

An Integrated Approach to Shared Responsibility: Where Does the Diocesan/Eparchial Pastoral Council Fit?

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A significant finding in the 1997 study conducted for the U.S. bishops by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) concluded that diocesan and eparchial pastoral councils have tended to operate in isolation from the other organizational structures that support the bishop's ministry of governance. While it is clear that pastoral councils are to help the bishop in pastoral planning, how such planning is integrated into the overall life of the diocese/eparchy along with other consultative structures remains unclear. Much has been written about pastoral planning and pastoral councils. Little analysis, however, has been given to developing *systems* to support the integration not only of their work but also of the other structures that support the bishop in overseeing the pastoral care of the diocese or eparchy. The following provides some insight into how a bishop might develop an integrated system of consultation to support his governance role and to promote the mission and ministry of the local church.

A Systems View

Rather than looking at each consultative body in isolation, a systems view looks at all of the structures as a whole and seeks to achieve a comprehensive functioning that encompasses all of their roles. To achieve this, two things are required: 1) an overall conceptual framework, and 2) staffing or executive assistance to ensure the integration of the work of each consultative structure into a unified whole.

1. Pastoral Planning: The Overall Conceptual Framework

One of the primary misconceptions that has frequently resulted in the isolation of the diocesan/eparchial pastoral council is the notion that it alone is involved in or responsible for pastoral planning. In actuality, the bishop is the chief planner for the diocese or eparchy. As such, pastoral planning transcends the function of any specific group and, in this sense, it should incorporate and guide the work of all groups charged with supporting the bishop in fulfilling his ministry. Pastoral councils have a major role in assisting the bishop in the pastoral planning process, but if that process is to be effective, other councils, deaneries, parishes, and diocesan/eparchial offices and agencies must play leadership roles as well. This systems view enables pastoral planning to be seen as a shared responsibility.

Another common misconception is that pastoral planning is a finite process, with a beginning and an end. If pastoral planning is to be an effective integrating principle, however, it must be a cyclical process. The process should be one that is ongoing, includes evaluation and adjustment of past plans, and provides an opportunity for constantly refreshing the ministry of the church.

There are three phases in a systemic diocesan or eparchial planning process: a) directional planning, b) strategic planning, and c) administrative planning. The entire process may take three to five years from the completion of one cycle to the initiation of a new cycle. The following is an overview of these phases together with a description of the roles and responsibilities that might be exercised by the

various consultative groups within a diocese or eparchy.

The details of a diocese's or eparchy's overall planning steps should be designed prior to initiating a process. The respective leadership of all consultative groups and agencies should participate in its development and have a general sense of each one's role and the timeline that is to be followed. Appropriate formation and orientation activities should be undertaken for each consultative group engaged in the process.

A. Directional Planning: The Role of the Diocesan/Eparchial Pastoral Council

The first phase of the pastoral planning process is led by the bishop with the diocesan/eparchial pastoral council and focuses on the development of a set of broad directions or priorities. This phase may incorporate four elements: 1) study and formation, 2) a listening process designed to engage as many of the faithful as possible, including diocesan/eparchial leadership, 3) development of recommendations to the bishop regarding broad directions or priorities, and 4) developing plans for the promulgation of the broad directions or priorities. In dioceses or eparchies where previous planning processes have been conducted, these steps are preceded by an evaluation of the impact of previous goals and the process used to develop them. In a five-year cycle, this entire phase may take eighteen to twenty-four months.

Step 1: Study and Formation. The pastoral council should reflect the membership of the local church. While not representing constituencies, the council membership can provide the best consultation when they are as economically, racially, culturally, and geographically diverse as the diocese or eparchy. In order to provide frameworks for council members to understand and organize what they will learn in the listening process, they must be formed in a basic understanding of the mission and ministry of the Church.

Step 2: Listening to the Diocesan/Eparchial Church. A variety of mechanisms can be utilized to hear the hopes, dreams, and needs of the people of the diocese/eparchy. These include surveys, regional listening sessions, invitations to a broad spectrum of organizations, institutions, and communities within the area, development of written parish profiles, reviewing the results of pastoral planning efforts in parishes, and leadership convocations. Special attention should be given to interaction with the presbyteral council, whose leadership role in the planning process will be discussed later, as well as the finance council. The finance council can provide important information concerning the present state of resources within the diocese/eparchy. While its input would not address ministerial resource allocations, it may provide valuable insights into areas of administration and finance that should be priority areas.

