

Theological Foundations for Diocesan Pastoral Councils: A Latin Perspective

By Rev. James H. Provost
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The ultimate basis for diocesan pastoral councils is not some political or managerial theory; as for any consultative body in the Church, the basis is theological, in keeping with the nature of the Church itself. The Church is the people of God built up by the Holy Spirit into a communion of believers, at once local and universal. Within that communion, certain principles based on the Church's own reality guide the working together of pastors and the rest of the people to form a more effective light to the nations.

A. Work of the Spirit

Those who have been reborn by water and the Holy Spirit are formed into the one people of God, in whose hearts the Spirit dwells as in a temple.¹ The presence of the Spirit is assured the Church by Christ's promise. This is the Advocate whom Christ has sent to be with us, the Spirit of truth who remains with us and is within us, and who instructs us (cf. Jn 14: 17, 26).

The Spirit is in our midst in many ways. Through the sacrament of orders, the Spirit is assured to those who have by office the charism of truth,² and whose function it is to judge the nature and use of the gifts that the Spirit gives to God's people. Through the sacraments of initiation, the Spirit is dwelling in all the faithful, and through charisms – which the Church professes to be distributed widely among the people of God³ – the same Spirit is working in the world today. These charisms or gifts, even the most ordinary of them, give rise to rights and duties that Christians are to exercise in the Church as well as in the world.⁴ The function of pastors, whether bishops or parish pastors, is not to extinguish these gifts⁵ but to foster and nurture them that all, according to their proper roles, may cooperate in the Church's mission.⁶

Charisms are gifts given not for the personal benefit of the person who receives them, but for others. We might call them talents, actual graces, or special gifts, but their purpose is not the immediate sanctification of the person who receives them; rather, they are for the benefit, the sanctification of all God's people. Thus charisms are an important dimension of Church life, and the gifts of the Spirit – whether wisdom or understanding, counsel or strength, knowledge or fear of the Lord (Is 11:2) – are necessary to the living body of Christ.

While the same Spirit gives many different gifts, they are all given by the one Spirit and are intended to build up the unity of the Church in diversity.⁷ To accomplish this, various structures and institutes

1. Second Vatican Council, *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (Lumen gentium)*, Nov. 21, 1964, #9.

2. Second Vatican Council, *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (Dei verbum)*, Nov. 18, 1965, #8.

3. *Lumen Gentium*, 12.

4. Second Vatican Council, *Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity (Apostolicam actuositatem)*, Nov. 18, 1965, #3.

5. *Ibid.*

6. *Lumen Gentium*, #30; cf. Second Vatican Council, *Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests (Presbyterorum ordinis)*, Dec. 7, 1965, #9.

7. *Lumen Gentium*, #32.

have developed over the course of centuries as effective channels to bring the gifts of the Spirit to light, to focus them for the welfare of all the people of God, and to place them at the service of the Church. In our day, the Second Vatican Council issued a call for agencies to be established so that the fruits of the gifts of the Spirit can be expressed in the Church by all God's people in an orderly manner.⁸

B. Communion of God's People

"Faced with a divided world which is in search of unity," the bishops at the Special Assembly of the Synod for America stated, "we must proclaim with joy and firm faith that God is communion, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, unity in distinction, and that he calls all people to share in that same Trinitarian communion. We must proclaim that this communion is the magnificent plan of God the Father; that Jesus Christ, the incarnate Lord, is the heart of this communion; and that the Holy Spirit works ceaselessly to create communion and to restore it when it is broken. We must proclaim that the Church is the sign and instrument of the communion willed by God, begun in time and destined for completion in the fullness of the kingdom."⁹

The Church, the people of God, is rooted in the very life of God, a communion of three divine Persons in the Trinity. We are bonded together through the Spirit in a communion of divine life that is expressed and nurtured at the table of Holy Communion; this Eucharistic communion forms the basis for the hierarchical structure of the Church, whereby parishes, dioceses, and the Church universal emerge from and lead to this communion in Christ that opens us to the communion where two or three are gathered in his name.

