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Guidelines for Parish Pastoral Councils
(Department of Pastoral Ministry)
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Archdiocese of San Francisco

DEPARTMENT OF PASTORAL
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Chapter I: Introduction

Why Pastoral Councils?

This "Guidelines for Parish Pastoral Councils" should answer two questions immediately: what does a pastor gain by having a council: and what do parishioners accomplish by serving on such a council?

The pastor and his staff attend to the daily administration of the parish, often concerned with mundane, necessary details that absorb both attention and energy. In this context, there is a genuine need for a pastoral council to be a "keeper of the vision", a guardian of the larger picture. Such questions as: where has the Second Vatican Council asked us, this parish, to go? Where do we as a parish hope to be in five years? What programs are needed to make our parish viable? concern the pastoral council members who offer the pastor and his staff wise and prudent advice on how to respond to these questions.

The pastor can read what experts have to say in theory, but he needs to listen to what a parish council recommends as best to him for this specific parish.

Parishioners wish to serve on pastoral councils because they desire to advise the pastor and his staff wisely and prudently. They believe that the parish community possesses the gifts of the Holy Spirit and wish to help the pastor discern what the Holy Spirit is saying within the parish, Archdiocese, Universal Church. They wish to participate in the governance of their parish and have the satisfaction of doing an important task that contributes to the well being and growth of their parish.

Hopefully pastors and council members who read these pages will find guidelines for establishing councils, as the Church recommends, and for making them a fruitful part of parish ministry.

Chapter II: The Nature and Foundations of the Parish Pastoral Council

Official documents of the Church offer us a number of guiding points about the pastoral council.

Vatican II highly recommended parish councils as an effective means to promote pastoral activity.¹ The Code of Canon Law reinforced this recommendation of Vatican II.² Through the pastoral council, the pastor discovers the needs and desires of the parish because the council members are able to study and reflect on pastoral problems and to recommend practical solutions.³ The pastor, then, consults them to know his people more profoundly.⁴

The Church has made a number of statements concerning the purpose of parish councils. They help the parish life to conform ever more closely to the Gospel.⁵ They coordinate parish associations and initiatives.⁶ They advise the pastor on how to plan and implement pastoral ministry systematically and effectively.⁷

¹ Vatican II, "Decree on the Pastoral Office of Bishops in the Church", Christus Dominus, October 28, 1965, no. 27, translated by Matthew Dillon, OSB, Edward O'Leary, OP, and Austin Flannery, OP, in Austin P. Flannery, General Editor, The Documents of Vatican II. Preface by John Cardinal Wright (New York: Costello Publishing Company, 1975), p. 580.

² John Paul II, Code of Canon Law, Latin-English Edition, Translation prepared under the auspices of the Canon Law Society of America (Washington, D.C.: Canon Law Society of America, 1983), canons 511 - 514 and 536. While canon law does not specify the structure and form of parish councils, guidance can be found in the canons governing the purpose and function of diocesan pastoral councils.

³ Vatican II, "Dogmatic Constitution on the Church," Lumen Gentium, November 21, 1964, no. 37, translated by Colman O'Neill, OP, in Flannery, editor, "The Documents of Vatican II", pp. 394-395.

⁴ John Paul II, Code of Canon Law, Canon 529, par. 1.

⁵ Paul VI, Ecclesiae Sanctae I, August 6, 1966, "Apostolic Letter, written MoTu Proprio, on the implementation of the Decrees, Christus Dominus, Presbyterorum Ordinis, and Perfectae Caritatis", no. 16, translated from the Latin text in AAS 58 (1966), pp. 757-758, by Austin Flannery, in Flannery, editor, The Documents of Vatican II, p. 601.

⁶ Vatican II, "Decree of the Apostolate of Lay People," Apostolicam Actuositatem, no. 26, in Flannery, editor, The Documents of Vatican II, pp. 791-2.

⁷ Sacred Congregation for Bishops, Directory on the Pastoral Ministry of Bishops, (Ecclesiae Imago, May 31, 1973), no. 204, translation prepared by the Benedictine monks of the Seminary of Christ the King, Mission, British Columbia (Ottawa: Publications Service of the Canadian Catholic Conference, 1974), p.105.

