

# The Parish Pastoral Council Policy and Procedures

in the

DIOCESE  
OF  
CROOKSTON

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Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

The Church continues the mission of Jesus. Its mission, like His, is essentially one: to bring about God's reign over the hearts of all peoples. This one mission has three aspects: 1) proclaiming and teaching God's word, 2) celebrating the sacred mysteries, and 3) serving the people of the world (based on Sharing the Light of Faith, #30).

This, then, is how each parish community of faith continues the mission of Jesus: through the ministers of word, worship and service.

These ministries are under the direction of the pastor (or pastoral administrator when canonical norms permit). Canon 519 states the following about the pastor: "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 duties of teaching, sanctifying and governing, with the cooperation of other presbyters or deacons and the assistance of lay members of the Christian faithful."

In other words, "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 a community founded in and for Christ" (Commentary commissioned by the Canon Law Society of America, p.420).

"Shepherd," "spiritual head," representation of "the invisible Lord" – this is the language describing the role of the pastor of a parish. He is the one who is ultimately responsible for nourishing and sustaining God's people with the word of God, with the living bread and wine of the Eucharist and with the other sacraments; and he is the one who is ultimately responsible for leading God's people and forming them into a loving community with governance exercised with compassion, love and understanding.

The pastor, therefore, has an authority which, dependent on the diocesan bishop, can neither be handed over to nor taken over by any other person or group of persons. For the pastor to attempt to hand over this authority, which extends especially to the areas of "teaching, sanctifying and governing," is to abdicate as "the spiritual head of the parish." And for others to attempt to take it over is to violate right and just order within the Church community.

This authority, however, is never to be exercised in an autocratic way, but in a spirit of service. Decisions to be made, especially the more important ones, must flow from the discernment of the movement and will of the Holy Spirit. The process of discernment, which must be based on persistent prayer and study, belongs not to the pastor alone, but to others with him, all of whom must be open and obedient to the will of the Lord rather than closed in by self-willfulness or by a lack of mutual respect.

The pastor therefore needs "the assistance of lay members of the Christian faithful." One of the chief ways for him to receive this assistance is through the parish pastoral council, whose chief function is to help with the formation of policies which enable the pastor (and the parish staff ministering with him) to exercise his authority of teaching (word), sanctifying (worship) and governing (service) as effectively as possible.

Another way for the pastor to receive the assistance of lay members of the Christian faithful is through the parish finance council, now mandated by the Code of Canon Law. Its overall function is to “aid the pastor in the administration of parish goods” (Canon 537).

A third way for the pastor to receive assistance from lay person is the parish corporate board, which is mandated by civil law (Minnesota Statutes, par. 315.15). The function of this board is described in each parish’s Certificate of Incorporation.

Through these councils and the corporate board assist with the formation of pastoral and financial policies, the pastor alone (though always under the authority of the diocesan bishop who sends him) finally issues these policies and makes them operative. Moreover, implementing these policies, i.e., carrying them out in practice, belongs not to the pastoral council nor to the finance council but to the pastor (and his parish staff).

Pastors and parishes should find it helpful to have diocesan norms by which these consultative bodies are to function. With that in mind, let me now give the norms for the functioning of parish pastoral councils, parish finance councils, and parish corporate boards in the Diocese of Crookston.

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Bishop of Crookston

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Chancellor

Date  
Crookston, MN

## **THE PARISH PASTORAL COUNCIL**

### **I. Purpose**

- A. Through the parish pastoral council, which is a consultative body, the Christian faithful are to “give their help in fostering pastoral activity” (Canon 536).
- B. Pastoral activity means especially the proclamation of the Word of God and catechetical formation, the celebration of the Eucharist and the other sacraments as well as the fostering of family and individual prayer, and serving those in spiritual or bodily need (Canons 528 and 529; cf. appendix).

### **II. Membership**

- A. Members of the parish pastoral council are to be members of the parish in full communion with the Roman Catholic Church.
- B. The membership, numbering from six to eighteen, should represent the different facets of parish life, and it should include a near-equal number of men and women.
- C. Two-thirds of the membership is to be elected, and one-third is to be appointed by the pastor (hereafter includes pastoral administrator) after appropriate consultation.
- D. All members should serve a three-year term, renewable once, with vacancies filled as soon as possible through appointment by the pastor after consultation with the pastoral council.
- E. The names of the members of the pastoral council should be made known to all the parishioners.

### **III. Meetings**

- A. The parish pastoral council should meet at least every third month.
- B. The pastor and a majority of the members constitute a quorum for meetings.
- C. An agenda, with significant time for prayer and study, should be distributed several days prior to the meetings.
- D. Discussion at meetings should be conducted in a manner marked by Christian courtesy, love and respect.
- E. Voting should take place (if it is required or thought wise) only after consensus has been reached on a given issue.

### **IV. Officers and Responsibilities**

- A. 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, designate a member of the council to act as chairperson.
  - 1. The pastor should 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.
  - 2. The pastor should maintain the necessary communication between the council and other organizations within the parish.
- B. The parish pastoral council should elect one member to be secretary.

1. The secretary is to maintain accurate minutes of the meetings of the council and prepare a summary of the discussions at each meeting for publication in the parish bulletin.
2. The secretary should also prepare, if needed, the operating budget of the parish pastoral council for inclusion in the general parish budget, and should maintain a record of the council's income and expenditures.

## V. Committees

A. It is recommended that the parish pastoral council have the following standing committees: The Agenda Committee, the Committee for the Word of God, the Committee for Worship and Prayer, and the Committee for Christian Service.

