

# **“Conversations on the Journey”**

## **Module II: Supportive Role of Parish Pastoral Councils**

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# Module II: Supportive Role of Parish Pastoral Councils

## Three Functions of Parish Pastoral Councils

The Parish Pastoral Council is a consultative body, pastoral in nature, because it strives to discern the movement of the Holy Spirit among God's people in the parish. A Parish Pastoral Council gives its help to the pastor in fostering pastoral activity:

**It investigates**, under the authority of the pastor, all those things which pertain to pastoral works

**It ponders** them

**It proposes** practical conclusions about them.

It is essential that Council meetings occur in the context of prayer and openness to the Holy Spirit, so that at all times the common good will prevail.

Specifically, the Parish Pastoral Council's purpose is to enhance the process of:

- ❖ Pastoral planning
- ❖ Developing pastoral programs
- ❖ Improving pastoral services
- ❖ Evaluating the pastoral effectiveness of various programs and services.  
[Parish Pastoral Council Guideline, Diocese of Sacramento]

While the recommendations of a Parish Pastoral Council are not binding, diocesan guidelines direct that these recommendations should be honored "unless there is a compelling reason to do otherwise. If there is a reason, the pastor should share this with the Council." Ultimately, the pastor is responsible for the implementation and adoption and of such recommendations.

**For Reflection:** As you reflect upon the life of your parish, what three items of concern might you bring to your parish pastoral council for investigation, pondering and recommended action? As a pastor what inner attitude would you need to have for such consultation to be successful? What would contribute to frustration in such a situation?

## The Council as Source of Knowledge

Pastoral practice within the Sacramento Diocese sets term limits for its pastors and parochial vicars. As pastors move to new parish communities, possibly in new geographical areas, parish pastoral councils provide for them a valuable source of information on parish, civic, legal and pastoral realities. When the membership of a council is appropriately diverse and represents a variety of skills, it is able to provide pastors with insights vital for the decision-making process.

As a consultative body to the pastor, pastoral council members provide the following types of information necessary for decision-making:

- ❖ **Knowledge of the talents, skills and abilities of parish members**  
Parishes thrive through effectively calling forth the gifts of all for the sake of God's reign. No one project, ministry or undertaking can adequately respond to the multiple needs that exist in a community. Parish pastoral council members, connected to the wider community, can assist in identifying persons with talents and interest in specific areas. Such knowledge is acquired over time.
- ❖ **Knowledge of parish history and customs**  
Every community has its own way of doing things. It also possesses special faith carriers which carry high emotional value for parishioners. Individuals within a parish also carry the parish history and interpretation of life. Since one of the tasks of a pastor is fostering the growth and development of the faith community, it follows that change will be part of that service. The parish pastoral council can assist in guiding those changes by identifying sensitive areas, honest feedback and pointing to the parish wisdom figures.
- ❖ **Knowledge of the multiple populations present within the community**  
Our diocese is among the most ethnically diverse communities in the United States. Many of the newly arrived immigrants are Catholics even though they may be non-catechized. Some members of these communities are economically marginalized. In addition to ethnic communities, parishes host many persons who hold differing theologies, life situations, age groupings, spiritualities. It is part of the unifying function of a pastor to bring all this diversity into oneness while honoring its blessing. The parish pastoral council can provide information about what populations exist, how they relate to the whole and specific needs. This is particularly important in the areas of social outreach and faith formation.
- ❖ **Knowledge of the wider civic community including the availability of resources, legal and political considerations**  
No parish can do it all. The ability to connect with resources and other service organizations enhances the parish's pastoral outreach. Exploring means of mutual support and collaboration multiplies the parish's capacity to meet the needs of the whole. A second area of concern is the political and civic climate in which a parish functions. The advocacy ability of parishioners and the ability to work with civic limitations is a valuable asset when establishing new social outreach programs or when undertaking building projects.

**For Reflection:** If you were a pastor newly assigned to a parish, what knowledge would be most important to you? What pitfalls might you avoid by having an effective consultative body?

## Research Role of Councils

One of the key responsibilities of a parish pastoral council is “to investigate, under the authority of the pastor, all those things which pertain to pastoral works.” Council members can significantly reduce the work of a pastor through fulfilling this responsibility. Research activities include a wide variety of actions:

- ❖ The parish pastoral council [PPC] can research “best practices” throughout the diocese or nation relating to desired pastoral initiatives.
- ❖ The PPC can interview parish members to assess pastoral needs within the community or to identify the strengths and limitations of parish programming.
- ❖ The PPC can develop or adopt survey methods to collect needed data to inform decisions relating to the parish practices. Such a process would be the CARA survey.
- ❖ The PPC can undertake serious study and exploration of church documents to better understand the reasons for current pastoral practice, particularly in the areas of liturgy, social justice and faith formation.
- ❖ The PPC can sort, analyze and interpret data available from multiple sources as a support for decision-making

The research role of a council must be complemented by the twin functions of reflection (pondering) and recommending. These two functions rely on the research step to provide accurate, factual, comprehensive and relevant data upon which reflection and recommendations can be based.

**For Reflection:** In what ways might the research duties of a parish pastoral council be needed in the following instances:

- a. A pastor wishes to remodel the church
- b. Parishioners ask to initiate a ministry of sheltering the homeless in the parish hall
- c. Council members suggest that young adults are not being served by the parish

## Circle of Wisdom

Parish pastoral councils provide pastors with a ministerial community that can comprise a circle of wisdom. The duties of parish pastoral councils include pondering the reality placed before it and recommending action that best serves the Gospel mission. No one person possesses the whole picture. Consultation with a pastoral council, rooted in prayer and the practice of discernment, can assist the pastor in reaching decisions that best serve the Church community.