The parish council is called "pastoral" not only because of its focus on pastoral concerns, but because of its unique relationship to the pastor, who initiates and establishes the council, who convenes its meetings and presides at them, and who seeks the good of his people by interacting with the council.⁸

Although the explicit teachings about pastoral councils are recent, they are to be found in our tradition from the beginning, captured in four words: communion, participation, gifts and consultation.

We are, first of all, a communion formed by God's initiative on our behalf through Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit. The First Letter of Peter proclaims: "You are 'a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a consecrated nation, a people set apart' to sing the praises of God who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light."⁹ Our communion begun with our baptismal experience is the source of all our efforts on behalf of the Church.

Participation, secondly, in the life of the Church is an outgrowth of our communion. "As a body is one though it has many parts, and all the parts of the body, though many, are one body, so also Christ."¹⁰ Baptism commissions every Christian to carry on the saving mission of Christ.

The gifts of the Spirit, thirdly, require us to admit that each of us has certain gifts, while others possess still other gifts. We are incomplete without each other. Pastors have the gifts of leadership; they seek council members with gifts of wisdom and prudence. Thus there is lived out what Paul has written: "There are different kinds of spiritual gifts but the same Spirit; there are different forms of service but the same Lord; there are different workings but the same God who produces all of them in everyone."¹¹

Finally consultation reminds us that Church leaders from the earliest days would consult the community. The Apostles and elders met at the Council of Jerusalem to discuss whether gentile Christians needed to keep the Law of Moses (Cf. Acts 15 and Galatians 2). No decision was made until all parties, including Paul and Barnabas, had a chance to speak. As in the first century, so now pastors consult counselors to receive wise advice and to hold the community together.

⁸Canons 514, par. 1 and 536, par 1.

⁹ I Peter, 2:9.

¹⁰ I Cor., 12:12.

¹¹ I Cor., 12:4.

Thus we see that the parish council, while a new creation of Vatican II, has its roots in Christian tradition that always spoke of communion, participation, gifts and consultation.

Chapter III: Purpose and Function

The Council as a Pastoral Planning Body

After seeing what the Church has said about pastoral councils in its official documents and lived-out experience, we now ask the question: what do pastoral councils actually do?

Pope Paul VI has described the purpose of a pastoral council: “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 may be brought into greater conformity with the Gospel.”¹² In this description, we find three tasks assigned to the pastoral council: to examine, to consider, and to recommend.

To examine. Notice, first, that the object of the pastoral council’s examination, “pastoral work” is left sufficiently unspecified in order to include all that concerns the pastor and his staff in serving the parish. The council identifies issues and studies them either at the request of the pastor or on its own initiative.

To consider. The pastoral council certainly considers the data it has collected from its examination by trying to discern in what direction God is inviting the parish to go, what is behind the data.

To recommend. After the pastoral council has examined and considered any pastoral work, it now makes a recommendation to the pastor and his staff on what should be done for this parish at this time in its history.

From the description of the work of the pastoral council, the word that best summarizes its activity is planning. A look at the many sides of planning now follows.

Planning, first of all, involves the future of the parish: Where are we being asked to go as a parish by the Scripture, by the Second Vatican Council, by current papal and episcopal teaching? Where are we being asked to go to meet the present and future needs of our parish?

From attempting to answer these questions, the pastoral council is ready to embrace side two of planing: the creation of a parish vision. Councils help the pastor and his staff see the needs of the parish, be they: better liturgy, greater hospitality, more effective religious education, outreach to seniors.

¹²Paul VI, *Ecclesiae Sanctae*, no. 16, in Flannery, editor, *The Documents of Vatican II*, p. 601.

After the vision of parish needs has been created, the council next prioritizes them. With limited resources of personnel and budget, each parish can only do so much. Thus, it is crucial for the council to put the needs of the parish in an order of importance.

