

## ARTICLE: What is a Parish Pastoral Council?

The Parish Pastoral Council is *a recommended structure* within the church concerned with the *pastoral* activities of parish life. It is made up of a *representative body* of the faithful and must include the parish priest. The Parish Pastoral Council *shares the responsibility* for building the parish into a *vibrant Christian community* that promotes Gospel values of love, justice and peace. It is *a consultative body* of leaders who *actively seek the inspiration of the Holy Spirit* and are *guided by the teachings, laws and recommendations of the universal church and the local diocesan church*.

### *Recommended Structure*

*“In every parish in the diocese, a Pastoral Council shall be established, if the diocesan Bishop, after consulting with the Council of Presbyters, so decides”*

*Canon 536, #1*

Parish Pastoral Councils are recognised bodies within the church structure. Like the Diocesan Pastoral Councils, Parish Pastoral Councils were strongly recommended by the bishops of the Second Vatican Council as a vehicle for promoting the mission of Christ and ensuring that the ‘life and activity of the people of God may be brought into greater conformity with the Gospel.’<sup>1</sup> The Parish Pastoral Council is structure of participation that facilitates “an organic blending of legitimate diversities”<sup>2</sup> encouraging all the baptised to work together for the good of the whole community, ‘sustaining it in all its many needs: from catechesis to liturgy, from the education of the young to the widest array of charitable works.’<sup>3</sup>

The Pastoral Council is composed of members of the laity together with the parish priest and parish staff responsible for pastoral care; their task is to promote pastoral action in the parish.

### *Pastoral*

*“Feed my sheep”*

*John 21:15*

The Parish Pastoral Council is concerned with issues that affect the lives of parishioners rather than the administration or financial management of the parish. Areas of pastoral concern, which particularly affect Parish Pastoral Councils, are outlined in the pastoral activities of the parish priest described in the Vatican Documents and the Code of Canon Law.<sup>4</sup> They consist of:

- the proclamation of the Word of God
- faith formation and catechesis

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<sup>1</sup> Ecclesiae Sanctae 1a n. 16

<sup>2</sup> *Novo Millennio Inuente*, 46 (Hereafter N.M.I.)

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>4</sup> See Code of Canon Law 528 - 530

- liturgy, justice and peace
- family life
- evangelisation
- caring for the sick and the poor
- encouraging parishioners to become actively involved in the mission of the church

In essence, the Parish Pastoral Council is concerned with fulfilling the mission of the Christ in the local community and attending to all that affects the faith life of that community. The above outline does not detail a comprehensive list of pastoral concerns as each individual parish will have its own particular pastoral needs.

### ***A Representative Body***

*“Neither Jew nor Greek, neither male nor female”*

*Galatians 3:28*

The Code of Canon Law when speaking of the Diocesan Pastoral Council states that the members of the council should reflect the entire portion of the people of God taking into account different regions, social conditions and professions.<sup>5</sup> In concrete terms this seems to suggest that a young person should be appointed to represent the youth, a black person to represent the growing number of ethnic minorities in our parishes, a traveller represent the members of the local halting site and so the list continues. This type of representation:

- a) does not ensure that the council will possess the skills, gifts and expertise necessary to accomplish its mission in the parish.<sup>6</sup>
- b) presents a very real danger that individuals might focus on specific parish groups and interests rather than maintain an overall parish focus

A broad representation from the parish community is ideal, but what is essential is that the members of the council undertake to be representative of the whole community, taking a community view of issues and focussing on what is the best option for the whole parish.

