained and lay leaders who generously contributed their observations and insights.

The following persons contributed time and effort to the Archdiocese of Chicago Pastor Transitions Study Team:

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Clergy quotes used in this guide were selected from responses to a survey sent to priests in the Archdiocese of Chicago who assumed new pastorates in 2006 and 2007. Some questions asked of the newly appointed pastors included:

“How was your last move?” “What worked well?”

A sample response was: “Meeting with the staff and organizations of the parish I was assigned to prior to the move. Getting a feel for the ‘lay of the land’ before actually moving in. The time between the notification and arrival was beneficial for transition.”

“What would you change?” “What would you make certain to do again?”

A sample response was: “I certainly would have set up some process to deal with people’s fears. People wanted to keep holding on to me

till I left. It was hard. I wish I had taken the initiative to invite discussion and encourage openness.”

Using these insights and responses, *A Priest's Guide* aims to help priests—whether first-time pastors or veterans—understand the dynamics of pastoral transition and to prepare better for change.

Introduction

To change or not to change? That is the question facing any priest who receives an assignment—welcomed or not—to shepherd a new parish.

Transition evokes a wide array of emotions and requires adjustment from everyone involved. There are no shortcuts. The transition process must work at its own pace.

Perhaps you've heard the ecclesial admonition to "Change nothing the first year." While that axiom may not be absolute, especially in cases of abuse or fraudulent practices or structural building problems, it provides a helpful reminder that a new pastor needs to move slowly in making changes. A more realistic version of this adage might be "Change nothing within the first 120 days."

Either way, you don't want to ignore the wisdom of that counsel. Your tools for the transition are conversation, observation, inquiry, and empathic listening. As parishioners and staff come to accept a new pastor and he in turn comes to understand the parish's history and current situation, mutual trust begins to grow and openness to change increases.

Be strong and steadfast; have no fear or dread . . . , for it is the LORD, your God, who marches with you; he will never fail you or forsake you.

(Deut 31:6)

So whoever is in Christ is a new creation: the old things have passed away; behold, new things have come.

(2 Cor 5:17)

The reality is that staff and parishioners *expect* change. They know they would be naïve to think otherwise. Everyone wants change that's beneficial and that results from genuine consultation. But how do you make change that is beneficial and consultative?

Accentuate the Positive, Adjust to the Negative

All change creates stress; some change also poses significant challenges. However, the process of transitioning "from" and transitioning "to" is also charged with new possibilities that inspire hope. At any given moment when you are anticipating a major change, you might find yourself focusing on the possibilities or on the anxiety. Often, you may feel you have little or no control over which emotion takes hold of you.

Changing jobs and moving to a new home are widely experienced changes. Sometimes they occur independently, sometimes together. You can readily acknowledge the inherent stresses in those transitions. But some moves, as you may know well, are harder than others.

Prior to relocating, a friend commented that he didn't mind moving to a new home. This man was married and moving to a new neighborhood, and his family moved with him; his job didn't change, and he made the move voluntarily, so his new circumstances were not radically different from his former circumstances. He experienced minor stress related to managing the logistical details of the physical move from one home to another.

Priests, on the other hand, move under very different circumstances. They experience multiple stressors that seem to converge all at once, resulting in a distinct set of challenges. Transition can be as positive an experience for clergy as for anyone, but it can also be disruptive and difficult in ways that are unique to priests' lifestyle and circumstances.

Some priests may not point to the physical change itself, but to the necessary adjustments that must occur during the change that account for the anxiety, discomfort, anger, and even the

wild anticipation priests sometimes experience. Much of this discomfort seems to occur during the liminal “in-between” time as priests anticipate leaving their old parishes and prepare for moving to new ones.

The Goal of A Priest’s Guide

This resource seeks to help you with the significant transition you are approaching. The Archdiocese of Chicago—where this guide claims its roots—has well-developed policies and procedures for appointing pastors. For instance, Chicago’s archdiocesan policy mandates that first-time pastors attend a New Pastor Workshop offered through the University of St. Mary of the Lake (ongoingformation@usml.edu). Nevertheless, pastors asked for help navigating the spiritual, psychological, and interpersonal aspects of transitioning from one parish to another.