When the parish needs have been listed and prioritized, then the council begins the work described for it by Canon Law. That task is to study how to meet those needs. "The good council investigates the parish situation. It consults parishioners and examines what experts say about it. It considers various options and the cost of each. It learns all it can about the matter under consideration."¹³

Now the council is able to make its recommendation to the pastor and his staff, and the council's work is completed.

The work of implementation can now begin. This task belongs to the pastor and his staff and to those they invite to participate in the effort. Should council members be asked to help, they are, strictly speaking, no longer working as members of the pastoral council.

This chapter has let us look at the description of the work of a pastoral council given by Paul VI: to examine, to consider, and to recommend. It has further explored the elements included in planning: eyes in the future, vision, assessment and prioritizing of parish needs, then recommendation of an action to the pastor and his staff.

¹³Mark F. Fischer, Chairman, Unofficial Guidelines for Parish Pastoral Councils, Archdiocese of Los Angeles, Second Draft, p.9.

Chapter IV: Pastoral Council Meetings

Leadership and Principles of Operation

For a pastoral council to perform its task successfully it needs a pastor, a chairperson, and an agenda—all well prepared.

The Pastor The pastor is an ex officio member of the Council and presides over it.¹⁴ Certain attitudes of his are presumed once he has convened a council. He wishes, first of all, to listen to a source of wisdom larger than his own, saying by his presence on the council that he does not have all the answers, but that he believes in a collaborative process where the Spirit's gifts can be shared. He, secondly, implies his trust in the council members to work with him for the good of the parish and thereby empowers them to perform their ministry. He, thirdly, enters a covenant with them, agreeing to pursue an issue with them, to hear their recommendation, and to express his dissatisfaction with the recommendation should that be the case and all issues have not been resolved. He finally values and maintains the honesty of the exchange.

The Chairperson The chairperson will find invaluable help on how to prepare and run an effective pastoral council meeting in Making Parish Meetings Work (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 1997) by Medard Laz.

With this recommendation made, we can best describe the work of the chairperson by relating it to the work of the whole council. In the area of the council's investigation, the chairperson makes certain the council understands the question or issue placed before it; encourages reactions from the members not unlike the process of brainstorming; recognizes proposals that require deeper investigation, research and consultation; senses the developing of a common opinion; invites volunteers to undertake responsibilities to deepen the input.

In the area of consideration, the chairperson invites the council to reflect on and ponder the results of its investigation. The chairperson makes certain that everyone understands the purpose of the investigation as an attempt to respond to the issue raised by the pastor or the council. He/she refers to previous minutes as an index of progress made and sees to it that each member has the opportunity to express an opinion. He/she distinguishes between questions that can be readily answered and those needing further research.

¹⁴John Paul II, Code of Canon Law, canon 536, par. 1. It may be helpful to record here resolutions passed at the Council of Priests meeting June 5, 1986 and approved by the Archbishop: a parish council ceases to exist when the parish becomes vacant through the transfer, resignation or death of the pastor and is revived or replaced at the discretion of the succeeding pastor. (C. R. 85/86-9).

In the area of recommendation, the chairperson has a delicate and crucial task here: to enable the council to reach agreement about what course of action to recommend to the pastor and his staff. He/she must be able to articulate the truth they have discovered and embraced. We might add that only the most important issues need be reached by consensus, decisions that must be widely supported in order to be effective.

Forming the Agenda A well planned agenda is essential to a successful pastoral council meeting and assures that council members will return for subsequent meetings, convinced they are not wasting their time. Pastor, chairperson, council leaders (vice-chairperson and council secretary) compose the agenda and have it distributed to the council members at least a week in advance so that they can prepare for the meeting.

Some elements of a well done agenda would be:

1. At the top of the page, the date, time, duration and location of the meeting;
2. Time for prayer and formation of the members;
3. Reference to minutes of previous meeting with intent for approval;
4. Topics to be discussed (old and new business) and what the council is asked to accomplish under each topic;¹⁵
5. Opportunity to evaluate the meeting and determine time for the next one.
6. The allotment of a specific amount of time for each item.

We have seen now that the pastor, the chairperson, and the agenda made crucial contributions to the effective ministry of a pastoral council.

