



DIOCESE OF SACRAMENTO  
PARISH PASTORAL COUNCIL  
GUIDELINES

October 2013

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**THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH**

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

**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.

**DUTIES OF PASTOR**

A pastor has responsibilities which are uniquely his arising from his ordination and appointment to the pastorate by the Bishop. (Canon 519) When a priest accepts a pastorate, he becomes the appointed leader of the parish, the bond of communion, the designated head, the father in the faith to this community of believers. He is also called to be a servant of the people.

Moreover, he 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.

**CONSULTATION**

The Code of Canon Law insists on consultation at every level of decision making among all God’s people. The Code also makes it clear that pastors have certain responsibilities which are theirs alone. Cardinal Leo Suenens noted that a misinterpretation of the Council has caused some people to believe that the Church is a democracy: “The Church is not a democracy and not an aristocracy...but a collegial reality.”

On December 30, 1988, Pope John Paul II, referring to the ecclesiology of communion, said, “The Council’s mention of 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,” on which the Synod Fathers have rightly insisted.”

**ROLE AND FUNCTION OF PARISH PASTORAL COUNCILS**

Canon Law provides for the formation of Parish Pastoral Councils in Canon 536 #1. “In every parish of the diocese, a Pastoral Council shall be established, if the diocesan Bishop, after consulting with the Council of Presbyters, so decides. The pastor presides over the Pastoral Council. The Pastoral Council is composed of members of the congregation together with those of the parish staff who have pastoral care by reason of their office. The Pastoral Council assists in promoting pastoral action in the parish.”<sup>1</sup>

What constitutes parish staff will vary from parish to parish. Ordinarily, staff members are those who are involved in the day to day ministry of the parish. They may be full time, part time, or volunteers. The staff generally has its own unique relationship with the pastor as it endeavors to carry out its responsibilities and ministry within the parish.

Staff members may be invited to attend some pastoral council meetings when their expertise or training may be of assistance to the council. It is recommended that where applicable a parochial vicar, by virtue of office, be a member of the council. Other ex officio members may be included at the discretion of the pastor. However, their presence should not dominate council meetings or stifle the voice of the general membership.

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 to ponder them, and to propose 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

Although the Council is not a body which makes binding decisions, the recommendations of the Pastoral Council are to be taken seriously when grounded in prayer, discernment, and communal wisdom.

The pastor presides over the Parish Pastoral Council. The pastor is responsible for the final approval of Council recommendations concerning pastoral planning, programs, and services for the parish, as well as for their implementation. While the pastor is not obliged to follow the recommendations of the Parish Pastoral Council, it is understood that he ought to do so unless there is a compelling reason to do otherwise. If there is such a reason, the pastor should share this with the Council.

It should be noted also that where a liturgy committee, a school advisory commission, or other parish ministry committees already exist, the relationship between Council and other existing bodies should be carefully delineated. It is suggested that the Pastor schedule a joint annual meeting for the Parish Finance Council and the Parish Pastoral Council for dialogue purposes during the parish budget preparation period and prior to the budget being finalized.

### **PARISH PASTORAL COUNCIL MEMBERSHIP**

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.

Councilors are to be chosen so as to truly reflect the wisdom of the parish community. When parishioners understand the Council ministry and have an opportunity to discern which parishioners are suited for it, they can contribute enormously to the selection of councilors.

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 fits 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.

Official Church documents state that the Pastoral Councils are to represent the people of God, but not in the legal sense. Rather, council members are representative in that they are a witness or a sign of the whole community. They make its wisdom present. (Sacred Congregation for the Clergy, Private letter on Pastoral Councils, #7)

The Pastoral Council is a representative body rather than a body of representatives. A council member is not a representative for a particular neighborhood, age bracket, special interest group or organization. However, 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)

## **Elements of a Selection Process for Council Members**

### **Selection Committee**

A committee of outgoing council members together with the pastor form the Selection Committee and establish a time line that will allow for dialogue, reflection, and prayer.

The following elements may be included in the selection process.

### **Education/Formation of Parishioners**

- Invite parishioners to an education/formation session to learn more about the role/responsibilities, qualities and gifts for council membership. Share the criteria for council membership.

(This may also be done through the Sunday homily, or 2-3 minute snippets for several Sundays with more detail provided in the parish bulletin.)

### **Nomination Process**

- Invite parishioners to identify potential leaders, including self.

### **Discernment Process**

- Invite the present council and parish staff to provide a time of retreat/discernment for those who have been identified.
- Invite those who have decided to remain in the process (after the retreat) to write a two paragraph statement reflecting their experience, gifts and hopes for the parish. These are published for parishioners to read.

### **Confirmation Process**

- Invite parishioners to elect the appropriate number of nominees.\*\*
- Publicize the new pastoral council members.

**\*\*This process could be replaced by the following step: The names of those who remain in the process are given to the pastor and present council. They may wish to meet with each individual and then appoint those whose skills and gifts best fit the parish needs at this time.**

### **ORIENTATION/FORMATION**

Considering the responsibility entrusted to them, Parish Pastoral Council members are expected to participate in an ongoing formation process.