In the following pages you will find ideas and resources for this critical time in your life. You are certainly well aware that while it is the individual priest who transitions, the staff and parish are also deeply impacted when a pastor leaves and a new pastor is appointed.

This guide, created for new and veteran pastors, is specifically designed to assist you and your parish in discovering the blessings and negotiating the challenges of the transition itself. It is the lead guide in a trio of resources that includes guides written for parish staff and for parishioners.

As supplemental resources, the three books of the *Navigating Pastoral Transitions* series are not intended to replace the policies and procedures of your own diocese or archdiocese. Links to many such documents are provided at www.litpress.org/pastoraltransitions/resources.

Recognizing Life-giving Choices

A Priest's Guide assumes God's active, loving, and transforming presence in all of life's transitions. It also assumes that your partnership with God and God's people leads to life-giving choices that help ensure successful transitions in any setting—particularly ministry. Cognizant of the critical time you are

In contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Against such there is no law. (Gal 5:22-23)

approaching, you are invited to take a prayerful, proactive stance toward your upcoming transition.

As you reflect on these materials and dialogue with respected and trusted individuals (fellow priest, spiritual director, friend), you

may begin to recognize this time of transition as an opportunity for renewed engagement in life, renewed vision of your ministry, and for greater openness to the new. At this moment you could easily narrow your focus to the "physical move," but you may instead come to recognize that change can be redemptive.

May you be blessed with the latter!

Part One

The Pastor and Transition

The Spiritual Dimensions

The paschal mystery is the heart of Christian spirituality. The dying and rising of Jesus is the model for your own daily experiences of death and resurrection. Transitioning to a new pastorate certainly qualifies as an opportunity for dying and rising.

This notion of dying and rising is intimately connected to the biblical notions of “call” and “journey.” Those major themes, found throughout the Bible, are first encountered in the story of Abraham. His call to leave his people, his land, and his livelihood provides a clear paradigm for the pastoral transition priests face today. The Exodus story provides another paradigm and the gospels consistently characterize the life of Jesus as a journey undertaken in response to the call of the Father. These archetypes offer pastors in transition helpful models of faith, courage, and single-mindedness.

You are steeped in a culture that places its highest value on self-determination and personal fulfillment. But the Gospel says otherwise—that life is not all about you; God is the true center of your being. You are in the world but not of the world. In biblical language, it comes down to the difference between living in the flesh and living in the spirit, of surrendering to God’s call rather than fulfilling purely personal desires.

As a priest, you understand well the meaning of “call.” Your early subjective attraction to the life of a parish priest was

made objective through the scrutiny of the seminary system and the call of the bishop on the day of ordination. A priest's very identity is one of being called and sent. But today the calling and sending of priests as pastors is more complicated than ever.

Using Scripture to Understand Your Call

For many years, the Chicago Archdiocese experienced an abundance of priests applying to be pastors, with several men often applying for the same parish. A priest sought a parish that seemed to be a good fit for him and then he submitted his application, presenting himself to the placement board as a worthy candidate.

That pattern has shifted because of the significantly lower number of active priests. Not so long ago, a priest wouldn't *qualify* for a pastorate unless he had been ordained for at least ten, fifteen, even twenty years. Now priests can be invited to become pastors as soon as a few years after ordination. Early calls to the duties of pastor place great challenges before young men who are still adjusting to priesthood. This new situation conjures the "call" experience of some of the biblical prophets. Like them, priests, with their unique strengths, weaknesses, interests, and preferences, are sometimes asked to go places they never intended to go, at least so early in their ministerial careers.

A priest facing a new assignment might open the Lectionary to the special Masses for vocations to priesthood and religious life and use the numerous Scripture passages found there as possible springboards for prayer. As you read the Bible, you might want to begin identifying any passages that you think speak directly to you during this time of transition. Several Scripture passages that might help a pastor in transition include:

During the garden agony Jesus asks that his pain be taken away. His ultimate prayer, however, is "Not my will, but yours be done" (Luke 22:42). The life of a priest mirrors that of Christ, subjecting his will to the will of the Father.

