

Parish Pastoral Councils

The Diocese of Charleston



September 2005

I. Introduction:

In the *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church* we find stated:

“Gathered together in the People of God and established in the one Body of Christ under one head, the laity--- no matter who they are--- have, as living members, the vocation of applying to the building up of the Church and to its continual sanctification all the powers which they have received from the goodness of the Creator and from the grace of the Redeemer.”

“... the laity can be called in different ways to more immediate cooperation in the apostolate of the hierarchy, like those men and women who helped the apostle Paul in the Gospel, laboring much in the Lord (cf Phil 4-3; Rom 16:3 ff).”

“... may the way be clear for them to share diligently in the salvific work of the Church according to their abilities and the needs of the times.”

([Lumen Gentium #33](#))

The council Fathers further describe the laity in their role as collaborators in the *Decree on the Apostolate of Lay People* where it is stated:

“Participators in the function of Christ, priest, prophet and king, the laity have an active part of their own in the life and action of the Church. Their action within the Church communities is so necessary that without it the apostolate of the pastors will frequently be unable to obtain its full effect.”

([Apostolicam Actuositatem #10](#))

Finally, and most specifically, the Fathers of the Council make very clear their intention of the existence of Pastoral Councils on the Parish, as well as the Diocesan levels, in the following statement from the same document:

“In dioceses, as far as possible, councils should be set up to assist the Church’s apostolic work, whether in the field of evangelization and sanctification or in the fields of charity, social relations and the rest; the clergy and religious working with the laity in whatever way proves satisfactory. ”

“Such councils should be found too, if possible, at parochial, inter-parochial, inter-diocesan level, and also on the national and international plane.”

These citations from the Documents of the Second Vatican Council clearly indicate the desire on the part of the Council Fathers that collaboration exist between a pastor and his parishioners. Since the Council, in many parishes, pastoral councils have proven a valuable asset to pastors in keeping in touch with their people and sharing responsibility for promoting every aspect of parish life. This work of the pastor and his people offers the opportunity for all to realize that they are the Church, the Body of Christ.

In this same spirit, Pope John Paul II in promulgating *The New Code of Canon Law* in 1983 built onto and deepened the insights of the Council Fathers by the inclusion of Canon 536 which states:

“1. After the diocesan bishop has listened to the presbyteral council and if he judges it opportune, a pastoral council is to be established in each parish; the pastor presides over it, and through it the Christian faithful along with those who share in the pastoral care of the parish in virtue of their help in fostering pastoral activity.

2. This pastoral council possess a consultative vote only and is governed by norms determined by the diocesan bishop.”

[\(Code of Canon Law, 1983 #536\).](#)

II. Norms for Parish Pastoral Councils:

A. Title:

1. The parish council should hereafter be referred to as the **parish pastoral council**. This is not incidental; rather, it describes the council’s role as defined in Canon 536. Moreover, it distinguishes this council from the parish finance council.

B. Role of the Council:

1. The parish pastoral council is a consultative body through which the Christian faithful can offer their gifts and “their help in fostering pastoral activity.” This is both the role and the purpose of the parish pastoral council.

2. Pastoral activity is constituted by the following:

- a. Proclamation of the Word of God and Catechetical Formation.
 - b. Celebration of the Eucharist and the other Sacraments as well as the fostering of family and individual prayer.
 - c. Service of those in spiritual and bodily need. ([Canon 528 and 529](#))
3. The fostering of this pastoral activity within the parish should be primary function of the parish pastoral council before any other activity.

C. The Role of the Pastor:

1. As the pastor presides in love at the Eucharist, so he presides in love at meetings of the parish pastoral council ([Canon 536](#)); he may, however, appoint a facilitator or designate a member of the council to act as a facilitator.
2. “The pastor is the proper shepherd of the parish entrusted to him, exercising pastoral care in the community entrusted to him under the authority of the diocesan bishop in whose ministry of Christ he has been called to share. In accord with the norm of law he carries out for his community the duties of teaching, sanctifying and governing, with the cooperation of other presbyters or deacons and the assistance of lay members of the Christian faithful.” ([Canon 519](#))

“Although the parish priest is sent by the bishop and depends on him in the exercise of his office, he is not merely a kind of extension of the bishop. On the contrary, the parish priest is the spiritual head of the parish and truly represents the invisible Lord, and it is his duty to unite the individual faithful in the community founded in and for Christ.” ([Commentary- Canon Law Society of America, p. 420](#))
3. The pastor of a parish as shepherd and spiritual head in union with the bishop, has authority in the parish which can neither be handed over or taken over by any other person or group of persons.
4. The authority of the pastor is never to be exercised in an autocratic manner but in a spirit of service. Any decisions that are to be made are to flow from discernment and the will of the Holy Spirit. The exercise of authority is to be exercised only after a period of persistent prayer so that it can be done in

cooperation with other as a response to the will of the Lord rather than closed in by self-willfulness or lack of mutual respect.

5. The pastor is to encourage and enable full discussion at meetings, hearing the members of the council out, trusting that they are motivated by love for God and the Church, and responding to their counsel and advice.

6. The pastor is to maintain the necessary communication between the council and other organizations and committees within the parish.

