

Orienting Diocesan/Eparchial Pastoral Council Members to their Role

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Church documents outline the recommendation for and purpose of diocesan and eparchial pastoral councils, however, they offer little direction in terms of the process to use in orienting pastoral council members to their role. The effectiveness of a pastoral council is contingent upon the members' understanding of their role in the life of the diocesan or eparchial church. Time spent in orienting council members is critical in order to avoid bodies that fail to provide consultative pastoral counsel to bishops because they lose sight of their purpose.

The particular materials being used by different dioceses and eparchies for orientation of their council members represent a wonderful diversity of methods for approaching this process. Where they tend to share similarities is in three areas that are suggested herein as critical to consider in developing a process for your own pastoral council members.

1. Theological Reflection

Orientation of new council members may begin most fruitfully with the theological foundation that all Catholics are called by their baptism to serve and participate in the ministry of the Church, whether as lay, religious, or ordained persons. As reflected in the writings of St. Paul (cf., 1 Cor 12:4-6), everyone is gifted with unique skills and talents and is therefore called to offer those skills and talents in building up the community, the Kingdom of God in the here and now.

Service to one another and to the community may be presented as fundamentally sacramental. One of the more powerful images in the gospel is that of Jesus washing the feet of the apostles and telling them that their lives must be spent doing the same. The Christian life, then, is to be in service to the mission of Jesus Christ. This service is sacramental because it is rooted in baptism, which is both the calling and the commissioning to be a disciple of Jesus Christ and a member of the Church.

Conciliar ministry, being a member of a pastoral council, is an example of service being offered for the mission of Jesus Christ. The fullest expression of this service exists when the whole Catholic community – lay, religious, and ordained – collaborates in conciliar ministry. The diocesan or eparchial pastoral council gathers to offer pastoral counsel to the bishop in order to continue to build up the faith community in a specific geographical place.

While diocesan/eparchial pastoral council members will often bring specific pastoral concerns and sensitivities to this conciliar ministry, they should be encouraged not to lose sight of the whole Church. Consequently, the pastoral skills of listening, resolving conflicts, discerning, and respecting differences are all necessary in seeking the benefit of each and everyone, more often called the common good. In this way, the pastoral council builds up unity within the Catholic community.

If this theological foundation is shared, reflected upon, and hopefully embraced, then pastoral council members can understand more clearly their purpose of investigating, considering, and proposing practical conclusions about pastoral issues in the Church (*Christus Dominus: 27*).

2. Practical Hands-on Materials

After preparing pastoral council members through theological reflection, a certain amount of basic information of a practical nature may be shared in order to allow council members to be fully effective in their role. Such practical, hands-on material may include:

Understanding of Volunteer Ministry

The diocesan/eparchial pastoral council is composed of volunteers who represent the greater Church. As volunteers, they should be helped to understand the unique character and implications of volunteer ministry. Using exercises and reflections, council members can be led to discernment and recognition of their unique gifts, as well as an appreciation of the richness of shared ministry.

Council members would appreciate a written position description that states in precise language what is expected of them. Diocesan and eparchial pastoral councils will also reasonably anticipate within the diocesan/eparchial structure the presence of a support system for their ministry; the particular nature and means of accessing this support system should be clarified for the council members. As volunteers ultimately engaged in pastoral planning, council members need to be apprised of the meaning of pastoral goals, objectives, and action plans.

Participation in Prayer

Many find that the most important part of a pastoral council meeting is the time spent in prayer, ideally shared prayer as it helps members learn about and appreciate one another. Council members should be informed of the manner in which prayer will be integrated into meeting agendas. Often, a prayer service is developed and an outline of the service distributed to members a week or more prior to the council meeting. A prayer service outline should identify who is serving as prayer leader (a position that might rotate from meeting to meeting) and the theme for the prayer, which is typically reflected in the agenda for that meeting.