After giving Peter his "new assignment" to care for the sheep, Jesus concludes very pointedly, "I say to you, when

you were younger, you used to dress yourself and go where you wanted; but when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go.' He said this signifying by what kind of death he would glorify God. And when he had said this, he said to him, 'Follow me'" (John 21:18-19).

Jesus speaks those same words to each priest not only on his ordination day but constantly throughout his ministry and especially at those moments that are most characteristically Christian—when, like an aerialist, you have let go of one trapeze and hang in midair, waiting to catch the other as it swings toward you from the opposite side.

Moving into the Second Half of Life

Regardless of the age at which a priest becomes a pastor, and no matter whether it is his first or third pastorate, the experience of transition triggers a number of interior movements that are worth considering. The contemporary spiritual masters Ronald Rolheiser, OMI, and Richard Rohr, OFM, have done significant research on male spirituality. Most men, they say, spend the first half of life building up a healthy self-esteem and meeting needs for intimacy and generativity. During this time, their spiritual lives may be characterized as "wrestling with the devil," according to Rohr. The challenges include setting of boundaries and finding balance. Many young priests, who, like Martha, find themselves busy "about many things," might readily identify with the need to set boundaries and establish balance in their lives.

Significant loss usually triggers movement into the second half of the spiritual life. The death of a loved one, wounded pride, a health crisis, or a career disappointment are among the losses that can cause one's life to begin moving in a different direction. For some men, the rest of life becomes a process of shifting priorities. They may realize that much of what they once strove for or achieved does not really mean that much. They begin letting go. Now, they are no longer wrestling with the devil but with God (a much harder match, reported a senior priest). Instead of

hoping to win, as against the devil, these men now hope to lose. They recall Mary listening at the feet of Jesus rather than Martha taking care of business. Often, the second half of the spiritual life

We were indeed buried with him through baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might live in newness of life.

(Rom 6:4)

does not begin until well after the biological second half of life has begun.¹

Pastors in transition, especially those in midlife or later, may wrestle with these kinds of issues. While younger priests may still be about fulfilling generativity

needs when they become new pastors, they too eventually will enter this new stage and confront a new set of issues. A spiritual director is essential for men of any age to discern and negotiate the path the Lord is taking them on.

A recently appointed pastor commented on what helped him during his transition: "Strong relationship with Jesus Christ, support from my family, the Art of Pastoring Workshops through the Office for Ongoing Formation of Priests at USML . . . and I belong to a fraternity and have taken the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience."

Perhaps these thoughts will provoke further reflection and conversations with trusted guides who can help you maintain a healthy and desirable balance in the days ahead.

The Need for Conversation

To better negotiate the challenges of a new appointment, you will find it helpful to understand some of the psychologi-

cal dimensions of transition and to keep in mind that a change of pastors affects:

- the pastor himself,
- the parish staff and leadership,
- the parishioners at large.

It can be mutually helpful to share with these other groups some conversations that could be planned and others that are spontaneous. Again, your spiritual director can be a great resource to help you anticipate or plan such encounters. Note that such helpful conversations can ideally take place both in the community you are preparing to leave and in the new parish you are joining. In all the settings where planned conversations may occur, you may want to recruit a skilled person to serve as facilitator.

As pastor, you will want and need to read the other two guides—for parish staff and for parish leaders—in *Navigating Pastoral Transitions* so that you can plan these conversations and understand the dynamics of change and transition for other members of the parish.

Notes

1. See Richard Rohr's book, *Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011), or search YouTube for one of his lectures about the two halves of life. Ronald Rolheiser treats related themes in *The Holy Longing: The Search for a Christian Spirituality* (New York: Doubleday, 1999) .

Mapping a Transition

It is important to clarify the difference between change and transition. Some researchers speak of change as a shift in the *external* situation. In that view, transition is the *internal reorientation* one goes through in response to external change. It's not change itself that you may fear, but the transition—the necessary interior adjustment with its array of emotions and stages.

