

# **DIOCESAN NORMS FOR PARISH PASTORAL COUNCILS**

**JANUARY 1, 1987**

## **PREAMBLE:**

When the Second Vatican Council chose the term People of God as one of its expressions of the mystery of the Church, it re-opened a perspective on the nature of the Church. It placed a renewed emphasis upon the role of each member in the life and mission of the Church. Among other responsibilities, the members are called to share their wisdom for the building of the faith community.

This sharing is not a new concept in the Church. Sections of Old Testament literature explore the meaning of wisdom in our human endeavors. These same writings develop the concept of CONSULTATION with inspiration and insight. We are told that a wise man's counsel is a living spring (1) and that we should prepare our words well so that others will listen (2). Proverbs tells us that we will fail without guidance, but we will find security with many counselors (3). Proverbs also tell us that plans will succeed when the counselors are many (4).

Over the centuries the wisdom concepts, inherited from sacred scripture, gave way to structures, protocols and temporal matters. Through the Second Vatican Council, our Church Fathers brought about a refocusing of who we are as Church. We are reminded of Christ's mission and that we share this mission as part of the Church, the Body of Christ. In the communitarian spirit, we are all empowered and even sometimes obliged to express opinions and offer counsel on those things which pertain to the good of the Church (5). The revised Code of Canon Law, promulgated in 1983, has clarified and amplified the spirit of the Second Vatican Council.

The Church reminds us that the pastoral care of the faithful is a trust and responsibility that flows from the diocesan bishop to the pastor (6). In parity, the pastor is accountable to the bishop for shepherding the faithful in pursuit of the mission of Christ. He has a moral responsibility to make the best possible pastoral decisions when considering the life of the faith community. In the decision-making process he considers the many institutions - the Pastoral Council and the Finance Council (7) whose express purpose is to provide counsel to the pastor. These two unique groups are a part of the pastoral decision-making process because of the special expertise and responsibility that exists among the people of God (8) and also because of the wisdom of seeking and embracing consultation.

In his ministry each pastor embraces the tradition of consultation by calling a pastoral Council and Finance Council into reality. Once the two councils exist, he seeks their individual and collective opinion, as well as their consensus (9). Lay persons, on the other hand, consider seriously their call to serve the parish community as counselors. They commit themselves to providing the best possible counsel which is a result of prayer, reflection and dialogue as well as study, research and consultation with other parishioners.

The Pastoral Council and Finance Council function in a manner consistent with the norms of the Diocese (10). The norms for parish pastoral Councils in the Diocese of Galveston-Houston are respectfully presented herein.

A Pastoral Council is to be established and is to be operative in every parish in the Diocese of Galveston-Houston.

## NATURE AND PURPOSE:

The Pastoral Council is to be a representative body of the faithful whose focus is on the whole community - its beliefs, its hopes, its joys, its needs, its sorrows, its concerns, its gifts and its pursuit of the mission of the Church.

The Council provides a means for uniting the parish community in expressing its collective wisdom concerning pastoral plans and activities.

By reason of its existence, the Pastoral Council must read and reflect the "signs-of-the-times" to those planning or implementing pastoral activities in the parish.

By the fact that it is convoked by the pastor, the Pastoral Council must respond to his call and questions and offer the best consultation possible.

The Pastoral Council's task is counsel and consultation. Thus, the members of this group, along with the pastor, are called to reflect and consider pastoral issues for the common good and for the future. Their role is to understand, to reflect carefully and prayerfully and to seek consensus. Although, there will be times when circumstances will prevent the Council from reaching a consensus.

## CONSULTATION:

Consultation acknowledges that all the Christian faithful share, in diverse ways, the mission of Christ.

Consultation accepts that each of the Christian faithful is formed, re-formed and endowed by the Spirit with qualities and gifts that can strengthen the community.

Consultation recognizes that both the ordained and the non-ordained have distinct roles - that the ordained priesthood and the common priesthood of the faithful are different not only in degree but in essence. The roles of each are complementary in community because of their common bond in the Body of Christ.