1. The Agenda Committee, consisting of the pastor, the chairperson for the next meeting and/or secretary, should prepare and distribute the agenda for each meeting.
2. The Committee for the Word of God should be concerned about religious formation and education on all levels.
3. The Committee for Worship and Prayer should be concerned about the liturgical celebrations of the parish community and about prayer in the home.
4. The Committee for Christian Service should be concerned about those in spiritual or bodily need and about issues involving social justice and peace.

B. Sub-committees of the above committees (or other standing committees) may be established if the pastor and council judge this necessary for effectively carrying out the mission of the parish.

## VI. Relationship with the Parish Finance Council

A. Though the parish pastoral council and the parish finance council are distinct bodies with distinct responsibilities, communication between them must be maintained.

B. To maintain this communication between the two parish councils, one member from each council should attend the meetings of the other council.

Appendix I  
**“Parish Councils: Consultation in the Parish”  
by Bishop John Keating**

(Used with permission: Origins Vol 14 No 17, October 11, 1984)  
(We note and regret the use of non-inclusive language)

Parish councils cannot be modeled on secular consultative bodies because authority and consultation mean different things in the church than they do in secular society, Bishop John Keating of Arlington, VA., stressed in his first pastoral letter. Keating said the new Code of Canon Law makes it clear that “pastors have certain responsibilities which are theirs alone. They have duties which must be exercised personally in virtue of the mission they have from Christ in ordination and from the bishop through their appointment to the pastorate.” The code also, he noted, “insists on consultation at every level of decision making” and “canonizes the right to be heard among all God’s people.” Yet, he continued, the code also “makes it pretty clear that the real purpose of the parish council is not to safeguard the laity’s right to be heard, but to counsel the pastor on pastoral programs and services in the parish.” Parish councils are not legislative bodies, finance councils or grievance committees, their sole purpose is “to enhance the quality of parish life and pastoral activity” by helping the pastor identify parish needs, plan programs, improve services and evaluate efficiency. The text of the letter follows.

I was a priest but one month, back in 1959, when Pope John XXIII announced his intention to convene the Second Vatican Council and to rewrite the basic laws of the church the Code of Canon Law.

How much has happened in these past 25 years!

I remember how thrilled I was to attend the opening ceremonies of the council in St. Peter’s Basilica in 1962. During the four sessions of the council (1962-1965), “Catholic” news filled the newspapers. Catholics were on center stage, it seemed, and there was palpable excitement everywhere in the church. Changes were gradually being introduced into our worship and practices. It was really an exhilarating time to be a young priest, to be part of a new era.

At the same time, it was quite a challenge to be a young priest during that period, to be part of the turmoil that ensued. Almost helplessly, we priests, more than others, suffered the pain of loss of many brothers and witnessed the widening identity crisis that pitted the servanthood of our ordination against the quest for self-fulfillment that permeated the times.

Some were saying that the years following the Vatican Council should be called the era of the layman; others didn’t know what to call an era when the priesthood that comes of baptism and the responsibility that comes of confirmation converged to throw the role and relationship of both layman and priest into confusion. To be sure, it was a period that saw many unsteady first steps, some rash, some timid, toward creating almost “out of nothing” various structures of consultation within the church ... parish councils, priests’ councils, diocesan pastoral councils ... strange new concoctions that had no precedent to guide the pioneer designers.

From 1981 to 1983 the priests’ council of Arlington did extensive work on a document that sought to identify the structures and role of parish councils, to clarify the relationship of pastor and council in the decision-making process of parish leadership. After studying the

document with the diocesan pastoral council, I thought it best to share the draft of the priests' document with pastors and parish councils across the diocese in order to get a preliminary reaction and the considered opinion of many. This consultation resulted in the decision to devote this first pastoral letter to the subject of consultation in the parish.

To be perfectly frank, I was not at all sure how to approach the subject. One avenue of approach would be to develop a researched essay that might bring together the best in contemporary thinking and writing on the subject. Another approach would be to formulate a legislative document, stipulating how parish councils and pastors should collaborate hereafter.

However, after many, many hours of reflection – and not a little “consultation” – I have thought it best to approach the matter simply through personal reflections stemming from my experience in parish life and through some observations of an “old canonist” on the new Code of Canon Law as it will guide church life for many decades to come.

### Back to Basics

I wish to speak to you simply of fundamentals, nothing fancy, just some basic ideas that might cast some light – one might hope in clear, positive and pastoral terms.

It seems to me that most of the conflict arising in pastor-parish council relations in the period immediately after Vatican II stemmed from a confusion over the basic ideas of consultation, authority, decision making, role of the pastor, role of the parish council, etc. It was immensely interesting to me to study the constitutions of various parish councils to find that the form and structure of a local council usually follows the patterns with which the writers of the constitution were familiar. Some constitutions cast parish consultation in the categories of American governmental systems, others in military structures or, more commonly, according to models of corporate management. Yet the simple concept of ecclesial consultation, properly understood, should cut through all these categories and remove the usual pitfalls that inevitably accompany any attempt to construe ecclesial decision making in the forms of the secular society we know so well.

The Lord so often would tell a parable to illustrate a point, to teach us something important, something never to be forgotten. Do you remember his story of the two men who set out to build homes? The foolish man builds his house on sand, so that when the rains and wind come and beat against it, it collapses because the sandy foundation simply washes out. With no solid foundation, his house has to collapse.

The other man, the wise man, builds his house on rock. Because of the strength of the foundation, his house withstands the elements and serves him well (Mt. 7:24-27).

