

Role of Parish Pastoral Councils

The Mission of the Church

Vatican Council II in its document, *Lumen Gentium*, tells us that the Church is a mystery of God's love.

- ❖ Established by Christ as a communion of life, love and truth, [the Church] is taken up by him as the instrument for the salvation of all...and is sent forth into the whole world (#9)
- ❖ The Spirit dwells in the Church and in the hearts of the faithful...and bestows upon her varied hierarchic and charismatic gifts. (#4)
- ❖ All in the Church...are called to holiness...(#39)

The Church is the living body of Christ in which all share in various and diverse ways the responsibility for the mission given to the Church by the Lord to:

- ❖ Worship God in joyous celebration of the Mass and sacraments
- ∴ Proclaim the Word of God to all people
- ❖ Witness the love and redemptive healing of Christ
- ❖ Serve those in need in both Church and society

In the *Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity* the Council Fathers affirmed the responsibility of the laity to actively share in the work of Christ. Lay Christians were not only challenged to work toward having the spirit of the Gospel permeate and improve the temporal order, they were to be actively contributing to the life and activity of the church, share responsibility for the life of the church with the pastor and parish staff.

The responsibilities of lay Christians come from the sacraments of initiation especially Baptism. "Because they are partners in the priestly, prophetic and regal role of Christ, lay people share actively in the life and action of his Christ. Within the communities of the Church their cooperation is so much needed that without it the Apostolate of pastors would be largely ineffectual..." (Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity, Chapter 5)

For Reflection: What implications flow from the understanding of the Church and the role of laity within the Church? How might the church at the parish level respond to this challenge?

The Parish

"A parish is a definite community of the Christian faithful established on a stable basis within a particular church; the pastoral care of the parish is entrusted to a pastor as its own shepherd under the authority of the diocesan bishop." (Canon 515)

Clergy/ religious and laity together form a parish/ a portion of God's People whose pastoral care is entrusted to a pastor so that all can continue the mission of Jesus here on earth. The People of God have different gifts, roles and responsibilities, yet all are under one head/ Christ Jesus-sisters and brothers in Him.

The document on the Liturgy describes parishes as "the most important (groupings of the faithful), for in some way they represent the visible Church constituted throughout the world (*Sacrosanctum Concilium #42*) The parish unites into one community the different neighborhoods/ the diverse cultural, spiritual and apostolic groups, as well as the different age groups and mindsets. At the heart of parish are the numerous "domestic churches" of the faithful. The parish fulfills its mission by:

Feeding the faith of God's people through the liturgical life of the community.

Feeding the faith of God's people through on-going formation in faith for both children and adults.

Reaching out in service to those in need

Forming bonds of communion and solidarity among diverse peoples

Assisting the people of God in passing on the Good News of the Gospel to the next generation

The document on the Laity calls attention to the role of the laity within the life of the church/parish. "Nourished by their active participation in the liturgical life of their community, laity engage zealously in its apostolic works; they draw people towards the Church...; they ardently cooperate in the spread of the Word of God,...by their expert assistance they increase the efficacy of the care of souls as well as of the administration of the goods of the Church.'1

For Reflection: Given the mission of a parish, what do the people of God have a right to expect from their parish community?

Role of 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 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)

The pastor is responsible for the overall welfare of the parish and is accountable to the Bishop. He has responsibilities which are uniquely his arising from his ordination and appointment to the pastorate by the Bishop.

A pastor, father and servant of the people of God, is called:

To see that the word of God in its entirety is announced to those living in the parish through homilies and catechetical formation

To foster works by which the spirit of the gospel, including works of social justice, are promoted

To work for the reconciliation of those who have ceased to practice their religion

To see that the Most Holy Eucharist is the center of the parish assembly of the faithful and foster the sacramental life of the community

To come to know the community through family visitation, sharing the cares, worries, griefs and joys of the faithful

To make a special effort to seek out the poor! afflicted! lonely, refugee, those in special difficulty

To faithfully steward the resources of the Church

To strive to foster a communion of faith and unity among all members of the parish community through his role as reconciler, animator, unifier and healer

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 and to call forth the gifts of the community in service of all

To be chief administrator of the parish and oversee its daily operations

For Reflection: As you reflect on the role of the pastor, what responsibilities are most enhanced by the assistance of the laity? How might collaboration foster greater vitality in a parish?

Role and Function of Parish Pastoral Councils

The Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity affirmed that laity has an active part to contribute to the life and activity of the church. They share a responsibility for its life with the pastor and parish staff. The Second Vatican Council highly recommended councils as a means of promoting pastoral activity.

In so far as possible, there should be councils which assist the apostolic work of the Church, either in the field of making the Gospel known or in the charitable, social or other spheres. To this end, clergy and religious should appropriately cooperate with the laity...Councils of this type should be established as far as possible on the parochial, inter-parochial and inter-diocesan level.