A circle of wisdom is dependent upon prayer. The experience of listening to the word of God, sharing insights into that word and intercession for the needs of the parish are essential elements in every pastoral council meeting.

### At the Heart of our Gathering

The scriptures tell us that wherever two or more of us are gathered in the name of Jesus, he is in our midst. When you gather as a pastoral council, you gather in the name of Jesus for the sake of God's people. The role of the council, from a faith perspective, is two-fold:

1. To listen to the desire of God in terms of this specific community. This listening always remains within the context of our solidarity in the Risen Lord. It means that we must listen not only to God's desire for our parish but for the wider church and world.
2. To search together to discern what is the best response that can be given to what we have come to understand as God's desire.

In the light of these two faith tasks, the prayer of the Pastoral Council must always tune the members to attentiveness to these two dimensions of their call. Our prayer must be one of receptivity and discernment. Both of these tasks are dependent upon our attentiveness to the Holy Spirit and our receptivity to the Spirit's leadings.

#### **Implications:**

1. The prayer of Pastoral Councils must be rooted in the Word of God. Priority is placed on sharing the implications of the Sunday Gospel.
2. The prayer of Pastoral Councils places the work of the group under the guidance of the Holy Spirit and asks for the wisdom to hear the Spirit in and through each other.
3. The prayer of Pastoral Councils fosters solidarity with the community through its intercessory elements. When rooted in prayer, council members can free themselves from any personal agendas, be open to mutual influence and be unattached to any specific outcome.

From this stance the council or wisdom circle can move to recommend action or to propose alternative solutions to pastoral issues. Drawing upon this wisdom, the pastor makes the final decision. The members of the parish pastoral council can then assist in the implementation of the decision by advocating for the action taken, explaining the reasons behind decisions and assuring the parish community that the decision was made with the best interest of the whole in mind.

**For Reflection:** In what way does the style of gathering for parish pastoral councils model the whole of church? How do such meetings differ from typical business meeting, task groups or prayer groups?

Understanding that substantial time must be allotted to prayer during council meetings, how can the temptation to skip or shorten prayer time together be avoided? In what way can such prayer focus be a challenge to the group?

## Parish Pastoral Councils and Multi-Cultural Communities

The Diocese of Sacramento is host to a wide variety of cultural communities, age groupings, socio-economic groups, and traditions. Parish Pastoral Councils reflect that diversity. In some cases there are linguistic differences but even when all speak the same language, words may not carry the same meaning depending on one's cultural roots.

Major cultural variances are found in some of the following areas:

- \*How one communicates
- \*How one relates to persons in authority or who are older
- \*How one goes about decision-making
- \*How one understands participative governance

Lack of understanding concerning these areas can lead to misunderstanding, exclusion, failure to carry out initiatives and frustration both on the part of pastors and for council members. Elements of cultural dominance can go unrecognized even among people of good will.

At times pastors may find themselves with a council comprised entirely of persons from a culture different from their own. In other instances the council itself might be composed of members from two or more cultural groups.

In the United States Catholics hold expectations regarding Church life that might be unfamiliar to newly arrived immigrants, whether parishioner or pastor. These expectations arise from societal norms of the United States, but are not exclusively cultural. Some are closely aligned with our faith understanding of discipleship. It is important to recognize that while the Church is not a democracy, our faith understanding of baptismal responsibility leads to some shared values. "Through councils the Church:

- \*Makes the culture of participation its own
- \*Expresses an anthropology which assumes that all share responsibility for the commonweal
- \*Meets the sociological expectation that Catholics can shape their parishes
- \*Motivates members by giving them a say in Church management." [Is the Parish Council Democratic?, Mark F. Fischer]

Catholics, rooted in the American culture, place high value on the church's teaching that active participation in the life of the church is part of their baptismal call. Shaping the life of the Church is part of their journey to full maturity in Christ and an exercise of faithful discipleship. Having a place for sharing ideas, concerns and insights flows not only from the democratic value of voice, but from the theological understanding that the Spirit speaks in and through all members of the Church.

Diocesan guidelines echo this understanding stating:

*Moreover, he [the pastor] is to be the animator, motivating his people to work together, and at the same time to be the healer, bringing peace and unity to avert division and anger. Consultation with parishioners, as individuals and as a community, is required for a pastor to carry out his duties responsibly.*

Diocese of Sacramento, Parish Pastoral Council Guidelines

Other cultural considerations which can free or limit the efficacy of a parish pastoral council arise from communication styles. In some cultural groups one does not speak until invited to do so. Council members from these groups may be over shadowed by those who are culturally trained to speak freely. Some communications styles are brief, analytical and focused on task while others are more circular and intuitive in nature. Wise use of a multicultural council requires exploring such differences.

Attitudes toward authority is a third area of cultural variance. In some cultures questioning of those in authority is unknown. It is assumed that the one in authority has greater knowledge of the situation. To raise questions, offer alternative views or respectfully dissent is considered disrespectful. Others understand such actions as a natural part of the call to "investigate, ponder and offer recommendations."

**For Reflection:** Based on your own experience, what is the Most challenging aspect of cross cultural communication for you?

When you are in a ministerial position with persons from other cultures, what areas of understanding are most critical for you to Acquire?