### ***Shared Responsibility***

*“The Church of the Third Millennium will need to encourage all the baptised and confirmed to be aware of their active responsibility in the Church’s life” [N.M.I. 46]*

The right and duty of all the laity to share the responsibility for the leadership of the parish finds its roots in the grace of baptism. Through the sacrament of baptism we become

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<sup>5</sup> Code of Canon Law Canon 512 §2

<sup>6</sup> See Rademacher & Rogers, *The New Practical Guide for Parish Councils*, Twenty Third Publication, Connecticut, 1988 p 123

members of the living body of Christ and are given gifts by the Holy Spirit for the benefit of all. Every baptised person has a share in the life of the mystical body of Christ and is called to play an active part in carrying out the mission of Christ on earth. The entire baptised community share in the priestly, prophetic and leadership mission of Christ and together, whether cleric or lay, they form the communion which is the church.<sup>7</sup> The mandate to take up the mission of Christ form comes from the Lord himself through baptism and confirmation.<sup>8</sup> Lay people are co-workers in Christ Jesus with ordained ministers.

St Paul, writing to the church in Rome<sup>9</sup> tells us that we are like one body with many different parts; each part of the body has its own proper function and each part contributes to the well being of the whole. This Pauline image of the Church avoids the concept of uniformity, for diversity does arise, diversity of role not of membership. Because of our baptism a layperson is as much a member of the body of Christ as the Pope.

The diversity of roles and functions needs to be understood and respected. Having respect for the diversity of experience, gifts, competence and hierarchic leadership strengthens the bonds of fellowship and enables the Parish Pastoral Council to work together in harmony.

### *Vibrant Christian Community*

A dynamic Christian community is one in which the complimentary and diverse ministries and gifts of all the members of Christ's body work together in a spirit of unity and love, in a spirit of communion.

In his apostolic letter to close the Jubilee year of 2000, Pope John Paul II states that "the great challenge facing us in the millennium" is "to make the church the home and the school of communion"<sup>10</sup> because the experience of communion reveals the very essence of the mystery of the church. It is in the building of a communion of love that the church appears as a sacrament, as a sign and as an instrument of the presence of God in the world.<sup>11</sup>

Parish Pastoral Councils are essentially visible structures responsible for building community and providing conditions for a spirit of communion to flourish. They must be grounded in the four elements of:

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<sup>7</sup> See Decree on the Apostolate of Lay People, Vatican II *Apostolicam Actuositatem* 18-11-65 n. 2 also Code of Canon Law, Book II, The People of God Part 1, Christ's Faithful Can. 204 §1 and *Christifideles Laici*, #28

<sup>8</sup> Lumen Gentium n 33

<sup>9</sup> Romans 12:4-5

<sup>10</sup> The remainder of this section on communion is based on NMI n 43

<sup>11</sup> See At the Beginning of The New Millennium, *Novo Millennio Ineunte* [Hereafter referred to as NMI] Apostolic Letter of Pope John Paul II n 42 Also, Vatican II, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, Lumen Gentium, n 1

- Trinitarian life
- membership in the mystical body of Christ
- the giftedness of the baptised
- the practical outworking of a life in God<sup>12</sup>

If these elements are not present the visible structures, no matter how impressive and well organised, will ‘become mechanisms without a soul, “masks” of communion rather than its means of expression and growth.’ They will be the clanging gongs of kingdom business rather than the orchestrated music of Kingdom Life.

### *A Consultative Body*

*“Let us listen to what all the faithful say, because in every one of them the Spirit of God breathes” St Paulinus of Nola<sup>13</sup>*

Relationships on the Parish Pastoral Council are characterized by a spirituality of communion that encourages fruitful dialogue leading to pondered agreement.<sup>14</sup> The Code of Canon Law and the Second Vatican Council provide precise rules for participation on Parish Pastoral Councils; rules that should protect and facilitate communion. To this end these documents clearly inform us that such councils are consultative bodies regulated by the norms laid down by the diocesan bishop. These bodies are a key element of renewal in the parish and witness to a new way of being church.

