

Bishops serving bishops in the Middle Ages and in the Early Modern period. Suffragan bishops, Auxiliary bishops, Consecrators

Call for papers

In the early Middle Ages, when a bishop was unable to carry out his liturgical and sacramental duties, in principle it was the bishops serving in neighbouring areas who would step in to administer the sacrament of Holy Orders to priesthood candidates, to administer the sacrament of Confirmation to the baptised, and to consecrate or reconsecrate buildings: These were important matters, involving both institutional and symbolic dimensions, which a mere vicar – who did not hold the episcopal rank – could not perform. And it was only natural that such help should come first and foremost from bishops within the same ecclesiastical province: they were, technically speaking, the 'suffragans' (supporters) of the archbishop of the diocese in question, which is why this term came into use to denote this function of substitution.

Since the 13th century, political dynamics and personal circumstances made it increasingly common for a bishop not to reside at his see for long periods and/or that pontifical duties would not be his primary concern. It therefore became customary to include amongst one's collaborators other bishops who had been duly consecrated but who did not bear the name of the dioceses in which they actually served. They were, in fact, bishops of defunct diocesan sees (located in Dalmatia, Greece, North Africa or the Near East); in some cases these might genuinely have been prelates fleeing their own sees, whilst in others they were individuals ordained to enable those dioceses to continue to exist whilst being situated – as it were – *in partibus infidelium* (they were 'titular bishops', that is to say, endowed only with the title of bishop but not with a flock of worshippers). In doing so, the ancient rules – according to which there was to be no more than one bishop for each diocesan see – were bypassed. Faced with the abuses that might derive from this, Pope Clement V decreed that the appointment and consecration of these bishops must be approved by the Apostolic See.

In the Middle Ages and in the Early modern period, these assistants were often referred to – somewhat inaccurately – as 'suffragans'; in German, the term 'Weihbischöfe' is also used, meaning 'consecrating bishops' (these are to be distinguished from 'coadjutors', appointed in the event of illness or permanent incapacity of diocesan bishops, who participated in the governance of the diocese and were sometimes entitled to succeed to the office). Often these suffragans were friars of the mendicant orders, who lived on modest incomes and merely performed those episcopal duties which the bishops – who would otherwise have been responsible for the pastoral care of souls – did not carry out. Thus, at the episcopal level, the relationship between those who held office and the 'mercenaries' who replaced them—sometimes in a questionable manner—was replicated. This category was also discussed at the Council of Trent, and there were those who called for its complete abolition; nevertheless, suffragans/auxiliaries/consecrators continued to exist, and, particularly in the German Empire, they played an important role in the adoption of ecclesiastical reform initiatives throughout the modern era. Auxiliary bishops continue to exist even today in large dioceses where a single bishop is not sufficient.

Anyone who has studied bishops, episcopal curias, diocesan administrations and pastoral matters between the late Middle Ages and the Early modern period is familiar with the existence of these bishops serving other bishops; yet the attention paid to them by historians does not appear to have

been commensurate with the role they played. Canon law played a significant part in this, as the issue of defining the nature and limits of their powers frequently arose.

Analytical studies and reviews have taken account of their presence in the imperial/Germanic sphere: examples include the chapters devoted to this subject by Heribert Raab, in *History of the Church*, edited by Hubert Jedin (a book from 1970, with an extensive bibliography). Auxiliary bishops are also featured in the volumes *Die Bischöfe des Heiligen Römischen Reiches*, edited by Erwin Gatz; also mention should be made of the book *Weihbischöfe und Stifte. Beiträge zu reichskirchlichen Funktionsträgern der Frühen Neuzeit*, edited by Friedhelm Jürgensmeier (1995), which contains eight essays (covering different time periods, but with particular focus on the Early modern period) on the auxiliary bishops of Bressanone, Constance, Krakow, Hildesheim, Mainz, Münster, Paderborn, Regensburg and Salzburg; Klaus Ganzer also examines how auxiliary bishops were discussed at the Council of Trent, whilst Hans-Joachim Schmidt explores their political role (their activities were by no means insignificant, particularly where bishops were also entrusted with civil duties).

The overall impression is that, in Italy, the subject has not been addressed as such and that no more than a few footnotes have been devoted to individual figures; the monograph that Simone Weber devoted almost a century ago to the suffragan bishops of the Church of Trento does not appear to have had many parallels.

The scientific committee – comprising Emanuele Curzel (UniTn), Riccardo Parmeggiani (Uni-Bo), Daniela Rando (UniPv) and Mariaclara Rossi (UniVr) – is therefore reaching out to researchers in the run-up to a conference dedicated to bishops who served other bishops and acted on their behalf during the Middle Ages and the modern era.

The aim is to encourage participants to focus not only on the administrative and 'auxiliary' roles they fulfilled, but also on their individuality and the choices they made; their actions, whilst inevitably confined to specific tasks, nevertheless had the capacity to influence the lives of the people and shaped the quality of liturgical rites and pastoral care. Topics to be addressed might include:

- the legal framework (canon law, conciliar decrees, Papal Magisterium);

- the presence of these figures in theoretical models (or anti-models) of the 'good shepherd' (theological treatises, *specula episcoporum*, funeral eulogies, funerary monuments, sermons, millenarian prophecies, satirical short stories and poems, pamphlets by intellectuals and reformers...).

- case studies relating to their activities: biographical pathways leading to the attainment of the role; collaborations or antagonisms with the vicars and cathedral canons; social advancement of individuals or families in connection with the attainment of the role; canonical and inquisitorial trials; invectives and satires directed against their behaviour and personal conduct...

The time period eligible for consideration is broad, encompassing both the Middle Ages and the modern era. The geographical area of primary focus will be Italy, but proposals relating to other geographical areas will also be considered, particularly where they offer a comparative perspective. The scientific committee naturally reserves the right to define or structure the conference programme according to the proposals submitted.

Proposals must be submitted to the organisers' institutional email addresses by 28 February 2027. Proposals may take the form of a 30-minute conference paper or a 10-minute contribution. A brief summary of the presentation's objectives (maximum 2,000 characters), a list of the bibliography and sources that will be used, and a short CV of the author must be attached. Proposals (as well as conference presentations) may be in Italian, German, English or French.

The conference will be held in Trento, as part of the events being organised to mark the millennium of the Episcopal Principality (1027-1803) in the latter months of 2027 or the early months of 2028. Participants selected by the scientific committee will have their travel expenses and accommodation covered and – subject to a peer-review process – will be guaranteed publication in an issue of "Quaderni di storia religiosa medieval" or another A-level scientific journal.