To design and utilize effective processes of consultation in decision making, it is absolutely necessary to build on solid and fundamental ideas of, e.g., pastor, parish, parishioner, parish council, etc. To design a consultative process for the church on popular conceptions – or misconceptions – of secular backgrounds and models, can often lead to a confusion of roles, misguided agendas, mutual resentment and distrust, or outright dissension.

Are there any basics which the church has developed in its history, any clear and simple “primeval” ideas which can and must be the foundation for any solid ecclesial consultative process in a parish? Does the church shed any light on, e.g., the fundamental role and function of a pastor – on the fundamental role and function of advisers to the pastor – on the agenda of a parish council?



The answer to these questions is yes.

After studying 20 years' postconciliar experience and experiments, the church has recently promulgated some basic concepts and directions for those who must develop workable processes of consultation in the local church. The source: the new Code of Canon Law, in effect now since Nov. 27, 1983.

#### Vatican Council

Even though the phenomenon of parish councils appeared in the wake of Vatican, it should be noted that the documents of the council do not speak of, much less mandate, the existence of parish councils. Although there is no explicit reference to them in the teaching of the council, it would be unfair, however, to say that parish councils simply appeared on the scene "out of thin air."

There is a passage in the Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity (no. 26) which recommends that the bishop institute a diocesan council which would act as a sort of coordinator among the various diocesan organizations promoting the lay apostolate: "While preserving the proper character and autonomy of each organization, these councils will be able to promote the mutual coordination of various lay associations and enterprises. The document then suggest that this might also be implemented on a parochial, inter-parochial and inter-diocesan level, as well as in the national or international sphere. Commentators on Vatican are agreed that this reference really does not speak of parish councils, but refers to an inter-organizational board to promote coordination of effort.

Somewhat germane is a two-sentence paragraph in the council's Decree on the Bishop's Pastoral Office in the Church (no. 27):

"It is highly desirable that in each diocese a pastoral council be established over which the diocesan bishop himself will preside and in which specially chosen clergy, religious and lay people will participate. The function of this council will be to investigate and to weigh matters which bear on pastoral activity and to formulate practical conclusions regarding them."

More relevant to the creation of parish councils was the now-famous reference in the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (no.37), which stated:

"An individual layman, by reason of the knowledge, competence or outstanding ability which he may enjoy, is permitted and sometimes even obliged to express his opinion on things which concern the good of the church. When occasions arise, let this be done through the agencies set up by the church for this purpose. Let it always be done in truth, in courage and in prudence, with reverence and charity toward those who by reason of their sacred office represent the person of Christ."

This expression of a right and a duty of the qualified layman to assist and advise his pastor is enshrined now in Canon 228 of the new Code of Canon Law. Beyond the right and duty merely to speak, there comes from Vatican Council the theological basis for the layman's right and duty actively to participate with pastors in the threefold mission of Jesus and his church: to proclaim God's word to others, to sanctify others by his gifts of sacrament and sacrifice, and to lead others actively to his promise of eternal life.

Virtually all commentators on Vatican Council agree that one of the most important and enduring concepts to come out of the council is the idea of all the faithful, ordained and

unordained, as the people of God. Gone is the idea that the laity are merely passive recipients of pastoral service rendered by the ordained. One may no longer envision church membership as composed of the ordained, who minister, and the unordained, who are ministered unto.

No, all of us, through our baptism, in becoming children of God and heirs of heaven, have received through the Holy Spirit a whole network of rights and obligations that involve us directly in the mission of Jesus himself.

“Let sacred pastors recognize and promote the dignity as well as the responsibility of the layman in the church. Let them willingly make use of his prudent advice. Let them confidently assign duties to him in the service of the church, allowing him freedom and room for action. Further, let them encourage the layman so that he may undertake tasks on his own initiative. Attentively in Christ, let them consider with fatherly love the projects, suggestions and desires proposed by the laity. Furthermore, let pastors respectfully acknowledge that just freedom which belongs to everyone in this earthly city.

“A great many benefits are to be hoped for from this familiar dialogue between the laity and their pastors: in the laity, a strengthened sense of personal responsibility, a renewed enthusiasm, a more ready application of their talents to the projects of their pastors. The latter (i.e., pastors) for their part, aided by the experience of the laity, can more clearly and more suitably come to decisions regarding spiritual and temporal matters. In this way, the whole church, strengthened by each one of its members, can more effectively fulfill its mission for the life of the world” (Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, 37).

And so, in the 1960s began many local attempts to organize parish councils. There was unbounded enthusiasm among the pioneers, confident that it was all “in the spirit” of Vatican II.

It was only natural that the early designers would borrow from what they knew best. Some parish councils took on the form of representative democratic government, as we know it here in the United States. Sometimes a council would envision itself as the legislative branch of the parish government, with representatives elected from the various “districts”, “wards” or “precincts.” The pastor might be envisioned as the chief executive who could “veto” legislation of the council. In case of dispute between the legislative and executive branches in a particular instance, appeal might be made to the judicial branch, i.e., the bishop.

Another model commonly used in designing parish councils was borrowed from the business world, the corporate-management model. The council would sit as the board of directors of the corporation, representing the interests of the parishioner “shareholders.” The pastor might well be both chief executive officer and chairman of the board of directors. Then again, he might be assigned only “non-voting” membership on the board.

Much time and energy were often expended by the designers, trying to decide whether they should be policy-making boards or simply advisory boards. Should they be the decision makers of the parish policy or merely counselors to the decision makers? Often the scope of

the agenda was limitless, “whatever spiritual or temporal matter might come up for discussion or a decision.”