William Bridges, who writes extensively about organizational and personal change, inverts the “beginning, middle, end” scenario and posits instead an “end, middle ground, beginning” construct:

Endings: This is the departure phase of saying good-bye, leave-taking, and letting go of what was.

Neutral Zone: This is the in-between phase of experiencing the liminality of needing to leave where you are but not yet identifying with where you are going. Though projects remain and responsibilities linger, as pastor you need to set up a timetable for how to wean yourself from your various involvements at the parish you are leaving.

New Beginnings: This is the reentry phase of adjusting to new surroundings and making them “home,” the time when you embrace a new role and new relationships.¹

The Stages of Transition in Action

See what three priests had to say about their experiences in these stages:

Endings

“I talked about ‘Transition’ and *my* transition at least two years before I left. I talked with parishioners, staff, spiritual director, and friends about it. It was no surprise to anyone.”

Neutral Zone

“(One of the hard parts of the transition was) the fact that I was still focused on projects at St. _____ till the day I left. I was trying to organize a church renovation team before leaving, to make it easier on my successor.”

New Beginnings

“When people ask me how the new place is, I tell them it is new—new faces, names, routines, facilities, staff, etc., etc. It is all difficult because it is new. I was comfortable, content, and pleased with where I was. I walked away from that into something completely new. That is difficult, it is also energizing, but it is all new.”

The Land of Promise

The Exodus story illustrates the three-stage process. Israel left the land of Egypt and so left behind much of its identity. The people entered the in-between place of the desert where they were sorely tempted to return to the fleshpots of Egypt and the familiarity and predictability of their former lives. In that middle ground, however, they learned adaptive skills, and they shared visions of how things could be in a new place. Finally, they reached the Promised Land but even so, approached warily. Only after additional years of wandering in the “in-between” wilderness did they finally claim the land of promise.

This model can be readily applied to a priest’s move from one parish to another, but it only goes so far. Stages one and three are predictable and assured: you will leave and you will enter the new assignment. What’s unpredictable is that middle phase. It will be critically important to go there, bring others there, and stay there longer than you or anyone is likely to want. Think of middle ground as a time and place for rehearsal, testing, evaluating. There everyone can try new ways of working, and, because it’s only “middle ground,” the cost of failures or merely partial successes is relatively low.

Both external circumstances and interior disposition can hinder a productive experience of liminality, that time when you are between homes and can find your true home only in the hands of God. Priests who experience a longer period between being informed of their new assignment and making the actual move benefit significantly. It will be up to the individual priest to ensure that the intervening months provide opportunities to do the interior work that will enable him to approach the new “land” without the fear that beset Israelites for so many years.

Because this liminal period is critical, a priest must balance the responsibility of continuing to pastor his old parish with the need to prepare spiritually and psychologically to pastor a new one. It is essential that a priest take time to reflect on his departure. This includes grieving what will be left behind. A priest might easily ignore his feelings of loss, but if he fails to process his grief, unresolved feelings may surface in the new setting and take shape in his making unfavorable comparisons and perhaps even expressing hostility.

Other Stressors

The high level of stress inherent in transition can be exacerbated by many factors. If a newly appointed pastor is also a first-time pastor, the process is complicated by the transition to a new role as well as to a new parish. Leaving an assignment where he was particularly happy adds, of course, to the sense of loss.

Sometimes when a priest enters a parish where the previous pastor was dearly loved, the new pastor may encounter resentment simply because he is not the former pastor. If his leadership style differs noticeably from his predecessor's, the adjustment to this new pastorate can become all the more difficult. Even if the previous pastor was not popular, the new pastor may need significant time to gain parishioners' confidence.

Because he is now an “authority figure,” a *first-time* pastor may feel disoriented in his new role. As an associate pastor, he may have been viewed more like one of the parishioners, or

as a peer with staff. Now, as pastor, he may find people don't approach him as easily. Sometimes he may feel treated as an adversary. During transition, especially for a first-time pastor who is recently ordained, maintaining close relationships with a mentor, the local dean, and one's bishop or episcopal vicar can ease adjustment to the new role.