Step 3: Recommending Priorities. Here the pastoral council must integrate what it has learned about the mission and ministry of the Church and what it has heard from the people of the diocese or eparchy. Drafts of possible priorities should be circulated among other leadership bodies for review and comment. It is critical that ownership is developed among these groups since they will have major responsibility for assisting the bishop in shepherding the identified alternatives through the next steps of the planning process. The pastoral council should not abdicate developing recommended priorities that are prophetic. Certainly, the acceptance of such priorities by the larger diocesan/eparchial church will depend on the credibility the council has established over time.

Step 4: Promulgation. This critical step in the planning process is often overlooked. It involves not only publishing the priorities but creating a means for helping the local church understand where the priorities came from and what will happen to them. While it belongs to the bishop alone to make public what has been done within the council, council members can assist him by recommending who should most appropriately address priorities. Some priorities may clearly call for diocesan/eparchial initiatives. Others may require the attention of regions or parishes. Some priorities may challenge individuals and families. The materials developed promulgating the priorities should take into consideration who is being addressed.

B. Strategic Planning: The Role of the Presbyteral Council

In contrast to directional planning, strategic planning decisions involve the allocation of significant resources, have long-term ministerial implications, and are often difficult to reverse once the decisions have been made. For this reason, it is helpful for the bishop to enlist the support and involvement of individuals who exercise more formal leadership roles within the diocese/eparchy. Often, the bishop asks the presbyteral council to assume this role.

Properly structured, the membership of the presbyteral council can include regional leadership, vicars and deans, as well as pastors and other priest leadership that reflects the various dimensions of pastoral care within the diocese or eparchy. In addition, because of the offices that they exercise, deans and vicars can provide a direct organizational link to regional gatherings of leadership. Through them, the bishop can develop a consultative network with vicariates, deaneries, and even parishes. This network will serve the bishop not only in the pastoral planning process, but also in involving local church leadership in advising the bishop on other major issues before the diocese/eparchy.

Therefore, the leadership role in the pastoral planning process now passes from the bishop with his diocesan/eparchial pastoral council to the bishop with his presbyteral council. The strategic phase of the pastoral planning process also has several steps: 1) assessment of the resources of the diocese/eparchy and how they are currently allocated, 2) generating and analyzing possible new strategic initiatives, and 3) developing recommendations for the bishop.

Step 1: Evaluation of Resource Allocation. Where applicable, this phase may be accomplished with the assistance of the moderator of the curia, the chief financial officer (CFO), and the diocesan/eparchial finance council. The moderator, assisted by leaders of diocesan/eparchial offices and agencies, can develop an analysis of current activities in light of previous and new priorities. The CFO, aided by the finance council, may develop projections of revenues and expenditures for a three-year period. These projections can provide parameters for the rest of the strategic planning phase.

Step 2: Possible New Initiatives. The presbyteral council, supported by committees or diocesan/eparchial office staff as delegated by the bishop, may initiate research into alternative approaches for addressing identified priorities. Such a study should include reviewing initiatives made by other dioceses/eparchies, national organizations, and religious communities with specific charisms in the priority area. There may be efforts in and learnings from secular society that could support addressing new priority areas. While these studies are undertaken, the presbyteral council, in dialogue with the pastoral council, may develop criteria to evaluate possible approaches. Criteria for evaluating strategies could include realities specific to the diocese/eparchy such as racial and cultural diversity, economic or geographic demographics, financial limitations, or historical considerations.

Step 3: Recommendations. Once the strategic alternatives have been developed, the presbyteral council may utilize the regional and parish consultative network to critique and build upon the options. The diocesan/eparchial pastoral council is an important resource in this step of the planning process to insure the faithfulness of the alternatives to what was originally heard through the listening process and their study and formation. The finance council is an essential resource for evaluating the possible long-term financial implications of the various alternatives. In dioceses and eparchies that have experience with pastoral planning cycles, it is not unusual for some issues that surface as priorities to be on the agenda of the bishop and the presbyteral council already. In many ways, this is a confirmation of the integrity of the system in place.

C. Administrative Planning: Diocesan Offices and Agencies, Vicariates, Deaneries and Parish Leadership

The last phase of the pastoral planning process is directed by the bishop with the assistance of the leadership of diocesan/eparchial offices, agencies, vicariates, deaneries, and parishes. Some initiatives may involve the development of diocesan or eparchial wide programming. This may call for some reorganization of diocesan/eparchial offices, programs, and services, or the creation of partnerships with national programs and religious communities. Others may call upon regional leadership (vicars and/or deans) and the pooling of regional financial or personnel resources to institute new initiatives.