In the early days parish councils frequently stood out more by their differences from one another than by what they had in common. The history of some councils was one of reverse logic. First the group would come into being; then it began to wonder what it should do. Some councils had extravagant structure and devoted themselves mostly to procedure rather than to substance; other councils had no structure to be efficient at all.

In any case, one of the sadnesses in the post-Vatican Council era was that occasional conflict which arose within some parish councils. Looking back now, one might say that the confusion of that period was really inevitable, given the fact that there were very few absolutes by which to judge roles, responsibility or competence.

"The problem, however, was that there were no adequate models to follow, and most parish councils become battlefields for power or were just plain boring. Most parish councils have adopted the model of corporate management, which often leads to frustration and unresolved conflict and tension. They did not have a clear purpose and were usually burdened with structure for the sake of structure and hampered by strict observance of Robert's Rules of Order. Meetings were often long, dull, non-productive and nothing more than an endless succession of committee reports" (Sofield-Hermann, *Developing the Parish as a Community of Service*, 1984, p. 13).

In those pioneering days there were so many obstacles and uncertainties to deal with that parish councils and pastors often succeeded in irritating not only each other, but the parish at large. In my judgment, the greatest single weakness of some parish councils was the conviction that unless the council had real power to dictate policy and programs, it was useless in enhancing the quality of parish life. Some were truly persuaded by their experiences in secular life that a parish council is worthwhile only insofar as the collective votes of its individual members could indeed be the decision maker. To say that a council is “only advisory” or “only consultative” to the pastor was to enervate its purpose and to reduce its usefulness to naught.

### Purpose

It would certainly be more exciting to devote this pastoral letter to the mission of the church, the things to be accomplished in the name of Jesus, the people to be reached and touched, the corporal and spiritual works of mercy to be generated in actual human situations, etc. But here we are talking about something prior to all that, something irritatingly fundamental in the very structure of planning how to accomplish such things.

We are dealing here with the nuts and bolts of the process of getting those noble things into existence.

The real purpose and mission of a parish, of course, is outward in thrust, reaching out in service to people, ministering to them through the threefold mandate of teaching the word of God, sanctifying persons and leading them toward eternal life. So you must excuse us if we pause to undergo a bit of introspection, turning in on ourselves and our mechanics of operation. But this is basic to achieving success in our real mission outward to people ... to proclaim the Gospel effectively, to recognize the signs of holiness all across the parish, to deepen that holiness throughout the parish by prayer, sacrament and personal example, to help people worship God in the best way possible.

## The Pastor: Father of a Family

Most of the people whom a pastor serves in his parish have a primary identification with family and family life. They are naturally at home in an atmosphere of family life, where they experience support, acceptance, intimacy and availability. They naturally tend to seek these same traits in their parish community. Indeed this family characteristic of the laity profoundly influences and shapes the community life of Christians.

With a tinge of pride, a pastor will refer to “our parish family of St. Matthew’s.” The pastor is indeed the father of this parish faith community. The image of father is apt; the title father, so appropriate. He may not be the greatest organizer among his people, or the greatest accountant or public speaker. But he is the father. And that has a wealth more meaning than any worldly skills he may have or not have. When the pastor senses that his people see him as their spiritual father, as their father in the faith, it helps him immensely to give the kind of overall leadership his office requires.

## Servant and Leader

More than anyone else in the parish, the pastor publicly represents the credibility of the Gospel and the church to the world:

“All pastors should remember too that by their daily conduct and concern, they are revealing the face of the church to the world. Men will judge the power and truth of the Christian message thereby” (*Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, 43).

When a man accepts a pastorate, he becomes inescapably the appointed leader of the parish, the designated head, the adopted father in the faith to this community of believers. There is no getting away from that fact. It is simply the structure of the job, the office of pastor as designated by the church. It is not too surprising that priests sometimes have a difficult time stepping into that leadership role because, though called to be leaders in virtue of their ordination, they also are called to be servants of the people. Integrating the dual roles of leader and servant is not always an easy task.

Moreover, the pastor is to be the animator (a favorite word of Pope John Paul); he is to motivate his people to work together toward eternal life. Yet, at the same time, he is expected to be the healer, the one who, though perhaps suffering himself, is called upon to reduce and neutralize tensions, to defuse antagonistic emotions, to bring peace and unity to his people.

It is no wonder that pastors are a rather rare breed. One of my pastors recently reminded me that among the people of God pastors are really a tiny minority. “Here in the Diocese of Arlington,” he said, “we have 50 pastors among 188,000 Catholics. Within the people of God, we’re outnumbered better than 3,000 to 1!”

## Pastoring as an Art

The new Code of Canon Law goes into great detail describing the rights and duties of pastors. The local bishop may not take away those rights and duties (nor may his parishioners), but we can and must develop processes and procedures to help the pastor fulfill his responsibilities.

Some have said, however, that successful pastoring is more a matter of personality than process. There is an old Latin disjunction, *id quod-modus quo* (substance-manner), enshrined by usage through the centuries (especially by priests who come up through the

Latin route) which was often invoked to say: What you do is not as important as the manner in which you do it; a person's style of leadership is more important than his credentials as leader; your decisions are not as important as the manner in which you arrive at them, announce them, implement them. The substance of decisions sometimes does not affect people's openness and acceptance half as much as the manner in which the decision was arrived at and implemented. It is not so much the authority that a pastor represents, but the manner in which he exercises that authority that really counts with people.

*Modus quo* means a lot for a leader. The manner, the way, the style, the timing, the wording, the setting – all these things mean much to the people's perception of the decision itself. I don't think it too far off the mark to surmise that most conflict in parish councils has arisen, not because of the substance of a decision, but because of the manner in which it was made.