D. Membership:

1. Members of a parish pastoral council are to be the pastor, parochial vicars and members of the parish in full communion with the Roman Catholic Church.

2. The membership is to reflect the different facets of parish life and is to be of a size appropriate to the size of the parish, but small enough to act effectively.

3. The configuration of the council is left to the pastor. Its membership may be established by appointment of the pastor; after appropriate consultation, by a process of selection by the parishioners; or a process of discernment.

4. Council members are to serve a three-year term, with vacancies filled as soon as possible through appointment by the pastor in consultation with the pastoral council. It is advisable, for the sake of stability, that terms be held on a staggered basis.

5. The names of members of the pastoral council are to be made known to members of the parish.

E. Work of the Council:

1. The parish pastoral council offers "their help in fostering pastoral activity." This act of fostering is accomplished by investigating and considering pastoral matters, and sharing insight and providing recommendations to the pastor. This activity can be described as **pastoral planning**.

2. Parish pastoral council members are to work with the pastor in addressing the present and future needs of the parish through a pastoral planning effort.

Pastoral planning is accomplished by creating a mission statement for the parish, identifying pastoral needs, and establishing reasonable goals and objectives.

3. The Word of God, Worship and Sacraments, Spirituality, and Christian Service are areas of concern always to be taken into account before all else. The following six areas were defined in the Diocese of Charleston Synod (1995).

- a. **Christian Formation.** Regarding the Word of God, the council is to be concerned with the religious formation and religious education of parish members on all levels.
- b. **Prayer and Worship.** Regarding Worship and Sacraments, the council is to be concerned about the liturgical celebrations of the parish community.
- c. **Evangelization.** Regarding Spirituality, the council is to be concerned with prayer in the homes of parish members and promote special programs of spiritual enrichment for the community.
- d. **Social Ministry.** Regarding Christian Service, the council is to be concerned about those in spiritual or bodily need and about issues involving social justice and peace.
- e. **Building Community.** Regarding Building Community, the council is to be concerned with creating welcoming and inviting elements within the parish that build the Body of Christ.
- f. **Stewardship.** Regarding Stewardship, the council is to be concerned with ongoing practices and educational tools to encourage parishioners to embrace all aspects of stewardship (offering of time, talent and sacrificial giving) as a way of life.

F. Meetings:

1. The parish pastoral council is to meet **at least quarterly** (every three months).
2. The pastoral council is never to meet in the absence of the pastor.

3. The pastoral councils are to be discerning, then prayer and faith must form a significant part of each meeting.
4. If pastoral councils are to offer informed advice, then study must be a normal part of each agenda.
5. An agenda, with significant time for prayer and study, must be distributed several days prior to meetings.
6. Discussion at meetings must be conducted in a manner marked by Christian courtesy, love and respect; and advice given to the pastor should be reached not by vote but by **consensus**.

G. Specific Roles ¹:

1. The **Presider** (pastor) has the primary role of leadership in both the spiritual and temporal affairs of the parish. He is held accountable by the Church for the well-being of the parish. He offers direction and expertise in ecclesial and pastoral matters. At meetings, he is to preside, in a way similar to presiding at the liturgy. By his attentive presence he encourages the respectful participation of council members, guaranteeing the roles and duties are assigned and carried out.
2. The **Convener** is the person responsible for reserving the meeting space, preparing whatever materials are needed for the meeting, and generally making sure the environment is conducive for the meeting and the necessary practical preparations. The convener works with the recorder to make sure members are adequately informed and reminded of the meeting date and time.
3. The pastor presides at the pastoral council meetings, but he may appoint a member to serve as a **Facilitator**. This individual designs and oversees the process of each council meeting, assisting the group with planning, decision-making and problem solving. The facilitator is not a chairperson to whom comments are addressed, but rather someone who assists the group in fulfilling its tasks and responsibilities.
4. The **Recorder** keeps track of the progress of each meeting and records official decisions for reference. The recorder is also responsible for any council

¹Specific role titles and/or functions were developed in Diocese of Greensburg (PA).

correspondence or other clerical tasks, including disseminating the agenda and meeting reminders to the council in advance of each meeting. The recorder may also be the designated contact with the media and/or the diocesan or local newspapers for publicity on newsworthy items.

H. Distinctions of the Parish Pastoral Council and the Parish Finance Council

1. The Parish Finance Council, mandated by the Code of Canon Law², is separate and distinct from the Parish Pastoral Council. Communication between the two councils is, however, essential. In order to ensure the communication, a member of the Parish Finance Council could serve on the Parish Pastoral Council as an ex- officio member.
2. The Parish Finance Council shares with the Parish Pastoral Council information regarding the parish finances and temporalities on a regular basis. The Parish Finance Council assists the Pastor in implementing the pastoral plans suggested by the Parish Pastoral Council by making fiscally responsible recommendations.

²**Code of Canon Law, Parish Finance Council, Canon 537:** Each parish is to have a finance council which is regulated by universal law as well as by the norms issued by the diocesan bishop; in this council the Christian faithful, selected according to the same norms, aid the pastor in the administration of parish goods with due regard for the prescription of Canon 532 (which names the pastor as the representative of the legal personality of the parish.)