2. Staffing and Executive Structures in Support of Systems Planning

For a systems approach to be successful, staffing and an executive support system must be in place. This may take many organizational forms. Some dioceses and eparchies have utilized offices of planning and research that provide staff support to the pastoral council and the planning effort. In a systems approach, these offices would need to have a more direct role in also staffing presbyteral and finance councils. When this is not possible, close collaboration among the staffs of the various councils would be critical. In dioceses and eparchies where financial resources are not available for such offices, pastoral planning consultants may be utilized to assist other diocesan/eparchial staff and volunteers through the process.

An Illustration

A practical example may illustrate how a bishop could direct the inter-dynamics among his various consultative structures within an overall pastoral planning process. After a period of formation and training and following regional listening sessions and a review of parish pastoral planning efforts, a diocesan pastoral council recommends perhaps six priorities to the bishop. One of the priorities is to *enhance the liturgical life of parishes*. Homilies, music, and hospitality have been identified as particularly critical to addressing this priority. The process has engaged thousands of Catholics and Catholic leadership, and heightened their awareness of this important aspect of the mission of the local church.

The bishop with his presbyteral council has reviewed current and projected diocesan resources, and the council has recommended that some resources be reallocated toward support of this priority. A number of potential programs have been suggested in each area of liturgy. Some involve new diocesan offices and agency programming, some suggest the involvement of national offices and religious communities

with charisms in this area, and some suggest regional and parish efforts.

After consultation on the parish and regional levels, the presbyteral council recommends to the bishop several efforts over the next five years to support parishes in reviewing current practices and developing new initiatives in the areas of homiletics, music, and hospitality. The bishop then directs the staff of diocesan offices and agencies to reassign resources and to develop programs and services that respond to the initiatives. Efforts concurrently take place within the regions and individual parishes.

Practical Implications of a Systems Approach to Diocesan Pastoral Councils

Given the systems approach for pastoral planning outlined above, a bishop should be encouraged to consider several factors when constituting the diocesan or eparchial pastoral council.

1. Membership: While the overall membership of the council should reflect the diversity of the diocese/eparchy, individual members must have the ability to look beyond their own natural constituencies in order to hear and understand the larger diocese or eparchy. Members on the council must demonstrate openness to a broad spectrum of personalities, experience, and thought. They must be willing and enthusiastic toward learning more about the Church's mission and ministry.

2. Terms: The cyclical nature of the pastoral planning process suggests that a less conventional approach to diocesan/eparchial pastoral council terms ought to be considered. The usual staggered rotation of terms may not be appropriate given the role of the diocesan/eparchial pastoral council. Creating an entirely new council with each new planning cycle can support several values. The whole membership can be looked at for ensuring that the diversity of the diocese or eparchy is reflected while benefiting from the overall skills and experiences available from nominees. Council members will benefit by having the more fulfilling experience of being a part of a whole planning cycle rather than many joining the council in the middle of a cycle. Finally, a new council is much more detached and therefore objective in evaluating the work of a previous council. In this model, however, continuity is not preserved through the membership. This emphasizes again the importance of the staff and executive structure to ensure not only integration but also continuity.

3. Workflow: Due to the cyclical nature of the planning process, the diocesan/eparchial pastoral council's responsibilities and workload will vary over its life. For example, in a five-year planning process, the first two years are generally intensive with formation, developing and conducting the listening process, and recommending priorities. In the third year, the council may be involved in assisting in the promulgation of the identified priorities. In the fourth and fifth years, however, the council may only need to meet semi-annually to review and provide comment on the work during the final stages of the pastoral planning process.

Summary

In a systems view of diocesan and eparchial governance, the pastoral council plays a critical role in the process of pastoral planning. A systems view of governance promotes greater participation in developing recommendations for the bishop. The recommendations placed before the bishop from such a system will have benefited from wide analysis, a context of priorities, and will most likely carry a great deal of support for the decisions that are eventually rendered.

Nevertheless, if the process is to be effective, other councils, deaneries, parishes, and diocesan/eparchial offices and agencies must play leadership roles so that pastoral planning may be seen as a shared responsibility. Successful pastoral planning efforts can be supported through a clearly delineated process design and timeline, clarifying the roles and responsibilities of each major group. Some stable staffing and executive structures should be utilized in order to track the planning process, ensure good communication among the groups, and foster collaboration throughout the process.

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