

COADJUTOR AND AUXILIARY BISHOPS
By Rev Fr John Patrick TINDANA
(Accra – Ghana)

In this article we shall talk of the two categories of bishops who assist the diocesan bishop in the pastoral care of his diocese, that is, the coadjutor bishop and the auxiliary bishop. These are treated under Cann. 403-411. However, for the purposes of this article we shall concentrate on only those canons which would help us know who the coadjutor and auxiliary bishops are.

One of the dictionary definitions of coadjutor is “one who works together with another – assistant.” This same sense can be applied to auxiliary as, for example, we know an auxiliary verb to be a helping verb. That means both coadjutor bishop and auxiliary bishop are “helping bishops” who assist the diocesan bishop.

Right from the onset let us bear in mind the three categories of these bishops. They are: 1) the coadjutor who has the right of succession to the office of the diocesan bishop; 2) the auxiliary with special faculties; and, 3) the auxiliary without special faculties. We shall go into details in the main body of this article.

According to Can. 403

§1 “When the pastoral needs of a diocese suggest it, one or more auxiliary bishops are to be appointed at the request of the diocesan bishop. An auxiliary bishop does not possess the right of succession.”

§2 “In more serious circumstances, even of a personal nature, an auxiliary bishop provided with special faculties can be given to a diocesan bishop.”

§3 “If it appears more opportune to the Holy See, it can appoint ex officio a coadjutor bishop who also has special faculties. A coadjutor bishop possesses the right of succession.”

Let us observe that, this preliminary canon, that is Can. 403, identifies three kinds of bishops, as mentioned above (the coadjutor who has the right of succession to the office of the diocesan bishop; the auxiliary with special faculties; and, the auxiliary without special faculties).

They are appointed to serve in the diocese together with the diocesan bishop. In other words, the diocesan bishop is their leader.

According to John P. Beal et al,

“All are appointed to service of the diocese, not the person of the diocesan bishop, even though some personal characteristic of the diocesan bishop (e.g., poor health) may occasion the appointment of the latter two types of auxiliaries.”¹

¹ J. P. BEAL – J. A. CORIDEN – T. J. GREEN (ed), *New Commentary on the Code of Canon Law*, New York, N. Y., Mahwah, N. J. 2000, p. 540.

This commentary shows that these helping bishops cannot be equated to personal secretaries of the diocesan bishop. No wonder the canon states, **“When the pastoral needs of a diocese suggest it...”** (Can. 403 §1). That is fundamental before the personal characteristic or need of the diocesan bishop.

The coadjutor and auxiliary bishops are all titular bishops. This subject has been treated in one of my YouTube videos titled, *The two categories of bishops*. That notwithstanding, let me quickly state that, according to Can. 376,

“Bishops to whom the care of some diocese is entrusted are called diocesan; others are called titular.”

That means, since coadjutor and auxiliary bishops are not diocesan bishops, they are properly speaking titular bishops.

One major difference between the coadjutor bishop and the auxiliary bishop is that, whereas the coadjutor bishop has the right of succession, the auxiliary bishop does not have this right. This situation of the auxiliary bishop is explicitly stated as,

“An auxiliary bishop does not possess the right of succession” (Can. 403 §1).

One of the sources of the canon under consideration is the Decree Concerning the Pastoral Office of Bishops in the Church, *Christus Dominus*, Proclaimed by His Holiness, Pope Paul VI on October 28, 1965. Number 25 of this document states,

The pastoral office of Bishops should be so constituted for the governing of dioceses that the good of the Lord's flock is always the supreme consideration. Rightly to achieve this goal, auxiliary bishops will frequently be appointed because the diocesan bishop cannot personally fulfil all his episcopal duties as the good of souls demands, either because of the vast extent of the diocese or the great number of its inhabitants, or because of the special nature of the apostolate or other reasons of a different nature.

Sometimes, in fact, a particular need requires that a coadjutor bishop be appointed to assist the diocesan bishop. Coadjutor and auxiliary bishops should be granted those faculties necessary for rendering their work more effective and safeguarding the dignity proper to bishops. This, of course, should always be accomplished without detriment to the unity of the diocesan administration and the authority of the diocesan bishop.

