

Parish Pastoral Council Guidelines

Introduction

Parish councils, introduced after Vatican Council II, have existed in the Archdiocese of Washington for some twenty years. Our experience is that, where carefully designed and implemented in a prayerful and effective manner, these councils have assisted the pastor and parish staff in developing a pastoral plan which meets the challenge of the Gospel. Laity, religious and clergy in such parishes are the best witnesses of the value of the parish council.

Because many parishes have requested assistance in reorganizing their councils, and because the success and helpfulness of such councils has not been uniform, a growing desire to re-examine our Guidelines for Parish Councils, published in 1975, has been evidenced for some time. The implementation of the new Code of Canon Law also requires such an updated set of policies for the effective operation of parish councils. What follows is a direct result of those requirements. These are norms for the framing of parish pastoral council by-laws in each parish of the Archdiocese. Indeed, with this publication these councils are mandated here and by-laws of all existing councils are to be reviewed and updated to conform with these norms. A copy of each parish's pastoral council by-laws is to be provided to the Archbishop through his Office of Parish Services for review and inclusion in the Archdiocesan master parish file.

Our best experience with parish pastoral councils has proven the value of consultation between well-formed and trained lay leadership and their pastors and pastoral staffs. Representative councils strengthen parochial recognition of opportunities for the parish to restore all things in Christ. They help create communities of worship and service in the image of Christ. The process of consultation develops a pastoral vision truly reflective of the Gospels and encouraging and challenging to all the faithful.

Consultation is not to be confused with administrative authority which is exercised by the duly appointed pastor, nor with legislative or judicial authority which properly belongs to the Archbishop and those institutions created by the Code of Canon Law. But consultation opens a range of practical possibilities to enliven and continually renew our parishes. Consultation leads to action.

The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church asks pastors "to recognize and promote the dignity as well as the responsibility" of lay persons in the Church. Pastors are encouraged to willingly make use of the laity's prudent advice and confidently assign duties to them in

January 1, 1986 in the Archdiocese. The work of the parish pastoral council and that of the parish finance council are always to be viewed as complementary.

1. The Nature of Parish Pastoral Councils

1.1 The parish pastoral council is an institution that brings together lay people, religious, and the ordained who, together with their pastors, work jointly to build the parish as a living Christian community. Parish pastoral council members care about parish life in their own and in other communities of the diocese, share in the concerns of the Church universal, and strive to bring the Gospel message to all people and places in their neighborhood and community.

1.2 Through reflection, prayer, planning, motivation and support, the parish pastoral council is the place where those ministries or services that are needed for the growth of a living parish community are identified, encouraged and evaluated on a regular basis. Thus the pastoral council must carefully consider the needs of the faithful and search within the community to recommend the means that will adequately respond to these needs.

1.3 This responsibility of the parish pastoral council does not take away from the continued mission and responsibility of the parish as a whole. Each baptized parish member remains responsible in his or her own way for the mission of the parish. In this way, the parish pastoral council is a means whereby the entire parish better fulfills its responsibilities.

2. Responsibilities of Parish Pastoral Councils

2.1 The main objective of the parish pastoral council is "to promote pastoral activity" that will help the parish achieve its goals as described in Section 1 of this text. This work is always concerned with the overall good of the parish and its mission. The work can include reflection, prayer, planning, setting goals and priorities, coordination, motivation, support, and evaluation.

2.2 All aspects of parish life fall within the responsibility of the parish pastoral council, although always in consideration for the responsibilities of the structures and organizations that are already in place. Concerned with the overall pastoral development of the parish, the pastoral council will often submit recommendations to the various parish groups through the pastor or at his request to the organizations concerned. In this latter case, care should be taken that the organizations concerned know of the pastor's support for the council's recommendations. The unity of spirit that must inspire the relationship between the parish pastoral council and the various committees and organizations of the parish is based on their common service. All of them, each with their own

themselves with care. They should be open to training and experienced in prayer and action with a lively faith and a love for all. In other words, future parish pastoral council members should know their faith, be able to communicate and work with others, and adapt quickly to new challenges. However, all parish members should learn about the nature and role of the parish pastoral council so that interested people may become aware of its various tasks. Finally, the parish pastoral council will make a special effort to help new members integrate quickly into their office.

3.2 The faithful can be represented in different ways. However, as members of the council one should always find:

- women and men of different age groups and civil status (married, single, widowed, young adult, perhaps a college student, senior citizen, etc.);
- people from different walks of life and different racial, ethnic, cultural and social conditions;
- people from the different geographic sectors of the parish;
- representatives from the religious men and women working or residing in the parish;
- finally the non-voting members are the parish pastor and, as the case may be, associate pastors and deacons. Where the parish pastoral staff includes lay people and/or religious working on a full-time basis in the pastoral service of the parish, some of these members should be represented on the pastoral council. The pastor and the parish staff are the recipients of the advice of the pastoral council and for that reason they are non-voting members.

