

Austin Diocese

Pastoral and Finance Council Norms

submitted by

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Preamble

When the Second Vatican Council chose the term “people of God” as one of its expressions of the mystery of the church, it reopened a perspective on the nature of the church. It placed a renewed emphasis upon the role of each member in the life and mission of the church. Among other responsibilities, the members are called to share their wisdom for the building of the faith community.

Through the Second Vatican Council, our church fathers brought about a refocusing of who we are as a church. We are reminded of Christ’s mission and that we share this mission as part of the church, the body of Christ. In the communitarian spirit, we are all empowered and even sometimes obliged to express opinions and offer council on those things which pertain to the good of the church (1). The revised *Code of Canon Law*, promulgated in 1983, has clarified and amplified this thrust flowing from the spirit of the Second Vatican Council.

The church reminds us that the pastoral care of the faithful is a trust and responsibility that flows from the diocesan bishop to the pastor (2). In parity, the pastor is accountable to the bishop for shepherding the faithful in pursuit of the mission of Christ. He has a moral responsibility to make the best possible pastoral decisions when considering the life of the faith community.

The church has provided two parish-level institutions, the PASTORAL COUNCIL and the FINANCE COUNCIL (3), whose express purpose is to provide council to the pastor. These two important groups are an integral part of the pastoral decision-making process because of the special expertise and responsibility that exists among the people of God (4) and also because of the wisdom of seeking and embracing consultation.

In his ministry each pastor embraces the tradition of consultation by calling a PASTORAL COUNCIL and FINANCE COUNCIL into reality. Once the two councils exist, he seeks their individual and collective opinion, as well as their consensus (5). Lay persons, on the other hand, consider seriously their call to serve the parish community as counselors. They commit themselves to providing the best possible council which is a result of prayer, reflection and dialogue as well as study, research and consultation with other parishioners.

The PASTORAL COUNCIL and FINANCE COUNCIL function in a manner consistent with the norms of the diocese (6). The norms for parish PASTORAL COUNCILS and FINANCE COUNCILS are presented herein.

THE PASTORAL COUNCIL:

A PASTORAL COUNCIL is to be established and is to be operative in every parish and mission in the Austin Diocese. (7)

NATURE AND PURPOSE:

The *PASTORAL COUNCIL* is to be a representative body of the faithful whose focus is on the whole community – its beliefs, its hopes, its joys, its needs, its sorrows, its concerns, its gifts and its pursuit of the mission of the Church.

The council provides a means for uniting the parish community in expressing its collective wisdom concerning pastoral plans and activities. The *PASTORAL COUNCIL* is to guard against serving special interest groups.

By reason of its existence, the *PASTORAL COUNCIL* must read and reflect the “signs-of-the-times” to those planning and/or implementing short and long term pastoral policies and activities in the parish. Ordinary administration of the parish will be the responsibility of the administrative staff.

By the fact that it is convoked by the pastor, the *PASTORAL COUNCIL* must respond to his call and questions and offer the best consultation possible.

The *PASTORAL COUNCIL'S* task is to give council and seek consultation. Good counsel is the result of full, holistic, active consultation. Thus, the members of this group, along with the pastor, are called to reflect and consider pastoral issues for the common good and for the future. Their role is to understand, to reflect carefully and prayerfully and to seek consensus. However, under certain circumstances, the pastor and council may choose to attain a majority through voting to decide a course of action.

CONSULTATION:

Consultation acknowledges that all the Christian faithful share, in diverse ways, the mission of Christ.

Consultation accepts that each of the Christian faithful is formed, reformed and endowed by the Spirit with qualities and gifts that can strengthen the community.

Consultation recognizes that both the ordained and the non-ordained have distinct roles- that the ordained priesthood and the common priesthood of the faithful are different not only in degree, but in essence. The roles of each are complementary in community because of their common bond in the body of Christ.

Because of its representative nature and consultative role; because it has been uniquely provided by the Church and convoked by the pastor; and because of its consensus-seeking process; the *PASTORAL COUNCIL* should be a distinct group. The *PASTORAL COUNCIL* function should not be assigned to a group which has a different function within the parish.

THE DIOCESE:

On-going training and workshops relating to the *PASTORAL COUNCILS* will be made available and accessible for clergy and laity throughout the diocese.

THE PASTOR:

The pastor, as the chief governing person and accountable to the Bishop, must preside (8) at the *PASTORAL COUNCIL* meetings and participate in its activities. The pastor is called to consultation by the Church. In this call, he must:

1. in turn, call the *PASTORAL COUNCIL* and seek council on pastoral (9) matters affecting the life of the parish;
2. experience and participate in the interaction that follows;
3. be open, respectful and receptive to the voice or voices of the parishioners;
4. weigh seriously and respond appropriately to the collective wisdom or consensus of the *PASTORAL COUNCIL*;
5. make every effort to insure that the membership of the council is truly
6. representative of the whole parish community;
7. assist in the proper formation, training and orientation of all counsel
8. members;
9. insure that the council's concerns reflect the whole Church (diocesan and universal) and its mission;
10. facilitate council members building their own community of faith, trust and
11. respect;
12. assist in the preparation of council agenda;

13. support, encourage, and work diligently toward implementation of Synod recommendations.

