

What Is A Diocese?

A diocese is the local Catholic Church, a miniature of the Universal Church, and full expression of Roman Catholic Christianity in a given area. Though sometimes seen only in its administrative sense, the authentic Catholic understanding of a diocese is pastoral. It is the people who comprise the Catholic Church in a particular geographic area.

Also called the Particular Church, a diocese is defined in canon law as “a portion of the People of God, which is entrusted to a bishop to be nurtured by him, with the cooperation of the presbyterium [clergy] in such a way that, remaining close to its pastor and gathered by him through the Gospel and the Eucharist in the Holy Spirit, it constitutes a particular Church. In this Church, the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church of Christ truly exists and functions.”

Administratively, dioceses usually follow local boundaries such as counties, and they generally center on a prominent city within that territory. A diocese also is sometimes called a See, a term linked with the official seat of the bishop and referring to his territory or charge.

The background of dioceses is in the New Testament, where the apostles founded particular local churches, such as the Church at Ephesus, the Church at Rome, the Church at Corinth, and so on. Where once each church was headed by a bishop, the growth of Christianity led to the practice of one bishop heading a number of churches, such as village churches linked with the bishop of the nearby city.

Gradually, as the Church grew even more, the bishop's area of leadership became known as a diocese, a term then used for the administrative county-like districts of the Roman empire. Today, the term is used not only in the Roman Catholic Church but in Eastern Orthodox Churches, Anglican/Episcopal Churches, some Lutheran Churches, and a few other religious groups.

Within the Roman Catholic Church, dioceses are autonomous churches limited only to the authority of the Pope or ecumenical councils, and cooperating through national conferences of bishops. Dioceses also group together as Provinces, such as the Province of New York with the Archdiocese and the seven other dioceses in the state. The Metropolitan Archbishop has a position of honor and some limited appellate authority with the province.

In the United States, the first diocese was established in 1789, at Baltimore, following the practice of colonial Catholics being linked with bishops in England, France, and Canada. In 1808, four additional dioceses were created in Boston, Philadelphia, New York, and Bardstow, KY. The Diocese of Albany was created in 1847. The Diocese of Ogdensburg was established by Pope Pius IX on February 16, 1872.