### *Consultation*

Consultation in the church is rooted in the understanding of the Church as a community of believers who share in the priestly, prophetic and governing mission of Jesus. It reflects our belief in the universality of the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Far from being advice-giving forums where the parish priest consults and then does as he pleases, parish councils foster a spirit of communion. They respect the diversity of roles and functions of all members, including the hierarchic leadership of the pastor, and together as a unified body they engage in a process of consultative decision-making.<sup>15</sup>

### *Consultation and the Role of the Parish Priest*

Can 127 §2.º makes it clear that if the councillors are in agreement the administrator – in the case of a parish, the parish priest - should not act against them unless he has good reason. As the official delegate of the diocesan church the parish priest is ultimately responsible for decisions made at parish level and while he will do everything possible to facilitate consensus, at the end of the day it is his responsibility to ensure that decisions are made for overall good of the parish. *If* a parish priest ever has to stand in opposition to the Parish Pastoral Council then it means that a breakdown has occurred in communication, in relationships and in the decision making process.

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<sup>12</sup> See Appendix 1 for a more detailed description of the elements mentioned by Pope John Paul II

<sup>13</sup> Epistola 23, 36 to Sulpicius Severus: CSEL, 29, 193.

<sup>14</sup> *NMI* n 45

<sup>15</sup> For more detail see Section Three, The Consultative Decision-Making Process

### *Inspired by the Holy Spirit*

***“I will ask the Father and he will give you another Paraclete to be with you forever.”***

*John 14:16*

Members of Parish Pastoral Councils are people of faith who come together as one body to discern what the Holy Spirit is saying in the parish today. Prayer is central to the work and life of the Parish Pastoral Council as its source of inspiration and vision. This is not book-end prayer that opens and closes meetings but prayer that aims to change hearts and minds, prayer that sincerely searches out the mind of God in relation to the particular parish, a particular meeting, a particular agenda. Prayer is a source of strength and guidance and a group that spends quality time in prayer will be formed into a community of faith at the heart of the parish.

There is a tendency to think that ten to fifteen minutes on a busy agenda dedicated to prayer is time that could be better spent on other matters. Nothing could be further from the truth! Time dedicated to prayer gives the group its proper focus for it enables the group to recognise that this is the Lord’s work, this is nothing less than partnership with God, sharing in the divine task of transforming all things in Christ.

If prayer is omitted or used simply as a book-end at the beginning and end of each meeting then the Parish Pastoral Council has lost sight of what it is really about. The work, even though done efficiently, becomes simply the work of the councillors and will lose its essential ‘Christian’ identity as co-workers with Christ. As the psalmist states, ‘If the Lord does not build the house, in vain do the builders labour.’ (*Psalms 127:1*)

### *Guided by Teaching and Tradition*

He [the parish priest] is to cooperate with his proper bishop and with the *presbyterium*<sup>16</sup> of the diocese. Moreover, he is to endeavour to ensure that the faithful are concerned for the community of the parish, that they feel themselves to be members both of the diocese and of the universal Church, and that they take part in and sustain works which promote this community. *Canon 529 § 2*

A parish is not an isolated unit but is part of a diocesan church, “in which the one, holy catholic and apostolic church of Christ is truly present and operative”.<sup>17</sup> The diocese is a living reality, a family of communities made up of the parishes. Members of a parish, while consciously building communion in the local community, also need to be conscious of their membership of a diocese and of the universal church. While all have a role in maintaining this relationship, the parish priest/pastoral administrator is the official delegate of the

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<sup>16</sup> See Appendix 1

<sup>17</sup> Canon 369

diocesan church who is ultimately responsible for ensuring that the parish remains in sacramental and ecclesial communion with the local diocese and the universal Church.<sup>18</sup>

Individual parishes express their relationship with the diocese by:

- Drawing on the wisdom and rich traditions of the wider church community.
- Establishing links with other parishes in the area with a view to sharing resources, planning joint initiatives and learning from each other.
- Engaging the support of various diocesan agencies and committees.
- Availing of the resources and assistance from the staff employed by the diocese to work with parishes.
- Attending the annual gatherings of pastoral councillors, meetings of chairpersons and the annual commissioning ceremony for parish councillors and their families.
- Pooling financial resources for the overall good of the diocese.
- Participating in diocesan gatherings, supporting initiatives promoted by the diocese and sharing concerns raised at grass root level.

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<sup>18</sup> See Canon 205