The pastor should consider carefully the decisions of the council and provide proper explanation to the council when acting contrary to its recommendations. However, in matters that violate church teachings or discipline, or in matters contrary to diocesan policy, the pastor, after appropriate explanation to the council, must withhold acceptance. In cases of nonacceptance of counsel, for whatever reason, the pastor's position and reasons for it shall be presented to the council in writing. Appeals may be made to the diocesan bishop or his designee for clarification, consideration or arbitration. The bishop or his designee will provide a written response to the appeal.

In the absence of the pastor, the *PASTORAL COUNCIL* can discuss matters, but cannot make final decisions. When a pastor leaves a parish through transfer, retirement or death, all formal activity of the *PASTORAL COUNCIL* ceases until the new pastor or assigned administrator reconvenes the council. A new pastor would be wise to seek council from existing council to become more informed about the nature of the community. He should be very reluctant to dissolve the council, even though it is his prerogative to do so.

THE COUNCIL

Each council is to develop in writing its own organizational and functional norms as prescribed within the limits of diocesan norms. These parish norms make clear the purpose, scope and role of the council as well as address the size of the council, membership criteria, selection process and leadership. Unnecessary complexity is to be avoided, and the procedure for amending the parish norms should be defined within them. These norms and any subsequent amendments will be reviewed by the Dean or bishop's designee.

Each council is to formulate a parish vision/mission statement, goal and objectives (after gathering input from the members of the parish) (10).

The vision/mission statement, goals, objectives and norms will be readily available to the members of the parish (11) and evaluated at least annually by the *PASTORAL COUNCIL*.

Each council should determine its leadership by an appropriate process. Such leadership should include a Chairperson and a Recorder.

Because of the council's unique existence, there is a perpetual eliciting of the needs and concerns of the community. Each council, therefore, has the dual obligation to perceive and to deliberate. Thus, each council should meet a minimum of once a quarter as well as when called by the pastor or council leadership.

Each council member must make a special effort to understand and to implement the consultative process. In this process, each member is to share his/her wisdom regarding the issue being considered. Although a common conclusion among the members is not required when functioning as a consultative body, the process of seeking consensus is very helpful in providing quality consultation.

Each council must take time to develop spiritually so as to be more keenly aware of the Spirit's presence and functioning within the council and within the whole parish community.

Each council needs to interact closely with the parish *FINANCE COUNCIL* to assure the pastor and the parish membership that finances are available to support the council's goals and objectives.

Each council is to insure that social justice starts at home, whereas the parish strives for openness and ethical accountability in its business practices.

Each individual member of the council must attend the necessary training that provides a full understanding of the functions of the council, its interrelationships with other parish organizations, and its responsibility to the Church as a whole.

If any parishioner feels strongly that the pastor and/or council has not followed the intent of these diocesan norms, they may appeal through the following process:

1. A formal letter signed by the parishioner(s) will be submitted to the *PASTORAL COUNCIL* describing their concerns and why they feel the intent of the diocesan norms were not followed.
2. The pastor and the council have an opportunity to correct or resolve the appeal.
3. If resolution of the appeal is not obtained to the satisfaction of the parishioner(s), the *PASTORAL COUNCIL* will vote either to reconsider the appeal or send it to the dean for resolution. Simple majority vote of the council will prevail. The parishioner's letter, along with the minutes of the council meeting discussing the appeal and a statement by the pastor and/or the council on their position in the matter will be forwarded to the Dean for his deliberation.
4. If not resolved by the Dean, all documentation, including the Dean's position, will be sent to the bishop for deliberation and ultimate resolution. The bishop will respond in writing within 30 days.
5. A council cannot be dissolved without consultation with the bishop.

Membership (Qualifications)

Council members must:

1. be a baptized Catholic (in rare circumstances an exception can be made with the approval of the pastor)
2. be registered in the parish;
3. have demonstrated a commitment to the parish community
4. commit themselves to spiritual growth;
5. commit themselves to skills development as part of the Christian leadership process;
6. be willing to commit the necessary time and energy to offer effective consultation;
7. be willing to support, encourage, and diligently work toward implementation of Synod recommendations;
8. be familiar with programs of various diocesan commissions and/or standing committees; and
9. be willing to take the time and make the effort to open themselves to the training and group process of the formation of council rationale.

Determination of Council Members

For adequate representation and effective operation, the *PASTORAL COUNCIL* should consist of at least five and no more than twelve lay representatives.

Council members are to be determined by the parish community using an appropriate process as specified in the parish norms. Even though each council member represents the whole parish, each *PASTORAL COUNCIL* should be representative of all ages, ethnic groups and gender (13). In addition, the Pastor may supplement the Council by appointing other members for balanced representation of the parishioners. The number of such appointments may not exceed one-third of the number of council members determined by the parish community. In regards to representation, involvement of active and interested parishioners, who are open to the needs of the whole parish community, has to be a high priority. A strict representation of all age groups or certain special interest areas seems to place emphasis in popular vote rather than what is most important and best for the operation of the council in carrying out its mission. Sound judgement needs to be exercised to reflect sensitivity to the representation issue.

