

CODE OF ETHICAL STANDARDS FOR CHURCH MINISTERS

Diocese of San Diego

Preamble

This Code of Ethics is based on the fact that Church ministers must always uphold Christian values and conduct as promoted by the Gospel and taught by the Church. It does not presume to provide the answer to all the ethical questions facing Church ministers nor is it intended to supersede canon or civil law. Its purpose, rather, is to establish a set of general ethical standards for Church ministers. These standards will help to delineate boundaries for appropriate behavior in ministry.

The term “Church minister” is used to indicate all those who represent the Church by virtue of office or designated position. This Code will be used in their formation for ministry, and in holding them accountable to live within the ethical standards it sets.

Responsibility for adherence to this Code of Ethical Standards rests with the Church ministers themselves. Violations will be dealt with by the appropriate employing or appointing authority through action that may, if necessary, lead to exclusion from ministry.

The conduct of Church ministers, both public and private, has the potential to inspire and motivate people, or to scandalize them and weaken their faith. Church ministers must always keep this in mind.

General Principles

Five key principles underlie the ethical stance of this Code: ecclesial commitment, integrity, respect for others, personal well-being and ministerial competence.

Ecclesial Commitment

Church ministers should know Christ and seek to make him known. They should be familiar with the scriptures and be able to apply them to day-to-day situations. Church ministers must have a deep commitment to the Church as evidenced by adherence to Church teaching, loyalty to tradition, attentiveness to present demands, and readiness to take on future challenges. This commitment looks beyond the boundaries of parish faith communities to embrace the wider Church, diocesan and universal.

Integrity

Church ministers are expected to be persons of integrity who conduct themselves in a manner that is open, honest and above board. This requires that they be conscientious in their ministry and morally upright in their personal lives.

Respect for Others

Church ministers must respect the rights, dignity and worth of everyone regardless of their degree of participation in the faith community, cultural background or economic status. They should strive to be sensitive to issues of aging, gender, race, religion, sexual orientation, physical and mental disabilities, and language, since these all affect how the message of the Gospel is accepted and lived out.

Personal Well-Being

Church ministers are expected to give proper attention to their own human, spiritual and intellectual well-being.

Church ministers should show appropriate regard for their own physical, mental and emotional health, and should promote the personal well-being of one another as well. They should determine healthy limits in their work environment and live within these limits as much as possible. They should make use of allotted time for vacation and days away from the work environment.

Church ministers should maintain an active prayer life and properly address their own spiritual needs in order to nurture their faith and minister effectively to others.

They should strive to grow in their knowledge of the faith and faith-related issues, both on their own initiative and by participating in opportunities available to them.

Ministerial Competence

Church ministers should develop and maintain a high level of competence in their particular ministries by participating in the ongoing formation required of them. They shall not attempt to provide services in those areas in which they lack competence.

Ethical Standards

Christian Behavior and Environment

The lives of Church ministers must be marked by Christian virtue. In both their personal life and ministry, they must strive to create environments in which all are treated with dignity, charity and respect. Church ministers are to live the virtue of chastity according to their Christian state of life whether single, married or celibate.

Church ministers, moreover, must not betray the trust of the faith community by any kind of misconduct whatsoever, including, but not limited to, harassment, exploitation and abuse. In particular, sexual misconduct by Church ministers, especially in the context of a ministerial relationship, is never acceptable. A ministerial relationship is created whenever a person in his or her capacity as a Church minister interacts with another person.

Church ministers are obligated to know and to abide by existing law and diocesan policies as these apply to all forms of misconduct. Those who work with youth on a regular basis are required to participate in safe environment training programs which address child abuse, including sexual abuse, and cover prevention, identification, response and reporting.

Administration

Church ministers in administrative positions should:

- Treat employees and volunteers according to the demands of justice and with charity, fully embracing the social teaching of the Church.
- Make decisions consistent with civil and canon law.
- Never use their position to exercise unreasonable or inappropriate power and authority.
- Exercise responsible stewardship with Church resources.
- Observe diocesan policies and guidelines for ministry and fiscal management.

Conduct in Counseling

In providing counseling, including spiritual direction, Church ministers should:

- Function within the limits of their competence and refer counselees to other professionals when appropriate.
- Respect legitimate expectancies for confidentiality.
- Make sure there will be no negative consequences before entering into a counseling relationship with someone with whom they have a pre-existing relationship.
- Respect appropriate boundaries, never engaging in sexual intimacies and avoiding any physical contact that could be misconstrued.
- Conduct sessions in appropriate settings and never use electronic means to record them without explicit permission from the counselee.
- Maintain a log of the times and places of counseling sessions for each person being counseled.

Ministry with Minors

In ministry with minors Church ministers should:

- Maintain open, trustworthy relationships that are marked by personal and professional integrity.

- Avoid exclusive relationships with minors and be cautious of minors desiring such a relationship.
- Avoid any physical contact that can be misconstrued by either minors or adults.
- Never provide minors with alcohol or illegal drugs or with any sexually explicit material.
- Never offer minors overnight accommodations in rectories or other personal residences unless additional adult supervision is present.
- Be aware of their own and others' vulnerability and, whenever possible, use a team approach to ministry.

Confidentiality

Church ministers must respect the confidentiality of information which they have acquired in the course of counseling, spiritual direction or other ministerial encounters. Without prejudice to the seal of Confession, they should:

- Discuss the nature of confidentiality and its limitations at the outset of a ministerial relationship with assurance that confidentiality will be respected.

For example, in beginning what is clearly a counseling relationship, the Church minister should inform a counselee that confidentiality is limited when there is clear and imminent danger to the counselee or to others.

- Disclose confidential information only for compelling professional reasons or as required by law.
- Exercise great care to limit the content of shared information when disclosure is necessary.
- Safeguard the confidentiality of information maintained in notes and files or by electronic means.

Conflicts of Interest

Church ministers should avoid situations that might present a conflict of interest since the existence, or even the appearance, of a conflict of interest can call integrity into question. They should:

- Disclose to proper authorities all relevant factors that could create or be seen as a conflict of interest.
- Be open and honest with all parties concerned when a conflict of interest arises.
- Refuse gifts and testamentary bequests of money or property which should be received for the benefit of the Church.