1. Members are required to attend a general orientation on Parish Pastoral Councils provided by the diocese. Some of the topics covered are the role of the council, the mission of the Church, prayer and spirituality, history of the diocese, decision-making.
2. Ongoing formation at the parish level may include an annual evening of recollection and other prayer experiences. In addition, the diocese will also offer regular presentations on pastoral planning, goal-setting, visioning, conflict resolution and discernment.

### **MEETINGS/AGENDA**

The Constitution/By-Law document or foundational document needs to explain how items may be proposed and placed on the agenda.<sup>2</sup> The pastor is the primary selector of the Council's agenda, inasmuch as he is the presider. However, any member of the Council may raise items for the agenda.

Parish Pastoral Councils are advisory in nature. Pastors depend on their wisdom, candor and sensitivity in addressing issues of pastoral concern. For this reason participation in the meetings of the Parish Pastoral Council are invitational.

Ordinarily, the Council meets monthly or at least nine times a year for one to two hours.

### **TERMS OF SERVICE**

It is recommended that Council members serve a two-year term, renewable once; or one three-year term.

Further details regarding operation of the Council should be specified in The Constitution/By-Law document or foundational document.

The Council does not deal with acts of administration which are distinct from pastoral policies and planning. Acts of administration concern the daily operations of the parish, which includes the implementation of the pastoral plan and policies, parish programming, budgeting and personnel matters. The pastor has the responsibility for these matters and for the staff. Some elements of administration belong to other groups, such as the Parish Finance Council as mandated by Canon 537.

Following are some of the pastoral activities which could constitute agenda items for the Parish Pastoral Council:

- Instruction in the full range of the faith and catechetical formation
- Programs promoting gospel values, including issues of social justice
- Responsibilities to people with special needs
- Catholic education of children and young adults
- Outreach to alienated Catholics
- Multi-cultural/multi-ethnic issues
- Ecumenism and evangelization
- Programs of sacramental life and preparation
- Promotion of Eucharistic devotion
- Enhancement of programs for the sacraments of penance and Eucharist
- Inculcation of prayer life, especially within families

- Effective participation in the liturgy
- Methods of acquaintance with parishioners
- The welcoming of newcomers
- Home visiting
- Efforts at building community
- Motivation of the spiritual and corporal works of mercy
- Efforts of special care for the sick and dying
- Tangible concern for the poor, the afflicted, the lonely, the exiled
- Fostering of solid Christian family life
- Promotion of the lay apostolate
- Strengthening of extra-parochial relations with the bishop, diocesan-pastoral efforts and a worldwide Catholic identity
- Special role with parish stewardship activities
- Outreach to and inclusion of youth and young adults in the life of the parish

### **VACANCY OF THE OFFICE OF PASTOR**

When a parish becomes vacant due to death, resignation, or transfer of the pastor, the Parish Pastoral Council ceases. In the interest of continuity in the parish's work and mission, the new pastor/parochial administrator/parish steward will establish the parish Pastoral Council anew within two months of the date of installation.

The Chair and members of the Parish Pastoral Council will present to the pastor/parochial administrator/parish steward a written report of the Council's activities, including how the parish has responded to the CARA survey and the Synod initiatives. Thus, the Parish Pastoral Council can be a valuable resource in a time of leadership transition.

The pastor/parochial administrator/parish steward will, after a period of at least six months, through mutual dialogue and prayer, determine if any changes in membership and/or direction are necessary.

### **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> *(Councils at the parish level have been part of our local diocesan Church since the 1970s. In 1984, Bishop Francis Quinn requested that all pastors establish parish pastoral councils. To assist in this process, diocesan guidelines were published in 1985. In anticipation of the Jubilee year and in solidarity with a resolution of the Council of Priests, Bishop William Weigand reiterated this request (mandate) that all parishes have pastoral councils established by the year 2000. The Guidelines for Parish Pastoral Councils were updated and promulgated in 1999. Most recently, the diocesan Synod confirmed the necessity of involvement of laity in collaborative ministry and shared responsibility by ensuring "that every parish has a pastoral council and a finance council". Initiative #3)*

<sup>2</sup>*An outline of the components of these documents is available at the Diocesan Pastoral Center*

## **SOURCES**

“Whenever it is possible, councils should be established at the parish level to assist in the apostolic work of the Church.

**(Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity, Ch V., Par 26)**

“Because they are partners in the priestly prophetic and regal role of Christ, lay people share actively in the life and action of his Church. Within the communities of the Church their cooperation is so much needed that without it the Apostolate of the pastors would be largely ineffectual...Lay people offering their competencies...leads efficacy to the care of souls.”

**(Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity, Ch III, Par 10)**

“The activity of the laity within church communities is so necessary that without it the Apostolate of the pastors is generally unable to achieve its full effectiveness...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.”

**(Christifideles Laici #27)**

“The competence of the lay faithful is evident in their participation in various councils of church governance. The Code of Canon Law encourages the establishment of Pastoral Councils both for the dioceses and parishes (Canons 511-514, 536-537). Because we believe that they can enrich the life of the church, we strongly encourage efforts to establish them where they do not exist.”

**(Called and Gifted for the Third Millennium, page 23)**

**Synod 2004 (document from the Diocesan Synod containing Pastoral Initiatives for implementation by Parish Pastoral Councils)**

**Revised and Promulgated by Bishop Jaime Soto**

**October 2, 2013**