The Diocese of Sacramento, in faithful response to this recommendation! mandated Parish Pastoral Councils for all parishes in 2000. (Diocesan Statute, #58)

The Parish Pastoral Council is a leadership community rooted in prayer, open to the guidance of the Holy Spirit, committed to patient listening and study, and working to recommend the plans and directions that will enable the parish to respond most fully to what Jesus asks of us in these times. It rests on the tripod of prayer, study and action.

Paul VI stated that the purpose of the parish pastoral council is "to examine and consider all that relates to pastoral work and to offer practical conclusions on these matters, so that the life and activity of the People of God be brought into greater conformity with the Gospel" (*Ecclesiae Sanctae* #16) Pope John Paul II further reflected upon the task of pastoral councils saying: "Examining and solving pastoral problems by general discussion ought to find its adequate and structured development through a more convinced, extensive and decided appreciation for Parish Pastoral Councils (*The Lay Members of Christ's Faithful People*, #27.) In this context, "pastoral" refers to whatever pertains to the work of the pastor! including the well-being of the community! the needs of the parish and concerns that will need attention in the future. In considering these matters, the council seeks to discern how God is present in the situation.

For Reflection: In reflecting upon the vision outlined and the three primary tasks of councils identified by Paul VI:

to investigate and consider all that relates to pastoral matters
to prayerfully ponder these things
to offer practical conclusions and recommendations to the pastor

What principles guide its work? What are **not** among its duties?

Membership on Parish Pastoral Councils

Four principles guide the selection of Parish Pastoral Council members. They are the Principle of Gifts, the Principle of Clear Expectations, the Principle of Inclusion and the Principle of Discernment.

The Principle of Gifts

Every parish has members who have one or more of the gifts needed for council ministry.

Implication: The identification of individuals possessing the gifts needed for the council is of vital importance. Such identification of gifts is enhanced through selection processes that consult the wider parish community on potential candidates for the council membership.

The Principle of Clear Expectations

Clear expectation relating to task, time and terms must be articulated prior to selection

Implication: Persons need to be clear on what they are saying "Yes" to. Pastors must have a clear sense of what they expect from the Parish Pastoral Council and make that expectation explicit. For Parish Pastoral Council members to fully commit to the role, they must know how long they are to serve, what the time demands entail and what will be asked of them,

The Principle of Inclusion

The Parish Pastoral Council represents the wisdom of the whole parish community. Its composite make-up should adequately reflect the reality of the parish family.

Implication: Parish Pastoral Councils should adequately reflect the ethnic diversity of the parish family as well as its variety of generational mindsets. While no member represents a "constituency", it is important to draw from the wisdom and understanding found in a variety of experience. Such diversity allows the council to speak out of experience rather than projecting needs upon others which might not be valid.

The Principle of Discernment

While it is the prerogative to select and appoint members of the Parish Pastoral Council, such membership is a ministry of service prompted by the Spirit. Selection of members is most fully responsive to the movement of the Spirit when it is marked by knowledge of the task, consultation, reflection, and prayer. Such a process is called discernment.

Discernment means living life prayerfully-bringing oneself to God as honestly and completely as possible, and then, in faith, responding as fully as possible. A life lived this way, trying to bring all one's faculties into harmony with God's transforming grace, is consecration in practice. Our discernment is to be guided by:

- *prayerful consideration of the needs of our time
- *Gospel priorities, especially the needs of those who are poor
- *pastoral priorities of the universal and local church
- *our talents, resources and limitations (Gerald May)

Implications: The selection and appointment of Parish Pastoral Councils is a process that takes sufficient time to assess what gifts are needed, who possesses those gifts, who best can speak to the needs of the whole parish community and who the Spirit is calling forth. The process for selection is outlined in Parish Pastoral Council Guidelines of the Diocese. (pp. 4-6)

The process used for identifying new council members will vary from parish to parish, but ought to include some opportunity for parishioners to participate. The entire process needs to be permeated with private and public prayer to the Holy Spirit. The intention should be included in the prayers of intercession at each Mass.

Ordinarily, the composition of the Council should be a balance between members:

- ❖ Nominated and elected by the parish at large
- ∴ Selected by a process of discernment
- ∴ Appointed by the pastor in consultation with his pastoral team

The number of council members should consist of not less than 6, or more than 15 members.

Serving on the council is a ministry to the whole parish. When considering membership on the council, the following criteria should be kept in mind. Potential candidates should be:

- ∴ Of proven faith,
- ❖ With sound morals,
- ∴ Demonstrating the gifts of wisdom and prudence,
- ∴ Willing to commit their time, talent and wisdom in a consultative and collaborative manner

Council members should have the ability to study and reflect prayerfully, and to recognize and respect the viewpoints of others.

...In the spirit of the diocesan Synod, due regard is to be given to the cultural, ethnic and gender diversity of the community, social conditions, professions, gifts and roles when choosing council members. (Synod Initiative #8, Objective 6)

For Reflection: Given what is recommended for the selection of Parish Pastoral Council members, what preparatory steps would you need to take if you were a pastor, member of the parish staff or a member of the selection committee for new council members?