In the local church, the diocesan bishop has a special responsibility for this communion. The bishop "is the visible principle and foundation of the unity of his particular church,"¹⁰ which leads the pope to insist that bishops "cannot but feel duty bound to promote communion in their dioceses."¹¹ Not only does this build up the life of the Church; it also leads to a more effective evangelization of the world in which that Church exists.¹²

Communion of this type is not a vague notion or abstract ideal. It is supposed to find expression in various concrete experiences,¹³ beginning with the experience of sharing Christ's life through the sacraments and in the various aspects of Christian living, but also in the communal life of the local church. The bishop is to promote this "with the help of the priests, deacons, religious and lay people" by implementing "a coordinated pastoral plan which is systematic and participatory, involving all the members of the Church and awakening in them a missionary consciousness."¹⁴

The Second Vatican Council proposed especially appropriate instruments for developing this pastoral plan and for providing systematic and participatory means to carry it out. In this context, the diocesan pastoral council stands out as the chief diocesan body "to investigate under the authority of the bishop

8. *Lumen Gentium*, #37.

9. John Paul II, apostolic exhortation *Ecclesia in America*, Jan. 22, 1999, #33: *Origins* 28/33 (Feb. 4, 1999) 576, quoting Proposition 40.

10. *Lumen Gentium*, #23.

11. *Ecclesia in America*, #36, p. 577.

12. *Ibid.*

13. *Ibid.*, #33, p. 576.

14. *Ibid.*

all those things which pertain to pastoral works, to ponder them and to propose practical conclusions about them."¹⁵

C. Principles for Working Together

In promoting the communion of the diocese and in realizing the role of all the people of God in the Church's mission, the diocesan bishop is guided by the Church's law regarding the rights and duties of all the Christian faithful. Four principles set the context for the bishop, and indeed for all the faithful, in the working of diocesan pastoral councils: communion, sanctification, mission, and participation.

1. Communion

All are bound by an obligation to maintain communion with the Church and to fulfill the duties each owes the Church universal and particular.¹⁶ If there is an obligation to preserve this communion, there is likewise a right to be in communion, not to be cut off from the living communion of the Church. This right is to participate in the community of the Church, to take one's proper role in the inner life of the Church as well as in its mission in the world. This first principle – to maintain communion – implies mutual respect, shared responsibility, and various degrees of participation in that communion.

2. Sanctification

All share an obligation as Christian faithful to live a holy life and to promote the growth of the Church and its continual sanctification.¹⁷ Flowing from this obligation are the right to hear the word of God and to receive the sacraments, to worship God in keeping with the rites of the Church, and to follow one's own form of spiritual life in keeping with Church teaching.¹⁸ As the pope points out in his apostolic exhortation on the laity, holiness is not some isolated compartment of our souls, but a life lived to the full in keeping with our commitments to family and work, to community and Church. "The Church's holiness is the hidden source and the infallible measure of the works of the apostolate and of missionary effort,"¹⁹ so the call to holiness is really the call to be the Church as God's people in the Spirit. This second principle emphasizes that the Church is the work of all Catholics, not just of a few, and that its ultimate purpose is communion with God.

3. Mission

"All the Christian faithful have the duty and the right to work so that the divine message of salvation may increasingly reach the whole of humankind in every age and in every land."²⁰ This call to mission is repeated for laypersons²¹ and is the basis for rights to form associations, to assemble, to take the initiative in apostolic activities, and to a Christian education.²² The Holy Father sees mission as an essential dimension of who we are as a Church, a communion in Christ. "In the context of church

15. 1983 Code of Canon Law, canon 511.

16. Canon 209.

17. Canon 210.

18. Canons 213, 214.

19. John Paul II, apostolic exhortation *Christifideles laici*, Dec. 30, 1988, n. 17: *Origins* 18/35 (Feb. 9, 1989) 569.

20. Canon 211.

21. Canon 225.

22. Canons 215-217.

mission," he says, "the Lord entrusts a great part of the responsibility to the lay faithful, in communion with all the other members of the people of God."²³ This third principle is a clear basis for active participation in the life and work of the Church, a call for collaboration and shared responsibility in being what the Church is, a communion on mission.

