

## What is a Curate?

Ever since it was announced at Annual Meeting that I would begin serving as curate here at Emmanuel, people have been asking me the same question: “So what exactly is a curate, anyway?”

To be honest, I’ve sort of been wondering that myself.

Being an academic at heart, I decided to do a little research. I have learned that the word *curate* is generally used to refer to an assisting priest or deacon, although originally the word meant any priest “entrusted with the care (or ‘cure’) of souls in a particular area or parish.”

There are two important points to keep in mind. The first is that I’m an assistant. Usually, but not always, the first job held by a new seminary graduate is that of “curate.” The priest-in-charge is supposed to mentor and guide the curate, and the curate is supposed to learn as much as possible about what it takes to be a good priest. This arrangement is beneficial to the overall health of the Church, which recognizes that not everything that matters in parish ministry can be learned in a classroom. Much of it needs to happen on the ground, in lived relationships, among real people. In other words, one learns how to be a priest by doing the things that priests do.

Which brings me to the second important point. To understand what priests do, one could do worse than return to the old definition of a curate: someone entrusted with the care of souls. The truth is that there are very few things that *only* priests can do (and technically, they’re all done in place of the bishop, whose job they really are). An old mnemonic device has helped many of us remember the priestly ABC’s: **A**bsolution, **B**lessing, and **C**onsecration. Yet the reality is that a priest’s professional activities are wide and varied and include many of the things you would find in any office job: meetings, phone calls, email, budgets, deadlines, paperwork, and more meetings. And that’s in addition to the more obvious things like preaching, leading worship, visiting the sick and making time for prayer and study. But ultimately, the “care of souls” is what gives all of these activities their focus and meaning.

Because I will be learning these priestly duties while a curate here, it is ideal that I be a generalist, not a specialist. I’ll give time and attention to many program areas, as well as to worship and pastoral care, but I won’t be solely responsible for any one area. Which means further that this is a time of transition for me; I will be handing over leadership of the Formation for Children and Families programs to a talented, energetic, creative committee, rather than leading them myself. I have the utmost trust in these leaders and know they will do a great job. At the same time, I will miss spending as much hands-on time with these programs as I’m accustomed to doing!

One more thing: you’ve no doubt noticed that I’m talking about priestly duties even though right now I’m a deacon. The confusion comes about because in the Episcopal Church, anyone who is going to be ordained a priest must first serve a minimum of six months as a “transitional deacon.” My transitional diaconate began with my ordination in December and will end when I’m ordained a priest this summer. We have two wonderful deacons on staff, Susan and Burnell, and they are “permanent” or “vocational” deacons. They are beloved colleagues with whom I am privileged to serve and from whom I am learning much, but we have very different callings. I’m sure the argument could be made that theirs is a higher calling than mine, but we won’t go into that at this point!

Finally, if you’re new to the parish you might wonder about my schooling and qualifications. So, briefly: I earned a master’s degree in theology from Harvard Divinity School and studied medieval literature and religion at New York University for several years. Locally, I have taken classes at Aquinas Institute, Eden Seminary, and the Episcopal School for Ministry. Professionally, I’ve been working in the area of Christian Formation in parishes since 2003, and I’m currently a student in the Doctor of Ministry program at the University of the South School of Theology in Sewanee, Tennessee.

“The care of souls” is surely an art form more than it is a job description. It is also an indescribable privilege, especially when placed in the context of a large and loving parish like Emmanuel. Please keep me in your prayers as I begin this new adventure among you.

Faithfully,

*/Pamela Dolan*