The *PASTORAL COUNCIL* may be formed through a process of discernment, election, or by a combination of appointed and elected members whereas the number of appointed members does not exceed one-third of the council's membership. The members should be people that are willing to commit themselves toward improvement in parish life.

Each council will include in its norms a procedure for dealing with council members who fail to uphold their responsibilities as a *PASTORAL COUNCIL* member.

Council and/or pastors will develop a procedure on how a vacancy will be filled if one occurs. This procedure will be made part of the council's norms.

It is important that the parochial vicar (associate pastor) participate in pastoral council meetings. His role is distinct from that of the parish staff persons employed by the pastor due to his appointment by the Bishop to serve as "co-worker with the pastor in common counsel and endeavor with him and also under his authority (14)." The parochial vicar shares in the pastoral care of the parish and assists the pastor in his pastoral duties.

The *PASTORAL COUNCIL* provides consultation and support to the parish staff. These staff members assist the pastor in the administration of various parish programs. In light of their administrative role, it seems inappropriate that they would also serve as members of a body whose express purpose is counsel and consultation.

Terms of Office

Terms can be from two to five years. Council members' terms may be staggered by year or all members' terms may expire simultaneously. The specifics of the terms of office and the number of consecutive terms a council member may serve should be addressed in the parish norms.

Meeting Agendas

An agenda should be prepared prior to each meeting to enhance conducting the meeting in a professional manner. The pastor and chairperson should set out an agenda. The agenda should be posted in a place convenient for inspection by the parishioners at least one week prior to the council meeting. Names and phone numbers of council members may be listed on the posted agenda so parishioners can contact council members and express their views on the agenda items to be discussed. Special meetings would be exempt from posting the agenda one week in advance.

Openness and Confidentiality

The meeting of the *PASTORAL COUNCIL* should to the extent possible be open to parishioners who may wish to attend as observers unless their input is requested from the council. The parish norms should emphasize that active participation in the consensus building process during the meeting is reserved for the *PASTORAL COUNCIL* members.

Confidentiality is another major issue that the *PASTORAL COUNCIL* will need to address in their norms. An atmosphere of "openness" is important, but some situations and matters discussed by the council need to be kept confidential. For some circumstances requiring confidentiality, the council may choose to meet in a "closed" or "executive" session.

Communicating Council Proceedings

Each *PASTORAL COUNCIL* will establish a procedure of reporting to the parishioners the results of the *PASTORAL COUNCIL* meetings. This may be accomplished through the weekly bulletin, through a newsletter, by assembly, by published meeting minutes, or whatever other means of communication that would be appropriate for the parish.

COMMISSIONS:

The effectiveness of the council can be enhanced by the development of commissions. Additional participation of parishioners in parish administration can be increased by having parishioners as members of commissions. The structural configuration of commissions of the *PASTORAL COUNCIL* can vary depending on the explicit needs of the parish. Each parish should consider the configuration that best meets its needs and the Synod recommendations. Two possible alternatives are presented herein.

A. A parish may have the following commissions:

Spiritual Development Commission:

Areas of Concern -- liturgy, ecumenical activities, retreats, etc.

Community Concerns Commission:

Areas of Concern -- Community activities; social action, cooperation-deanery, interparochial, diocesan, etc. (15)

Education Commission:

Areas of Concern -- all formal educational efforts of the parish --adult, CCD, school, etc.

Family Life Commission:

Areas of Concern -- pre-cana conferences, marriage encounter, social activities of the parish, recreational programs, family counseling etc. (16)

Youth/Young Adult Commission:

Areas of Concern -- youth programs, active involvement of youth/young adults in parish life and leadership, need for clergy, etc. (17)

Administration Commission:

Areas of Concern -- communications(bulletins, public relations), studying, recommending, undertaking financial programs as determined by the Parish Council; maintaining parish properties, programs, activities, facilities, etc.

Evangelization Commission:

Areas of Concern -- spreading the gospel, reaching out to non-Catholics and alienated Catholics, etc. (18)

Stewardship Commission:

Areas of Concern -- Giving of time, talent and treasure in support of local parish diocese and universal church.

B. Since Our Lord was a Priest, a Prophet and a King, the *PASTORAL COUNCIL* may have as a minimum the following list of commissions:

Priest Commission:

Areas of Concern -- all committees, organizations and matter dealing with worship.

Prophet Commission:

Areas of Concern -- all matters dealing with teaching

King Commission:

Areas of Concern -- all matters that deal with service.

It is recommended that the coordinator of each committee or organization actually participate in their respective commission.

The pastor is an ex-officio member of all commissions.

The *PASTORAL COUNCIL* member may serve on one or more of the various commissions. Commission chairpersons and commission members will be appointed by a process as outlined in the parish norms for its *PASTORAL COUNCIL*. Members of commissions, who are not *PASTORAL COUNCIL* members, will not actively participate in the consensus building process at *PASTORAL COUNCIL* meetings.

The *PASTORAL COUNCIL* and the commissions are units of service not authority.