4. Participation

The Christian faithful have a duty and a right to participate in the inner life of the Church. This is carried out by obeying lawful commands and declarations concerning the faith, by making known one's needs and desires to Church leaders, and by expressing opinions on matters that pertain to the good of the Church.²⁴ The Second Vatican Council adds that making known our needs, desires, and opinions should be done "through agencies set up by the Church for this purpose."²⁵ Reflecting the emphasis placed on consultative bodies in the 1987 meeting of the Synod of Bishops, John Paul II confirms the importance of diocesan pastoral councils in this context of participation. "On a diocesan level," he writes, "this structure could be the principal form of collaboration, dialogue and discernment as well. The participation of the lay faithful in these councils can broaden resources in consultation and the principle of collaboration and in certain instances also in decision making, if applied in a broad and determined manner."²⁶ Ten years later, the 1997 Special Assembly of the Synod for America reaffirmed this magisterial teaching.²⁷ This fourth principle emphasizes the right and responsibility of each Catholic to collaborate in the inner life of the Church, applying one's experience and insight, and especially the gifts received from the Spirit.

D. The Diocesan Pastoral Council

1. A Consultative Council

As noted above, the basis for consultative bodies in the Church is truly theological, rooted in the magisterial teaching of the Church and articulated in fundamental principles found in the Church's law. It is important to lay this foundation in faith, for otherwise discussion of consultation can be reduced to a question of mechanics, polity, and even politics. For the Church, consultative bodies are not a question of democracy, or constitutional monarchy for that matter. These bodies are practical expressions of the reality that the Church is God's work, that it lives from the presence of the Spirit dwelling in our midst, and that it needs to have structures through which it stays in touch with the impulses of the Spirit who blows wherever it wills.

2. A Pastoral Council

Some people think "pastoral" has to do with fluff. Something is pastoral if it feels right, if it engenders a warm fuzzy sense of communion, or if it provides an answer which is somewhat outside the law, an unavoidable but temporary adjustment required by the circumstances. This is hardly a correct sense of pastoral.

23. *Christifideles laici*, #32, p. 576. See *Ecclesia in America*, #66, p. 586.

24. Canon 212.

25. *Lumen Gentium*, #37.

26. *Christifideles laici*, #25, p. 573.

27. *Ecclesia in America*, #36, p. 577.

The Second Vatican Council places pastoral at the very heart of apostolic succession: "The order of bishops is the successor to the college of the apostles in teaching authority and pastoral rule."²⁸ The pastoral function of bishops includes the teaching, sanctifying, and governing offices they fill. Pastoral must be concerned with the carrying out of the mission of the Church, pastoring God's people, and calling to conversion those who have not yet heard the gospel. It is for this that the Church is organized, holds property, collects money, missions people to various offices and functions, and so on. To be pastoral is to be the Church as it is in the world.

Nothing, therefore, escapes the category of pastoral if it truly pertains to the Church. For a pastoral council to investigate "all those things which pertain to pastoral works" means to look at the goals and objectives of the diocese, the personnel and material resources available to achieve those ends, the procedures by which those ends are to be reached, and so on. It is not being put on a shelf to be called pastoral; it is being put right in the center of what the Church is all about.

3. A Diocesan Council

The diocese itself is an important theological reality. It is a particular church, "in which and from which the one and only Catholic Church exists."²⁹ As Church, it is a communion of the "portion of the people of God entrusted for pastoral care to a bishop together with the cooperation of the presbyterate."³⁰ Each bishop "will make sure to promote among priests and lay faithful the sense that the diocese is the visible expression of the Church's communion. ... The spirit of participation and shared responsibility in the working of diocesan structures will certainly be strengthened if the nature of the particular church is better known and appreciated."³¹

Thus, the diocesan pastoral council provides the structure at the level of the diocesan church for the Church to realize itself as communion on mission, and to foster the effective participation of all the Catholics in the diocese in realizing the conversion to which the gospel calls them.

*Reverend James H. Provost, J.C.D.
Professor of Canon Law
The Catholic University of America*

28. *Lumen Gentium*, #22.

29. *Lumen Gentium*, #23.

30. Second Vatican Council, *Decree on the Pastoral Office of Bishops in the Church (Christus Dominus)*, Oct. 28, 1965, #11; canon 369.

31. *Ecclesia in America*, #36, p. 577.