### Leadership and Authority

It is basic to our Catholic faith that Jesus, in instituting the church, conveyed his authority to it as working principle within the church until the end of time. He transmitted that authority sacramentally so that it is entrusted to publicly discernible persons. It is so important that we not consider authority in the church in the manner that we see and know authority in secular societies.

Pastors participate in that divine authority. Like their parishioners, parish pastors have certain responsibilities which are theirs alone. They have duties which must be exercised personally in virtue of the mission they have from Christ in ordination and from the bishop through their appointment to the pastorate. While retaining all the responsibilities which belong to the baptized in common, a pastor holds an additional office which aims at the good of the whole body. Pope John Paul, in speaking to the bishops of central France during their *ad limina* visit of March 23, 1982, said:

"It is quite clear that the priest must retain among the laity his role as animator, trainer and coordinator, not to mention those activities which are peculiar to his ministerial priesthood and ought to be the essence of his life: the authorized teaching of the truths of the faith, the formation of consciences, training in prayer, the gift of God's grace through the sacraments, particularly the Eucharist and penance."

Those who are called to the ordained leadership in the church are, to be sure, especially accountable. Theirs is a commitment to service beyond the commitment of baptism. The ordained are especially bound to God's divine revelation, to the fundamental traditions and structure of the church, to the sacraments, to the teaching of the magisterium of the church. This leadership, carried out in interdependence with the total church community, provides the parish community with unity in doctrine, in worship, in moral guidance and in church life and achievement.

To carry out effectively their heavy responsibility, pastors really need the encouragement of their people, and people really need the encouragement of their pastors. The clergy need to learn from their people, and the people need to learn from their clergy. They absolutely need to appreciate each other, to trust one another, to communicate openly with one another, to know one another in truth and in faith.

If we truly understand the magnitude of a pastor's responsibility, we can appreciate easily that a pastor needs all the help he can get from whatever quarter. Someone once asked

me the question: What do an associate pastor and a bishop have in common? The answer, of course, is: They both have the task of helping the pastor do his job more effectively.

### The Parish

The parish has only one purpose for its existence – to continue the mission of Jesus. Its primary goal is to help every member grow to the fullness of his or her Christian vocation.

One of the many pleasant discoveries in the new Code of Canon Law is the definition which it gives for a diocese and for a parish, both along the same lines: a) a portion of God's people, whose pastoral care is entrusted to – b) a single public servant (bishop or priest). A parish is not a place where, but a people who. Understanding the church as "the people of God" has awakened the laity to a crucial role: the responsibility of all the baptized – clergy, religious, and laity together – to continue the mission of Jesus here on earth. Baptism confers inalienable rights and duties to this end. We are one people, with one faith, one baptism and one God, the Father of us all.

"The body is one and has many members, but all the members, many though they are, are one body; and so it is with Christ. It was in one Spirit that all of us, whether Jew or Greek, slave or free, were baptized into one body" (I Cor. 12:12-13).

"The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I do not need you,' any more than the head can say to the foot, 'I don't need you ...' (I Cor. 12:21).

"God has so constructed the body as to give greater honor to the lowly members that there may be no dissension in the body, but that all the members may be concerned for one another. If one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; if one member is honored, all the members share its joy" (I Cor. 12:24-26).

As one body, we depend on each other. While we have differing roles and responsibilities, we are all under one head, Christ Jesus, and through him we depend on each other as brothers and sisters.

"Just as each of us has one body with many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we too, though many, are one body in Christ and individually members of one another. We have gifts that differ according to the favor bestowed on each of us" (Rom. 12:4-6)

### The Right to Be Heard

As a young priest in a Chicago parish on my first assignment in 1959, my pre-Vatican mind was always trying to create solutions to church problems. I find now in my notes of 25 years ago – the oils of ordination, as they say, still moist on my hands – that I was convinced that the key to enlivening parish life was to find the right structure to safeguard and promote "the right to be heard" – of associate pastors like myself!

I still have in my files a rather spirited plan I composed in 1960 that would have the bishop legislate a weekly staff meeting of the pastor and his associates, thus assuring the associates' right to be heard. My creativity, I see, even got to the details on how the meeting was to be conducted, what the categories of agenda were to be, etc. There was never a thought back in those days of the laity's "right to be heard."

Then came Vatican Council II.

In 1964 I was asked by *Chicago Studies* (a theological journal published by the seminary staff in Mundelein, IL.) to write an article describing what a diocesan synod is, since Cardinal Albert Meyer of Chicago had announced that he intended to convene a diocesan synod, once the Vatican Council ended. Canon law (at that time) required every diocese to hold a synod every 10 years, and since Chicago had not held one in over half a century, the completion of Vatican II seemed to provide the natural setting.

In doing research on the subject, I came to the novel conclusion that the real purpose of a diocesan synod was not (as the rest of the world believed) to issue fresh statutes and regulations for the diocese. No, the real purpose of holding a synod was to assure, at least every 10th year, the people's right to be heard. This article, I could see, was destined to be a real humdinger, the greatest new insight into the church's historic wisdom since the time of Pope Benedict XIV (who wrote the classic treatise on diocesan synods back in the 18th century). But Cardinal Meyer died prematurely, before the end of the council, and all plans for a diocesan synod evaporated. So did my vaunted article.

“In my judgment, the greatest single weakness of some parish councils was the conviction that unless the council had real power to dictate policy and programs, it was useless in enhancing the quality of parish life.”

The new Code of Canon Law has a remarkable canon (no. 212). It canonizes the right to be heard among all God's people – clergy, religious and laity alike.