¹⁵ After each agenda item, council members should know what they are expected to do: listen, brainstorm, refine, debate, draw a conclusion.

Chapter V: The Council and the Parish

Members, Committees, and Relationships

After seeing the roles of the pastor, council chairperson, and well prepared agenda, we now focus our attention on the members themselves. We will try to answer these questions: what makes a good pastoral council member? What are the criteria for selection of members? What is a helpful selection process? How do council committees function? What is the relationship of the pastoral council to other groups (parish staff, finance council, parish organizations)?

Membership

Let us begin by observing that the council should have a workable number of members. If it is too small, it may not represent various segments of the parish; if it is too large, it may be unwieldy and accomplish very little. Fifteen members or less seems sufficient.

Canon Law speaks in general terms about who should be selected for membership on the council. They are chosen, it says, to reflect the wisdom of the entire People of God.¹⁶

To fulfill the tasks the council is to perform, members need specific gifts: the ability to study, investigate, and examine pastoral issues thoroughly. They need further the capacity to reflect widely and to ponder deeply, to listen to differing opinions, synthesize various points of view, and to discern what is best for the parish.¹⁷

Members should be Catholics in good standing who celebrate liturgy with the parish and are committed to a life of prayer, the mission and ministries of the parish, and to the Church's understanding of consultation as reflected in these guidelines. They must be willing to participate in ongoing education and the council's group process. In a word, they must be genuine collaborators. An excellent source for creating such council members is: Collaborative Ministry: Skills and Guidelines by Loughlan Sofield, ST, and Carroll Juliano, SHCJ (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 1987).

¹⁶John Paul II, Code of Canon Law, Canon 512, par. 2.

¹⁷Vatican II, "Decree on the Pastoral Office of Bishops in the Church," no. 27, in Flannery, editor, The Documents of Vatican II, p.580.

Finally the council members should be representative of the whole parish; they make the wisdom of the whole community present.¹⁸ Thus the membership reflects the various cultures, ages, and interests of the parish community.

Selection of Members

Three items of consideration assure the successful selection of members for the pastoral council: recognition of God's gifts to people, clear expectations for council members and discernment.

A few words about each item follow:

Gifts: People eligible to serve on the pastoral council should have an understanding of the parish joined with an ability to study issues and reflect upon them. They should have, moreover, a knowledge and competence that are widely recognized.¹⁹ Finally they should be people of faith and Gospel values who celebrate Sunday liturgy, the Easter Vigil and significant liturgies in the life of the parish, and who participate in parish activities and events. People lacking these gifts will be of no help to a pastoral council.

Clear Expectations: When recruiting members for the council, the pastor should offer clear expectations regarding the major tasks of the council, what projects and issues he will be asking the council to undertake, the length of the term of office,²⁰ the frequency of meetings, and the expectations that the people on the council will be collaborative. When all the cards are on the table, people who accept the pastor's invitation usually function more effectively.

Discernment: The pastor is encouraged to ask the help of parishioners in selecting members for the council. After presenting to these parishioners the role of the pastoral council and the expectations for its members, he can then invite their informed input. A popular election of members by parishioners who do not understand the workings of a pastoral council is less than helpful.

Committees

Most pastoral council committees are usually two types: an executive committee and a variety of ad hoc committees, which disband after they have accomplished their task.

¹⁸ Sacred Congregation for the Clergy, "Private Letter on 'Pastoral Councils,'" no. 7.

¹⁹ Vatican II, "Dogmatic Constitution on the Church," no. 37, in Flannery, editor, The Documents of Vatican II, pp. 394-395.

²⁰ Two- or three-year terms of office are most common with staggered terms so that only a few members leave.

Executive Committee: The executive committee usually consists of the pastor and the council officers (chairperson, vice-chairperson, and secretary). The pastor presides over this committee which determines the agenda for council meetings and sees that the members have copies of it. Parishioners may submit items for the agenda to this committee. The committee may react by placing it on the agenda or by determining that the item should be dealt with by some other group (pastoral staff, parish organization, finance committee). In either case, the parishioner should be informed of the committee's decision.

