

NORMS FOR COUNCILS IN PARISHES

INTRODUCTION

The tradition of the Church urges those who exercise executive authority to seek counsel from those who are affected by their actions before taking action. "What touches all must be approved by all." (Regulae Iuris) This vision does not democratize the Church in the mode of congregationalism. It provides a vision of faith which recognizes the movement of the Spirit in the midst of the community.

The Code of Canon Law recommends the establishment of a Diocesan Pastoral Council. Once established in a diocese, its membership should represent the Christian faithful: laity, clerics, and members of religious institutes. It is to be reflective of the faith life of the community, its diversity and its special social conditions. A pastoral council is an exercise in faith sharing, and therefore is served best by members who are truly faith-filled.

This dynamic is equally true for parish pastoral councils. Canon 536 explicitly authorizes bishops to mandate the establishment of local pastoral councils:

Canon 536. #1 After the diocesan bishop has listened to the presbyteral council and if he judges it opportune, a pastoral council is to be established in each parish; the pastor presides over it, and through it the Christian faithful along with those who share in the pastoral care of the parish in virtue of their office give their help in fostering pastoral activity. #2 This pastoral council possesses a consultative vote only and is governed by norms determined by the diocesan bishop.

Such councils exist to advise the person mandated to serve the common good of the community. They cease to function when there is no pastor. Service on the council should be determined for fixed terms and the council should meet with regularity as determined by local statute.

CANON 127 AND THE PROCESS OF CONSULTATION

The following is taken from the text of Canon 127:

When the law determines that in order to place certain acts a superior requires the consent or counsel of a college or group of persons, the college or group must be convoked...For such acts to be valid it is required that...the counsel of all who are present be sought...If counsel is required, the action of the superior is invalid if the superior does not listen to those persons; although in no way obliged to accede to their recommendation, even if it be unanimous, nevertheless the superior should not act contrary to it, especially if there is a consensus, unless there be a reason which, in the superior's judgment, is overriding. All whose consent or counsel is required are obliged to offer their opinion sincerely and, if the seriousness of the matter requires it, to observe secrecy sedulously, and this obligation can be insisted upon by the superior.

The spirit of consultation in the church requires that the bishop, pastors and administrators of the community do so with sensitivity to the needs and vision of the people involved.

On the part of the administrator true consultation demands:

a) a clear and fair presentation of the information which the advisory body must have in order to give wise and effective counsel;

b) a sincere and open listening to the advice and counsel given;

c) an ordinary predisposition to act upon the consensus of the advisory group and to seek the building of consensus when clear differences are present;

d) a responsibility on the part of leaders to clearly lay out the overriding reasons when the advice which has been offered will not be followed.

Faithful to this tradition of the Church, the Bishop of the Diocese of Spokane sets forth the following norms regarding the establishment and function of parish pastoral councils.

NORMS FOR PARISH PASTORAL COUNCILS

I. Establishment:

A. Every parish in the Diocese of Spokane is required to establish a Pastoral Council according to the norms of the Code of Canon Law and these Diocesan norms.

B. A combined Parish Pastoral Council may be appropriate for two or more smaller faith communities served by the same pastor.

C. Each Parish Pastoral Council shall formulate a constitution and by-laws, in harmony with these Diocesan norms, which set forth the elements of its own functioning. The constitution is to be shared with the Bishop.

II. Purpose:

A. The purpose of the Parish Pastoral Council is to foster pastoral activity, especially through the promotion of prayer, Christian formation and faith sharing among its membership and within the larger parish community.

B. The Parish Pastoral Council is consultative to the pastor. The pastor will respect the recommendations of the Council in the spirit of Canon 127. Consultation should be carried out in a spirit of prayerful reflection. Through prayer, reflection and frank discussion of the issues brought to the Council, the members should strive to develop consensus on those issues which they address.

C. Members of the Parish Pastoral Council will consult with parishioners about the pastoral needs and priorities of the parish.

III. Functions:

A. The Parish Pastoral Council plans for the future of the parish. This process is undertaken by developing a mission statement for the parish and by devising a written pastoral plan.

At least every two years, the pastoral plan is to be reviewed, evaluated, revised or even completely rewritten according to the changing needs and circumstances of the parish.

B. The Pastoral Council formulates parish policies and local pastoral initiatives. Local initiatives and policies are to be faithful to pastoral directives from the Bishop and in conformity with the policies of the Diocese.

C. The Pastoral Plan and its biannual review are to be shared with the Bishop and with the parish at large. The Bishop will share this plan with the Diocesan Pastoral Council.

IV. Membership:

- A. Members of the Pastoral Council are to be Catholics of the parish who are mindful of the common good, compassionate, prudent, and faithful in stewardship of time, talent and resources and who participate regularly in the worship of the community.
- B. The number of those who sit on the Council and the method of selection are to be set forth in the local constitution. The membership of the Council should reflect the diversity of points of view and social circumstances of the parish at large.
- C. Participation in the Council by parish staff members other than the pastor should be set forth in Pastoral Council Constitution and in the job descriptions of staff members. Ordinarily, staff members will be associated with the pastor in receiving consultation from the Council.
- D. The pastor sees to it that members of the Pastoral Council receive formation and skill development.

V. Meetings:

- A. The Parish Pastoral Council must meet at least four times annually or more frequently as established by the local constitution.
- B. The pastor presides at meetings of the Pastoral Council. The actual conducting of meetings may be delegated to a chairperson selected according to the local constitution. Other officers such as a vice-chair and a secretary may be selected according to the local constitution.

VI. Relationship with other councils and committees:

- A. The Parish Pastoral Council is the primary consultative group in the parish. All other parish groups receive their mandate for pastoral activity from the pastor assisted by the Pastoral Council.
- B. In consultation with the Parish Pastoral Council and parish staff or upon direction of the Bishop, the pastor may form other advisory councils or committees (e.g., a finance council which is mandatory, liturgy committee, social justice committee, school board, board of religious education, etc.). The purpose, membership and operating procedures of these bodies are to be set forth in writing as appendices to the constitution of the Parish Pastoral Council. These bodies shall not usurp the constituted responsibilities of the Pastoral Council. These boards are advisory to the pastor. The Pastoral Council assists the pastor in coordinating the work of all parish groups and in assuring communication among them.

VII. Suspension and Dissolution of the Pastoral Council:

- A. Unless directed otherwise by the Bishop, the Parish Pastoral Council is suspended when a parish becomes vacant (without a pastor), until the new pastor calls it into session which he is expected to do within one month of assuming office.
- B. The Parish Pastoral Council cannot be dissolved without permission of the Bishop.

Approved by Bishop William S. Skylstad
in April, 1992, following consultation with the Presbyteral Council