Regarding the importance of taking the necessary time, one priest surveyed suggested: "Listen. Listen. Listen! Take your time on ANY changes (you make). People don't like changes."

Social scientists say that among the most significant stressors in life are death of a loved one, divorce, moving from one's residence, and changing jobs. When a priest changes assignments, he is dealing with stressors that in analogous ways mimic these life changes.

Insights from the Stages of Grieving

The groundbreaking work of the late psychiatrist Elizabeth Kübler-Ross, a pioneer on death and dying, regarding the stages of grieving offers insight into the transition process priests undergo when they become pastors or move from one pastorate to another. Using the stages of grieving as a construct for pastoral transition, you can see how stressors experienced under different circumstances can resemble those experienced in pastor transition. As with the population addressed by Kübler-Ross, priests going through transition may not experience the grief steps in this typical sequence. Very likely priests will experience movements back and forth among the stages, and tidiness of the grieving process and straight-line progression are extremely rare.

Using Kübler-Ross's stages of grieving as a model for behavior, you might experience these emotions during your transition period:

Denial: Initially a priest might set aside or bury his emotions regarding the stress of both leaving a beloved assignment and adjusting to a new role in a new parish. It will eventually catch up with him. As one priest observed, “Not taking sufficient time to mourn leaving my previous assignment and not being patient enough to transition into the new environment made (my) transition difficult.”

Anger: Some priests may feel bitter about a change they did not really anticipate or want. The new parish may not be at all what they expected. They may be angry about having to deal with the challenges of adjusting to the new situation or the resistance they may be encountering. One priest in the survey expressed his anger, saying, “The archdiocese was not forthright with information regarding the parish. They *wanted* me to come here.”

Bargaining: In the Kübler-Ross construct, “bargaining” is usually understood to be a person’s *quid pro quo* with God: “Heal me or my loved one and I’ll do xyz.” Though it’s not the same as dealing with illness or death, pastoral transition can bring about the same kind of bargaining. A priest may accept the reality of his change but in a limited and conditional way. To hold on to the life he had before, he may dwell on an endless series of “what ifs,” or even attempt to “play the system” in order to extend his current tenure.

Depression and Resignation: Sometimes a priest can be resigned to face the inevitable while still lacking interior assent to make the move. He lacks a sense of hope or joy about the change and instead lingers in sadness, believing his life will never be quite the same. He may settle in and try to adjust, but he can’t claim to be altogether happy. This very common stage may be brief, or it may linger for some time. Priests speak especially of the difficulty of moving on at an older age when they feel settled and have less energy to face the challenges of building new relationships and negotiating the new personalities that await them. Whatever the context, this is a time when

it's important to resist the temptation to "take care of it myself" and instead talk about your feelings and the situation with a trusted listener.

Acceptance: Most pastors work through the emotions of the prior four stages and come to accept and adjust to their new parish and their new role. Psychology and self-help efforts, however, won't be enough to reach acceptance. It is essential that a priest utilize the spiritual resources of a healthy prayer life, a spiritual director, and a pastor mentor. The importance of these elements should not be underestimated. Without them, a pastor may soon find himself alone in a desert of discontent (see the stage above). When a priest finally arrives at acceptance, it's a great time for him to assess the new ground and ask, "What new work (or play, or ministry) can I do here that I didn't get to do before?" Ultimately, transitions that are well managed bring one a sense of renewal and achievement, and even a sense of finding new life and resurrection! Who wouldn't want that?

It is good to give yourself permission to take the long view. The process of transition may take anywhere from one to three years. Though the steps mentioned above comprise a normal part of the transition process, it remains important throughout the transition for you to engage in self-reflection and seek self-knowledge. During stressful periods, you may be tempted to seek comfort in behaviors inconsistent with a priestly lifestyle. To avoid such dangers, you would be wise to consciously choose behaviors that typify your best self and are most characteristic of a healthy priestly life.

What I do, I do not understand. For I do not do what I want, but I do what I hate. (Rom 7:15)

Notes

1. William Bridges, *Managing Transitions: Making the Most of Change*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Lifelong Books, 2009).