Whatever the accuracy of my thesis on diocesan synods back in 1964, the new Code of Canon Law makes it pretty clear that the real purpose of a parish council is not to safeguard the laity's right to be heard, but to counsel the pastor on pastoral programs and services in the parish.

How does a pastor promote and protect the laity's right to be heard and take the pulse of his parish? A lot depends on the size of the parish. Some pastors come across as “easily approachable” by their ready availability outside church at the weekend Masses. Some remarkable pastors make themselves singularly available by their home visiting. (Both Vatican II and the new Code of Canon Law call for home visiting as an effective way for the pastor to know and to consult his people.) Another way I have found to “hear from the parish” and to collect well-considered and useful advice from the total parish is through the use of the town hall meeting. For about 10 years I served on the priests' personnel board in the Archdiocese of Chicago, and it was our duty to visit a parish whenever it had a change of pastorates so that we might conduct a parish wide meeting of consultation on the needs, the desires, the problems and hopes of the parish. The method we used, I thought, rather efficiently collected very useful data, organized it and made it presentable to the incoming pastor. The new pastor always, it seemed, was anxious to read every word that we presented to him. It was my experience that the cross-section consultation of such a meeting gives a far more balanced and “catholic” pulse of the parish than a consultation limited to the members of the parish council.

### Consultation

Take one look at the Code of Canon Law and you know how strongly the church insists on consultation at every level of decision making.

I think it is a truism to state that a pastor cannot perform his responsibilities effectively as shepherd and as leader unless he is supported by consultation – solid consultation, quality

consultation. Pastors know perhaps better than most that rarely is decision making the work of one person. Indeed a special function of the pastor is to promote consultation so that people may share to some extent in forming those decisions which affect them.

Sometimes a pastor does more consulting than he realizes. He may consult his brother pastors or individuals inside or outside the parish. He might even consult the bishop on certain matters! And there is always to be a special consultative relationship between the pastor and his associate pastor(s): "Associate pastors render their service in pastoral ministry as co-workers with the pastor, in common counsel and endeavor with him" (Canon 545).

The associate pastor "is regularly to consult with the pastor on planned or existing programs so that the pastor and the associate pastors can provide through their combined efforts for the pastoral care of the parish for which they are responsible together" (Canon 548).

A pastor knows that there are among his people those who are clearly more competent than he is in e.g., accounting, fund raising, public speaking, organizing, coordinating, motivating, recruiting, record keeping, hospitality and entertaining, managing, planning, etc. Yet, by the appointment of the bishop, he becomes the father of a family, a spiritual father who brings to his parish family his strengths and weaknesses and embraces as his own the strengths and weaknesses of his family. He may be surpassed by various parishioners in any and every kind of skill that may be useful to a leader; but the pastor is to excel in the depth of his faith and in his commitment to serve the whole parish family. That depth of faith and that commitment to serve should provide the basis for his openness and effort to consult:

"Many benefits for the church are to be expected from this familiar relationship between the laity and the pastors. The sense of their own responsibilities is strengthened in the laity; their zeal is encouraged; they are more ready to unite their energies to the work of their pastors'. The latter, helped by the experience of the laity, are in a position to judge more clearly and more appropriately in spiritual as well as in temporal matters. Strengthened by all her members, the church thus more effectively fulfills her mission for the world" (*Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, 37).

### Quality of Parish Life

In 1982 Pope John Paul, addressing the bishops of western France, spoke with them about the quality of life within parishes and the role of the laity:

"I encourage you to have as your aim the quality of the existing Christian communities. This is undoubtedly more important than their quantity. People need to find there, first of all, a high quality spirit of welcome, thanks to the presence of likable and competent people whether they be priests, religious or lay people. They need high-quality liturgical ceremonies which are an aid to active participation in a prayer which holds the Christian mystery in great respect. Whether they are children, youth or adults, they need high-quality catechetical and doctrinal teaching."

There often is a correlation between the quality of pastoral activity in a given parish and the quality of the consultation which preceded it. A pastor in virtue of his office, needs to have the ability to consult, whether he has the ability by nature, by grace or by hard-fought acquisition. True, some people who have been given positions of leadership in the church are natural-born leaders. They have a God-given talent for it. They communicate;



they attract; they persuade. They seem to have an inborn knack to perceive, to sense, to appreciate, to prioritize. They are never lacking in courage to deal with others candidly and kindly, at times firmly and decisively. They never turn from a major problem that needs attention and solving. The tougher the problem, the more the leader is motivated to step in and address it.

### The Parish Council: What It Is Not

The new canon law makes very clear what was not very clear before; The parish council is not a legislative body. It is not a policy-making, decree issuing, statute-formulating council. It does not enact, decree, authorize or regulate; nor does it prohibit, enjoin, correct or enforce. It does not “pass bills” for the pastor to sign or veto.

I have heard recently that the study of Latin is making a great comeback in Virginia. That is quite a consolation for one like me who, for 10 solid but trying years, was taught his college and postgraduate courses through the medium of Latin in the classroom, including the study of Hebrew!

Latin is sometimes richer than English in its shades of meaning. For example, we speak of Vatican Council and the Third Council of Baltimore. Here the English word council comes from Latin concilium, and indicates a legislative body. But we also speak of St. Matthew's parish council and the Arlington priests' council. Here the English council comes from the Latin consilium, which clearly indicates a non-legislative body or a consultative body ... a meaning clearly lost in the English translation.

That literary loss has been the cause of some confusion in understanding the role of a parish council. To obviate any such future “loss in translation” the new Code of Canon Law reminds us explicitly that a parish council (consilium) is “consultative only” (Canon 536).