Because of its representative nature and consultative roles; because it has been uniquely provided by the Church and convoked by the pastor; and because of its consensus seeking process, the Pastoral Council should be a distinct group. The Pastoral Council function should not be assigned to a group which has a different assignment within the parish.

## THE PASTOR:

The pastor, as the chief governing person and accountable to the Bishop, must preside (11) at the Pastoral Council meetings and participate in its activities.

The pastor is called to consultation by the Church. In this call, he must:

- in turn, call the Pastoral Council and seek counsel on pastoral (12) matters affecting the life of the parish;
- experience and participate in the interaction that follows;
- be open, respectful and receptive to the voice or voices of the parishioners; and
- weigh seriously and respond appropriately to the collective wisdom or consensus of the Pastoral Council.

As presider, the pastor should:

- Make every effort to insure that the membership is truly representative of the whole parish community.
- Assist in the proper formation, training and orientation of all Council members.
- Insure that the Council's concerns reflect the whole Church - diocesan and universal - and its mission.
- Facilitate Council members building their own community of faith, trust and respect.
- Assist in the preparation of Council agenda.

Normally the pastor should not act contrary to the counsel given, especially when there is a consensus. However, in matters that violate Church teaching or discipline, or in matters contrary to diocesan policy, the pastor, after appropriate explanation to the Council, must withhold acceptance. In cases of non-acceptance of counsel, for whatever reason, appeals may be made to the diocesan bishop or his designee for clarification, consideration or arbitration.

When the pastor leaves a parish through transfer, retirement or death, all formal activity of the Pastoral Council ceases until the new pastor or assigned administrator reconvenes the Council.

#### COUNCIL MEMBERSHIP:

Council members must:

- be registered in the parish;
- have demonstrated a commitment to the parish community;
- be in full communion with the Catholic Church;
- commit themselves to spiritual growth;
- commit themselves to skills development as part of the Christian leadership process;
- be willing to commit the necessary time and energy to offer effective consultation

Council members are to be determined by the parish community using an appropriate process. In addition, the Pastor may supplement the Council by appointing other members for balanced representation of the parishioners. The number of such appointments may not exceed one-third of the number of members determined by the parish community.

It is important that the parochial vicar participate in Pastoral Council meetings. His role is distinct from that of parish staff persons employed by the pastor due to his appointment by the Bishop to serve as "co-worker with the pastor in common counsel and endeavor with him and also under his authority (13)." The parochial vicar shares in the pastoral care of the parish and assists the pastor in his pastoral duties.

The Pastoral Council provides consultation and support to the parish staff. These staff members assist the pastor in the administration of various parish programs. In light of their administrative role, it seems inappropriate that they would also serve as members of a body whose express purpose is counsel and consultation.

## THE COUNCIL ITSELF:

Each Council should determine its leadership by an appropriate process. Such leadership should include a Chairperson, Vice-Chairperson and Recorder.

Because of the Council's unique existence, there is a perpetual eliciting of the needs and concerns of the community. Each Council, therefore, has the dual obligation to perceive and to deliberate. Thus, each Council should meet monthly as well as when called by the pastor or Council leadership.

Each Council is to develop its own organizational and functional guidelines. These guidelines make clear the purpose and role of the Council as well as the size of the Council, membership criteria and selection process, term of office, in-service education, when meetings occur and Council leadership.

Each Council member must make a special effort to understand and to implement the consultative process. In this process, each member is to share his/her wisdom regarding the issue being considered. Although a common conclusion among the members is not required when functioning as a consultative body, the process of seeking consensus is very helpful in providing quality consultation.

Each Council must take time to develop spiritually so as to be more keenly aware of the Spirit's presence and functioning within the Council and within the whole parish community.

