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How to handle the transfer of your favorite parish priest

*By Our Sunday Visitor Editorial Board
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The transfer of a beloved priest often stirs deep emotions within a parish. Getting the news of a favorite priest's reassignment can be disappointing and challenging. At the same time, administrative moves are an important element of the Catholic Church's pastoral strategy. Understanding how these transitions work and why they are necessary can help parishioners navigate their feelings and support the ongoing mission of the Church.

Transfers are a standard part of a priest's role, designed to meet the needs of the diocese. While canon law admits a preference for stability, bishops' conferences can set the length of a pastor's term. In the U.S., a term is six years, renewable for another six. The bishop, responsible for the entire diocese, must consider the common good of all parishes under his care, rather than focusing solely on the success of individual communities. This holistic approach helps distribute pastoral talents where they are most needed and fosters a dynamic, adaptable ministry across the diocese. Parishes grow and change, and priests must be assigned to meet those evolving needs.

For many priests, the reality of potential transfers brings a sense of



uncertainty and pressure. They must often adapt to new communities and different pastoral needs, which can be as difficult for them as it is for the parishioners they leave behind. Recognizing this shared challenge can foster a spirit of mutual support and understanding between priests and laity.

Parishioners can find comfort and strength during these times by embracing several key attitudes:

1. Be open to change: Change is a constant in life and a necessity in faith. [St. Teresa of Avila](#) once said, "To have courage for whatever comes in life — everything lies in that." Embracing change with courage can lead to new opportunities for personal and communal growth.

2. Trust in the Holy Spirit: Believe that the [Holy Spirit](#) guides the Church — as the Catechism puts it, the Holy Spirit “builds, animates, and sanctifies the Church.” That includes even the arrangement and assignments of priests. This trust can bring peace during times of transition.

3. Encourage your bishop: The bishop’s role is to discern wisely the needs of the diocese and make decisions that enhance its overall spiritual health. Don’t be shy to write to him to respectfully share your thoughts. You may point out something he hasn’t considered or share with him information about a particular situation he wasn’t aware of. Once he has made his decision, however, trusting in his judgment is an expression of confidence in the structures that Christ himself established for his Church.

4. Continue participating in Mass: Choosing not to attend Sunday Mass after a priest’s transfer harms yourself (it’s a grave sin!) and your parish community. The Eucharist is the source and summit of Catholic life. A priest’s transfer doesn’t diminish the grace available in the Mass, which is centered on Christ, not the celebrant. Ultimately, the strength of a parish community lies in its members, not just its priest.

5. Resist following your priest: While strong attachments to particular priests are natural, it’s important to avoid the temptation of a cult of personality. Your focus should remain on Jesus Christ and the sacramental life of the Church. Don’t fall into the habit of transferring parishes if a

priest you love is moved within driving distance.

6. Express gratitude: Take the time to express gratitude to the departing priest, even if you didn’t really care for him! Send him a personal note, letting him know how his ministry has affected your life. Most of the results of what a priest does go unseen to him. He’ll appreciate the word of thanks!

7. Support your new priest: Your new priest may be more apprehensive than you think about his reassignment — or, especially, his first assignment as a pastor. Welcome new clergy with open hearts and minds. A new priest can bring a fresh perspective that can enrich the entire parish. Restrain from comparing him to his predecessors and allow yourself to discover his unique gifts.

Priest transfers are not merely administrative decisions but spiritual ones, meant to refresh and revitalize the Church’s mission. By supporting these transitions, above all in prayer, the faithful participate more fully in the life of the universal Church, rooted in a faith that transcends the wonderful, though temporary, relationships formed with individual priests.