Second, the parish council is not a finance council. Church law now requires that “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...aid the pastor in the administration of parish goods” (Canon 537).

One whole area, therefore, of the pastor's responsibilities lies outside the scope and purview of the parish council, and is assigned instead to a distinct consultative body, the finance council.

How separate the spheres of finance council and parish council? Some have suggested the distinction between “goods” and “services”; between “administration” and “ministries”; between what used to be termed the “spiritualties” and the “temporalities” of parish life. Some would divide it into the areas of the pastor's responsibilities as shepherd and as manager.

In any case, it is clear from the new law of the church that the scope of the pastoral council does not extend into the administration of the parish, but is restricted to what are called “pastoral” activities. That is why the precise title of what we have come to know as parish council or parish advisory board is the pastoral council of a parish.

Third, the parish council, or let us hereafter refer to it as the pastoral council, is not the grievance machinery of the parish. As we described above, the pastoral council's primary function is not to assure the faithful's right to be heard; nor is it the pastor's primary vehicle to take the pulse of the parish.

## What a Pastoral Council Is

Deliberately to enhance the quality of parish life and pastoral activity is the sole purpose of creating and utilizing a pastoral council. A pastor establishes a council to expand and enhance the decision-making process of 1) pastoral planning and goal setting; 2) developing and implementing pastoral programs; 3) improving pastoral services; 4) evaluating pastoral effectiveness.

Father Bertram Griffin, in a recent article in *Chicago Studies* (April 1984), summed it up rather graphically:

“The purpose of the pastoral planning council is to study the life and activity of the people of God; that is, to research the needs, the ideas, the hopes of the people of God, their actions and so on; secondly, to evaluate the parish in conformity with the Gospel; and thirdly, to recommend policies, procedures and programs. The job of the parish council, therefore, is not to decide whether the American flag will be in or out of the sanctuary, or whether coleslaw will be served at the parish dinner. The job of the parish council is to deal with the mission of the church, long-range and short-range goals and objectives, and to design those procedures and processes by which the pastoral work of the church is to be accomplished. It does not coordinate the work of the church. You do not have to attend a boring meeting once a month to hear what everybody else is doing. That is not the idea of a parish council in the revised code” (pp. 58-59).

The purpose of the pastoral council is to counsel the pastor in the area of pastoral activities. This of course is more simply said than done! The phrase “pastoral activities” seems to be one of those all-embracing phrases that can extend to almost anything.

Here again I think that the new Code of Canon Law can help us focus in on the proper agenda. More than ever before, the law of the church has spelled out the pastoral activities of the pastor (Canons 528-529). These two canons speak of what the church considers basic pastoral work in a parish:

1. Instruction in the full range of the faith and catechetical formation.
2. Programs promoting gospel values, including issues of social justice.
3. Catholic education of children and young adults.
4. Outreach to fallen-away Catholics.
5. Ecumenism and evangelization.
6. Programs of sacramental life and preparation.
7. Promotion of Eucharistic devotion.
8. Enhancement of programs for the sacraments of penance and holy communion.
9. Incultation of prayer life, especially within families.
10. Effective participation in the liturgy.
11. Methods of acquaintance with parishioners, the welcoming of newcomers, home visiting, efforts at building community.
12. Motivation of the spiritual and corporal works of mercy.
13. Efforts of special care for the sick and dying.

14. Tangible concern for the poor, the afflicted, the lonely, the exiled.
15. Fostering of solid Christian family life.
16. Promotion of the lay apostolate.
17. Strengthening of extra parochial relations with the bishop, diocesan pastoral efforts and a worldwide Catholic identity.

In a word, the role of the pastoral council is to help the pastor identify pastoral needs in the parish, help him plan pastoral programs and improve pastoral services, evaluate the effectiveness of existing programs and services with a view to their improvement or, at times, their substitution or termination.

I don't think it too far off the mark to surmise that most conflict in parish councils has arisen not because of the substance of a decision, but because of the manner in which it was made.

### Some Observations and Suggestions

1. *Keep the procedural norms of the pastoral council as simple as possible.* The structure of an ecclesial advisory (i.e., consultative) body is very simple, while the structure of an ecclesial legislative, executive or judicial body is tightly regulated.

Let me give an example from church structure. The local bishop must have a board of consultors (an advisory body of six to 12 priests) who counsel the bishop in various sectors of diocesan administration. In this capacity they have no formal machinery, constitution or bylaws to regulate their advisory activity. The consultation of bishop and consultors is pursued by simple dialogue and exchange. However, beyond its advisory duties, the board or consultors has the unique prerogative of electing a temporary administrator of the diocese when, for example, the bishop dies or is transferred. Church law, in this case, has made careful and stringent statutes to govern the election and concomitant duties of the consultors during the vacancy of the diocese. To put it "ecclesially," to advise does not require structures; but to elect or to govern does indeed require clear statutes. The same could be said of the College of Cardinals in their dual capacity of advising the Holy Father and of electing a new pontiff.

2. *Narrow the scope, competence and agenda of the pastoral council.* Since quality of advice is far more important than quantity, it is eminently advisable that a council take on only a limited number of issues which are really significant. Quality of advice is all important, often requiring plenty of homework. When the quality of advice is high, it is usually compelling and determines the final choice. The quality of pastoral activity in a parish or across a diocese depends heavily on the quality of the consultative process in planning and decision making. It is difficult to overestimate the value of good consultation.