For example, one prayer theme might be evangelization, and an appropriate Scripture passage would be selected such as Luke 9:1-6. The council members would be invited to prayerfully reflect on the Scripture passage prior to the meeting and be prepared to address one issue that the passage provokes, such as 'When Luke says that we should take nothing for the journey, what does this mean for us in this diocesan/eparchial Church?' The prayer leader opens the council meeting with a spontaneous prayer. A psalm, perhaps taken from the Liturgy of the Hours for the day, might be selected to be recited in common. The identified Scripture passage could be read aloud by a volunteer other than the prayer leader to involve additional members. The prayer leader could then repeat the theme and the raised question, inviting council members to dialogue around the question.

Awareness of Mission

Both new and returning members of diocesan/eparchial pastoral councils should understand and hold a common reason for the existence of the council. If the reason is available in print in the form of a mission statement, a constitution, or other written guidelines, such material should be made available to members prior to the first meeting of the year. All council members should read and reflect on the purpose of the council. Every year, the chair of the pastoral council is encouraged to review the purpose statement and emphasize the council's threefold purpose in offering pastoral consultation to

the bishop. Council members should understand that the pastoral council's scope and purpose is consultative rather than deliberative.

Relation to Other Consultative Bodies

Diocesan/Eparchial pastoral council members would benefit from being informed of the existence and relationship of all of the diocesan/eparchial consultative bodies and departments. The pastoral council is generally one of four consultative bodies that exist to enhance the bishop's ministry. The other consultative bodies at the diocesan/eparchial level include the College of Consultors, the Presbyteral Council, and the Finance Council. Members should be helped to understand the distinct purpose of each entity and the relationship of each, if any, to the pastoral council.

While reviewing the relational nature of council ministry, pastoral council members would also benefit from an awareness of all of the departments of the Chancery and how the pastoral council may relate to and/or work with any of these departments. Providing an organizational chart of the Chancery staff may serve as a tool for explaining that the departments are accountable directly to the bishop for carrying out the pastoral plans articulated by the bishop and the various consultative bodies.

Clarifying Council Structure

The internal structure of the diocesan/eparchial pastoral council should be explained to council members. The president of the council is the bishop because he presides (the root of 'president') over the Eucharistic assembly. Normally, the presider bishop prefers to identify both a chair and vice-chair for the pastoral council to oversee the day to day operation of the council. The chair and vice-chair roles are often for one year in duration but may be renewable for a subsequent year.

The presider bishop, chair, and vice-chair of the pastoral council typically constitute the Executive Committee of the diocesan/eparchial pastoral council. The Executive Committee is generally responsible for establishing the annual and specific meeting agendas of the pastoral council.

Bishop's Articulation of Pastoral Issues

Each year, council members typically like an understanding of the bishop's perceived pastoral issues so that they can effectively focus on pressing areas for reflection and consultation. The bishop may articulate his perception of pastoral issues for the diocese or eparchy after prior consultation with any of the four consultative bodies available to him, or as a result of pastoral visitations to parishes and organizations in his geographic area.

Operation of Council Meetings

Council members should be informed of the schedule for meetings and will anticipate a published agenda to be available sometime prior to each meeting. Members should understand they are committing themselves to a discernment process from which a consultative recommendation will be made to the bishop. As opposed to a parliamentary vote in which there is generally a winning and a losing position, discernment provides for all parties to state their position on a given issue and for the group to strive for articulation of a consensus position acceptable to all parties. The consensus position that has been respectfully discerned will be recommended to the bishop.

3. Commissioning Ceremony

Many dioceses and eparchies conclude the first council meeting of each year with a commissioning ceremony for all of the pastoral council members. The bishop generally presides over the ceremony, which often reflects three significant components. First, the bishop may remind the council members of their baptismal responsibility to build the kingdom by being faithful to the mission of Jesus Christ (cf., Theological Reflection). Second, the council members may be reminded of what is expected of them in this conciliar ministry, drawing connections to the written materials provided to them (cf., Practical Hands-on Materials). Lastly, the ceremony may include an inquiry and blessing to each member of the council. The bishop asks if the individuals are willing to serve on the diocesan/eparchial pastoral council in light of their baptismal responsibility and the position expectations. If the individuals agree to serve, the bishop concludes the ceremony with a blessing of the members.

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