Ad Hoc Committees: It is helpful for the pastoral council to form ad hoc committees that can aid it in its tasks of studying an issue and reflecting on it. These committees can be helpful in gathering data, taking surveys, polling parishioners or consulting experts. When the task assigned has been completed, the committee ceases to be.

Relationship to the Parish

The pastoral council is not a group of experts in various fields of ministry but rather a gathering of people who represent the wisdom of the parish. They are able to tell, from the many options possible, what is right for the parish.

Parish staff may sit on the council, but usually they do not, and appear at meetings when they are needed for their input. Parochial vicars and pastoral associates should participate by virtue of their office because they work with the pastor to realize the pastoral care of the parish.

The pastoral council does not coordinate parish organizations; that ministry is the pastor's. But the council members should be aware of the role and purpose of each organization in order to advise the pastor should he have issues about them.

We have seen in this chapter some consideration about selecting members for the pastoral council, the committees it may have, and its relationship to other parish organizations.

Chapter Six: Starting Fresh

Steps for Forming a Parish Pastoral Council

If a pastor may have had a “pastoral council” that was merely the meeting of the heads of organizations or has arrived at a parish where no pastoral council exists, he may wish to start a council like the one described in these pages. This chapter will try to offer suggestions on how to accomplish this task.

Desire for a Council

The first step in the formation of a pastoral council is the pastor’s desire to have one. This desire flourishes in the pastor’s humble admission that he needs help in the form of practical wisdom and in maintaining the larger picture if he is to serve God’s People well. Once he determines that the parish will be better served by his forming a pastoral council, he may consult these guidelines which contain the contents of the Church’s teaching on the subject and the Office of Parish Life in the Archdiocesan Pastoral Center.

The Parish Staff

When the pastor has decided to form a pastoral council, he should involve the parish staff. Specifically, he should convey to them his motive for wanting a council, the way in which the council differs from the pastoral staff,²¹ and the benefits he thinks the council can offer the staff.

The Steering Committee

Once the pastor has decided to form a council and once the staff understands its relationship to the future council, he will then want to establish a Steering Committee, which will recommend to the pastor its practical conclusions about the council.

The tasks of the Steering Committee are fourfold:

1. To define the purpose of the future pastoral council;
2. To inform parishioners about the purpose;
3. To invite parishioners to participate in the council;
4. To oversee the selection of council members.

²¹ The parish staff will need to understand the relationship between the expertise they provide and the vision with practical advice the council of non-experts provides.

To achieve the first task, the Steering Committee must prepare a statement of the council's purpose, a constitution or foundational document about the council. This document should include: the purpose of the council, Church teaching about councils, frequency and length of meetings, and the selection process for membership.

The second and third tasks of the Steering Committee focus on the parishioners whom they educate about the purpose of the council (task #2) and whom they invite to join (task #3). Let it be said at the start that there are many ways of accomplishing these tasks; what follows are merely recommendations. In a series of open meetings, the pastor and the Steering Committee state the motive for the council, its purpose, issues it will be invited to address, possible items parishioners wish investigated, and an invitation to parishioners to participate on the council.

The fourth and final task of the Steering Committee is the overseeing of the selection of new council members. Please consult the last chapter for the general principles which underlie the selection of councilors. Once, however, there has been clarity about the purpose of a council, and the gifts members need, the selection of members becomes an easier task.

Three ways of selecting council members have appeared in recent literature about the subject: the "shared wisdom" model; "election committee" model; "combined" model.

"Shared Wisdom" model: After parishioners learn about council ministry and if they feel attracted to it, they nominate themselves.

"Election Committee" model: The Steering Committee screens nominees and proposes candidates for general election to the pastor.

"Combined" model: This approach includes the open meetings of the "shared wisdom" model and a small group to screen and select council members from the "election committee" model. A more detailed procedure for each model is available from the Office of Parish Life.

Hopefully, these guidelines will serve pastors and their parishes in planning for the future, in studying pastoral concerns with practical wisdom and in keeping the vision God's Word imparts to God's People.