"With the introduction of the new law, the people in parish council ministry will, hopefully, have an opportunity to reflect on past experience. It may well be that we will see emerging a true pastoral council on the parish level, leaving the development and coordination of ministerial committees and apostolic lay organizations to parish staff, thereby avoiding the growing sense of boredom on parish super councils where the only action month after month is hearing reports from committees, commissions and organizations, each having a reserved seat on the board" (Griffin, "Code, Community, Ministry," Chicago Studies, April 1984, pp. 61-62).

3. *The pastor is the primary selector of the council's agenda.* While council members should have full freedom to add to the agenda, the work of the council should be determined mainly by the person to whom the body is advisory. It is clearly part of the pastor's leadership role to select pastoral topics and projects, programs and services, which really need consideration. There's some truth in the old adage: "A leader is not one who does things well, but rather one who finds the right things to do."

4. *The pastor is not a member of the pastoral council.* This is typical of the structure of an ecclesial advisory body. For example, the Holy Father is not a member of the College of Cardinals, nor is the bishop a member of the diocesan board of consultors or of the diocesan pastoral council. It would be off-target to debate whether the pastor is a voting or a non-voting member of the pastoral council.

5. *The ability to listen outweighs the ability to speak.* I have long been convinced that for both pastor and pastoral council members the ability to listen is far more valuable in the creation of good ideas than the ability to speak and that the ability to "feel with the church" (*sentire cum ecclesia*) is far more productive to good pastoral activity than the ability to be eminently logical in one's reasoning.

6. *No pastor, no council.* When a parish loses its pastor (through death, retirement, transfer, etc.), all activity of the pastoral council has to cease until the new pastor reconvenes the council.

#### And So, in Conclusion

I pray that what I have written here will be perceived as more than a short course in the new canon law on the subject of consultation in the church (though knowledge of the law is not at all to be disparaged). I pray that these few thoughts may help to prompt far greater consultation in parishes and a deeper unity within the people of God and their sharing in Jesus' mission here on earth.

It was in high school religion class that I learned of the four marks of the church, the four features that Jesus gave his church to allow it to be recognized as his church, the four "notes" that we profess every Sunday in reciting the Creed that comes down to us from the fourth century – unity, holiness, catholicity and apostolicity.

It was a pleasant theological reminder to find the new law saying so plainly that a diocese (like Arlington) constitutes a particular church in which the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church of Christ is truly present and operative" (Canon 369).

But if the four marks are present and operative in a diocese, they must also be present and operative in the individual parishes that comprise the diocese. If the pastoral council of a parish can achieve one supreme value, it is to work actively with the pastor to make their parish truly one, holy, catholic and apostolic. Together they are called to promote and enliven the God-given characteristics of:

1. *Unity:* by fostering among the total parish community a unity of faith, of liturgy and worship, of goals and leadership.

2. *Holiness:* by presenting clearly the image of the parish as genuinely dedicated to the sanctification of all its people.

3. *Catholicity:* by helping to reach out to everyone – to the elderly, the young, the unborn, the handicapped, to families, to non-Catholics – to everyone!

4. *Apostolicity*: by cultivating the parish's ties to the Holy Father, the bishop, the worldwide efforts of the church, aware of its historic identity with the church of the apostles.

The pastoral council is called to be the core group that supports the pastor in the leadership role, expands his awareness of needs and achievements, counsels him on pastoral outreach while affirming his indispensable office as the people's mediator with the Father and as their tangible link with the bishop and the universal church.

That's quite a calling. But God's grace is there to make it a reality.

## **APPENDIX II**

### Selected Canons from The Code of Canon Law

**Can. 212 §1** The Christian faithful, conscious of their own responsibility, are bound by Christian obedience to follow what the sacred pastors, as representatives of Christ, declare as teachers of the faith or determine as leaders of the Church.

**§2** The Christian faithful are free to make known their needs, especially spiritual ones, and their desires to the pastors of the Church.

**§3** In accord with the knowledge, competence and preeminence which they possess, they have the right and even at times a duty to manifest to the sacred pastors their opinion on matters which pertain to the good of the Church, and they have a right to make their opinion known to the other Christian faithful, with due regard for the integrity of faith and morals and reverence toward their pastors, and with consideration for the common good and the dignity of persons.

**Can. 528 §1** Qualified lay persons are capable of assuming from their sacred pastors those ecclesiastical offices and functions which they are able to exercise in accord with the prescriptions of law.

Lay persons who excel in the necessary knowledge, prudence, and uprightness are capable of assisting the pastors of the Church as experts or advisors; they can do so even in councils, in accord with the norm of the law.

**Can. 528 §1** 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 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.

**§2** 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 sacraments of the Most Holy Eucharist and the sacrament 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.

**Can. 529 §1** 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.

**§2** 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.

**Can. 532** The pastor represents the parish in all juridic affairs in accord with the norm of law; he is to see to it that the goods of the parish are administered in accord with the norms of can. 1281-1288.

**Can. 536 §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 office give their help in fostering pastoral activity.

**§2** This pastoral council possesses a consultative vote and is governed by norms determined by the diocesan bishop.

**Can. 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 can. 532.

**Can. 1281 §1** Without prejudice to the provisions of the statutes, administrators act invalidly when they go beyond the limits and manner of ordinary administration, unless they have first received in writing from the Ordinary the faculty to do so.

**§2** The statutes are to determine what acts go beyond the limits and manner of ordinary administration. If the statutes are silent on this point, it is for the diocesan bishop, after consulting the finance committee, to determine these acts for the persons subject to him.

**§3** Except and insofar as it is to its benefit, a juridical person is not held responsible for the invalid actions of its administrators. The juridical person is, however, responsible when such actions are valid but unlawful, without prejudice to its right to bring an action or have recourse against the administrators who have caused its damage.