Furthermore, coadjutor and auxiliary bishops, since they are called to share part of the burden of the diocesan bishops, so should exercise their office that they may proceed in all matters in single-minded agreement with him.

In addition, they should always show respect and reverence for the diocesan bishop and he, in turn, should have a fraternal love for coadjutor and auxiliary bishops and hold them in esteem.

Can. 403 §2 states,

“In more serious circumstances, even of a personal nature, an auxiliary bishop provided with special faculties can be given to a diocesan bishop.”

There is an interesting observation to be made in this second paragraph. That is, in paragraph 1, the canon states, among others, that,

“...one or more auxiliary bishops are to be appointed at the request of the diocesan bishop.”

However, in paragraph 2, the canon states, among other things, that,

“...an auxiliary bishop provided with special faculties can be given to a diocesan bishop.”

That means, when more serious circumstances, even of a personal nature, demand that an auxiliary bishop with special faculties should be given to the diocesan bishop the appointing authority can do so without the necessary intervention of the diocesan bishop. This to me shows that the good of the Church and the salvation of souls should always be placed above personal comforts and feelings.

Can. 403 §3 states,

“If it appears more opportune to the Holy See, it can appoint ex officio a coadjutor bishop who also has special faculties. A coadjutor bishop possesses the right of succession.”

Anytime we hear of coadjutor bishop, we should remember that he has the right of succession. That is the fundamental difference between him and the auxiliary bishop. Having the right of succession simply means that whenever the diocesan bishop ceases to hold office, the see does not become vacant.

In other words, the coadjutor is always present to become the new diocesan bishop or assumes immediate interim governance of the diocese, unless the Holy See has provided otherwise (Can. 413, §1).

We shall now take a look at the general rights and obligations of the coadjutor and auxiliary bishops. This is found in Can. 405. The first paragraph of this canon states,

“A coadjutor bishop and an auxiliary bishop have the obligations and rights which are determined in the prescripts of the following canons and are defined in the letter of their appointment.”

From this canon it is clear that the apostolic letter appointing the coadjutor and auxiliary bishops and some specific canons of the Code of Canon Law define the obligations and the rights of these offices. This is very good in a sense that it leaves nothing to chance and eliminates all forms of ambiguities.

The second paragraph of Can. 405 states,

“A coadjutor bishop and the auxiliary bishop mentioned in can. 403, §2 assist the diocesan bishop in the entire governance of the diocese and take his place if he is absent or impeded.”

We should always remember that when we talk of auxiliary bishop, he can either be an auxiliary bishop with special faculties or an auxiliary bishop without special faculties. The canon just cited above states that the coadjutor bishop and the auxiliary bishop with special faculties ***“assist the diocesan bishop in the entire governance of the diocese and take his place if he is absent or impeded.”***

Canon Law goes further to state that the coadjutor bishop and the auxiliary bishop with special faculties should be appointed as vicars general. (I have treated the subject of Vicar General in one of my YouTube videos.) This is stated explicitly in Can. 406, §1 as,

“The diocesan bishop is to appoint a coadjutor bishop and the auxiliary bishop mentioned in can. 403, §2 as vicar general. Moreover, the diocesan bishop is to entrust to him before others those things which by law require a special mandate.”

In addition to being appointed as vicars general, the law asks the diocesan bishop to entrust to them before all others those things which by law require a special mandate. This shows how close these helping bishops are supposed to be to the diocesan bishop. They are on a common mission, the mission of Christ, service to the Church, and this means they must work in unity and mutual respect.

To buttress this point, Can. 407, § 1 states,

“In order to foster the present and future good of the diocese as much as possible, a diocesan bishop, a coadjutor, and the auxiliary mentioned in can. 403, §2 are to consult one another on matters of major importance.”

The close collaboration between the diocesan bishop, the coadjutor and the auxiliary with special faculties should not be taken for granted. John P. Beal et al state,

“A very close bond of collaboration exists between the diocesan bishop and these others, closer than that existing between the diocesan bishop and an auxiliary bishop without special faculties.”²

So far it is obvious to all that the coadjutor and auxiliary bishops are not created or appointed to simply fill a position, as though, they are being honoured for long service, or exemplary conduct. No. They are appointed to perform an important role, and as such, must be accorded the necessary obligations, rights, and recognition.