## APPROVED AND PROMULGATED:

*Original signed and*  
Date *dated 1-9-87*

Most Reverend Joseph A. Fiorenza

## REFERENCES

1. Sirach 21:13
2. Sirach 11:4
3. Proverbs 11:14
4. Proverbs 15:22
5. Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, Chapter IV, paragraph 37, "By reason of the knowledge, competence or pre-eminence which they have, the laity are empowered - indeed sometimes obliged - to manifest their opinion of those things which pertain to the good of the Church."
6. Code of Canon Law, Canon 519, "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."
7.
  - a) Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, Chapter IV, paragraph 37, "By reason of the knowledge, competence or pre-eminence which they have, the laity are empowered - indeed sometimes obliged - to manifest their opinion on those things which pertain to the good of the Church. If the occasion should arise this should be done through the institutions established by the Church for that purpose..."
  - b) Code of Canon Law, Canon 536, "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 office give their help in fostering pastoral activity.  
  
"The pastoral council possesses a consultative vote only and is governed by norms determined by the diocesan bishop."
  - c) Code of Canon Law, Canon 537, "Each parish is to have a finance council which is regulated by universal law as well as by 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."
8. Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, Chapter 11, The People of God.
9. Code of Canon Law, Canon 127, "...although in no way obliged to accede to their recommendation, even if it be unanimous, nevertheless the superior should not act contrary to it, especially when there is a consensus unless there be a reason which in the superior's judgement, is overriding."
10. Code of Canon Law, Canon 536.
11. The pastor presides at council meetings in much the same way he presides at liturgy - he is present and participates in the activity, but he does not perform every function. the pastor's presidential role at council meetings does not preclude a council member serving as chairperson. In fact, it is preferable that the pastor be free of those responsibilities.

12. The word "pastoral" refers to the activities of a "pastor". In the following two canons, the activities of a pastor are clearly stated.

Code of Canon Law, Canon 528, "The pastor is obliged to see to it that the word of God in its entirety is announced to those living in the parish; for this reason he is to see to it that the lay Christian faithful are instructed in the truths of the faith, especially through the homily which is to be given on Sundays and holy days of obligation and through the catechetical formation which he is to give; he is to foster works by which the spirit of the gospel, including issues involving social justice, is promoted; he is to take special care for the Catholic education of children and of young adults; he is to make every effort with the aid of the Christian faithful, to bring the gospel message also to those who have ceased practicing their religion or who do not profess the true faith.

The pastor is to see to it that the Most Holy Eucharist is the center of the parish assembly of the faithful; he is to work to see to it that the Christian faithful are nourished through a devout celebration of the sacraments and especially that they frequently approach the sacrament of the Most Holy Eucharist and the sacrament of penance; he is likewise to endeavor that they are brought to the practice of family prayer as well as to a knowing and active participation in the sacred liturgy, which the pastor must supervise in his parish under the authority of the diocesan bishop, being vigilant lest any abuses creep in."

Code of Canon Law, Canon 529, "in order to fulfill his office in earnest the pastor should strive to come to know the faithful who have been entrusted to his care; therefore he is to visit families, sharing the cares, worries, and especially the griefs of the faithful, strengthening them in the Lord, and correcting them prudently if they are wanting in certain areas; with a generous love he is to help the sick, particularly those close to death, refreshing them solicitously with the sacraments and commending their souls to God; he is to make a special effort to seek out the poor, the afflicted, the lonely, those exiled from their own land, and similarly those weighed down with special difficulties; he is also to labor diligently so that spouses and parents are supported in fulfilling their proper duties, and he is to foster growth in the Christian life within the family.

The pastor is to acknowledge and promote the proper role which the lay members of the Christian faithful have in the Church's mission by fostering their associations for religious purposes; he is to cooperate with his own bishop and with the presbyterate of the diocese in working hard so that the faithful be concerned for parochial communion and that they realize that they are members both of the diocese and of the universal Church and participate in and support efforts to promote such communion."

- 13: Code of Canon, Canon 545, "A parochial vicar or several of them can be associated with the pastor whenever it is necessary or suitable for duly implementing the pastoral care of the parish; parochial vicars are priests who render their services in pastoral ministry as co-workers with the pastor in common counsel and endeavor with him and also under his authority.

A parochial vicar can be assigned to assist in fulfilling the entire pastoral ministry on behalf of an entire parish, a definite part of a parish or a certain group of the Christian faithful of the parish; he can also be assigned to assist in fulfilling a certain type of ministry in different parishes concurrently."