3.3. The parish pastoral council should never be a mere federation of movements, committees or other organizations of the parish. Nevertheless, care should be taken that the principal sectors of pastoral activity in a certain parish be represented. Some people may be able to represent several organizations together. This will keep the council's membership number within reason and help avoid the situation where the majority of parish pastoral council members participates as delegates of special interest groups.

3.4 A rightful need for efficiency suggests among other things that voting membership on the council not exceed 12 to 15 people. Non-voting members should not be more than 5 to 7 of the staff, including the pastor.

3.5 Care should also be taken for a good balance between lay people and priests or religious on the council. There should be more lay people on the parish pastoral council than priests, deacons and religious combined.

returning to the council after an absence of a year or more. The pastor may appoint such members of the staff as may prove helpful up to the number of six. They will be appointed or re-appointed annually.

5.2 So as to maintain stability and efficiency, it is best that not more than 1/3 of the members be replaced within a one-year period.

5.3 A person who is called to fill a vacancy on the council shall serve the unexpired term and may be re-elected once, independently of how long the previous member had already served on the council.

6. Specific Roles within the Council

6.1 **President.** The parish pastoral council president is the pastor or administrator. He is the person who calls the council together. He recalls the council's goals and guards the vitality and dynamism necessary for its proper functioning. This responsibility falls upon the pastor, i.e. upon the person who has been mandated by the bishop to provide pastoral care for the parish. Thus it is only natural that the parish priest should be the president of the institution that is representative of the parish (cf. Canon 536).

6.2 **Chairperson.** The parish pastoral council shall by simple majority vote elect one of its members annually to help the pastor in his task of council president. The chairperson will see to the good working of the council and together with the pastor, strive to make the council active and concerned about its responsibilities. The role of the parish pastoral council is to give advice to the pastor. Thus the council enables him to fulfill his task under the best possible conditions in freedom and impartiality. The chairperson should therefore chair the meetings enabling the pastor to hear the deliberations of the members. In this work he or she will encourage all council members to participate actively and to express their views freely. In this way, the council and ultimately the whole parish can benefit fully from the diverse gifts of all its members.

6.3 **Secretary.** This person need not be a member of the parish pastoral council given the secretarial role this person has to fulfill before and during the meetings, such as the keeping of minutes and the preparation of documents and reports, as well as implementation of certain requests or decisions of the meeting. This person may be responsible for the finances of the internal business of the council such as refreshments, retreats, etc.

7. Procedures

7.1 The chairperson and two other persons named by the council or the chairpersons of standing committees, are responsible for proposing the agenda to the president. The president may add items to the

8.2 Neither the council nor the pastor has the authority to make decisions that would contradict the common good of the parish or properly established Archdiocesan policies or canons. As long as a council decision has not been ratified by its president it remains a "council decision." This is the meaning of the Canon 536.2 when the Code speaks of a "consultative" voice of the council. However, this limitation on the authority of the council is more than a means to protect the ultimate responsibility of the pastor. It reminds the parish pastoral council of its place within the parish community whose members always retain their right to participate in the decision-making process.

8.3 Practically speaking, parish pastoral councils should always strive to achieve consensus so that vote-taking will rarely be necessary. However, where a vote is needed, the result should be at least 2/3 in favor so as to constitute a majority opinion of the council. An exception would be the election of the chairperson which would be by simple majority as previously stated. Again, given the special role of the council president, he shall not participate in the voting.

9. Relationship of Parish Pastoral Council with Other Levels of the Church

9.1 Just as the parish as a whole must be concerned with the needs of the Archdiocesan and universal Church, so also must the parish pastoral council be interested in the life of the different levels of Church and society, and especially in the development of other parishes in the Archdiocese.

9.2 Moreover, parish pastoral councils will be especially concerned about Archdiocesan pastoral priorities since parishes are usually the privileged place where Archdiocesan priorities should be implemented.

9.3 Finally, there is the duty for council members to become familiar with the pastoral publications of the Archbishop and his office and agencies, of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, and of the Holy See.

10. Clarification and Conclusion

The regional Bishop and the Secretary for Parish Life are mandated to assist parishes in the application of these norms to their unique and pastoral situation. While the development of effective and efficient consultative bodies requires prayer and hard work, the result is a more vibrant faith community which invites all who are initiated into Christ to use their gifts for building up the Body of Christ.