The diocesan bishop is to consult them on certain cases. Can. 407, § 2 puts it this way,

“In considering cases of major importance, especially of a pastoral character, a diocesan bishop is to wish to consult the auxiliary bishops before others.”

The presbyteral council is also given the opportunity of hearing on some issues of “major importance” or “greater importance.” Can. 500, §2 states,

² J. P. BEAL – J. A. CORIDEN – T. J. GREEN (ed), *New Commentary on the Code of Canon Law*, New York, N. Y., Mahwah, N. J. 2000, p. 544.

“The presbyteral council possesses only a consultative vote; the diocesan bishop is to hear it in affairs of greater importance but needs its consent only in cases expressly defined by law.”

My observation is that, since matters of major or greater importance concern the good governance of the diocese, and ultimately the salvation of souls, they should be handled in such a way that their intended effect would be achieved. And one good way of realising this is to make sure that people are given the opportunity to share their views on the matter and eventually own it.

If the diocesan bishop consults the auxiliary bishops as Can. 407, §2 above advises, there would be little or no room for misunderstanding. The last thing any leader would wish to happen to him is to send out a signal of division within his camp.

To forestall any divisive tendency in the administration of the diocese, Can. 407, §3 has this advice for the coadjutor and auxiliary bishops. It states,

“Since a coadjutor bishop and an auxiliary bishop are called to share in the solicitude of the diocesan bishop, they are to exercise their duties in such a way that they proceed in harmony with him in effort and intention.”

On this canon, John P. Beal et al state,

“The law places strong emphasis on the importance of diocesan unity; this unity is evident in collaboration and harmony among the bishops serving the diocese.”³

We have already stated in Can. 406, §1 above that the coadjutor and the auxiliary with special faculties are to be appointed vicars general. Paragraph two of the same canon has this to say of auxiliaries without special faculties:

“Unless the apostolic letter has provided otherwise and without prejudice to the provision of §1, a diocesan bishop is to appoint his auxiliary or auxiliaries as vicars general or at least as episcopal vicars, dependent only on his authority or that of the coadjutor bishop or auxiliary bishop mentioned in can. 403, §2.”

This means, if the apostolic letter does not say anything contrary, then the diocesan bishop is to appoint his auxiliaries without special faculties as vicars general or episcopal vicars.

From the tenor of the law, and as observed by John P. Beal et al,

“These auxiliaries are to be dependent solely on the authority of the diocesan bishop, the coadjutor bishop, or the auxiliary bishop with special faculties.”⁴

So far it is obvious that the coadjutor and auxiliary bishops are appointed to help the diocesan bishop in the governance of the diocese. To that extent they must be the first collaborators and assistants of the diocesan bishop.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid, p. 543.

According to Can. 408, §1,

“A coadjutor bishop and an auxiliary bishop who are not prevented by a just impediment are obliged to perform pontificals and other functions to which the diocesan bishop is bound whenever the diocesan bishop requires it.”

This means if the coadjutor and auxiliary bishops are not prevented by a just impediment, they are bound to perform their duties as bishops. In addition they are to perform other functions to which the diocesan bishop is bound whenever he requires it.

To curb the possibility of a diocesan bishop entrusting habitually to another certain episcopal rights and functions, Can. 408, §2 states,

“A diocesan bishop is not to entrust habitually to another the episcopal rights and functions which a coadjutor or auxiliary bishop can exercise.”

John P. Beal et al state,

“This reflects the close collaboration which should exist between the diocesan bishop and his coadjutor or auxiliary, and the importance of the episcopal office.”⁵

Based on the above, I will say that the diocesan bishop cannot assign responsibilities to those without episcopal character in order to spite his coadjutor or auxiliary. That will be an affront to sacred power which is for service.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we want to remind ourselves that when talking about the helping bishops, we have three categories of them. That is: 1) the coadjutor who has the right of succession to the office of the diocesan bishop; 2) the auxiliary with special faculties; and, 3) the auxiliary without special faculties.

Again, coadjutor and auxiliary bishops are called to share part of the burden of the diocesan bishop, and so they should exercise their office in such a way that they may proceed in all matters in single-minded agreement with him.

⁵ Ibid, p. 544.