

Diocesan and Eparchial Pastoral Councils: Executive Summary

In January 1997, the NCCB Committees on the Laity and on Pastoral Practices selected the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) to prepare and analyze questionnaires relating to the functioning of diocesan and eparchial pastoral councils (PCs)¹ in the United States. A PC is a diocesan or eparchial consultative body recommended by the *Code of Canon Law* (CIC) and the *Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches* (COEC). It is composed of clergy, religious, and especially lay members "whose responsibility is to investigate under the authority of the bishop, all those things which pertain to pastoral works, to ponder them, and to propose practical conclusions about them." (CIC c.511; cf also COEC c.272)

The questionnaires were sent to diocesan bishops, eparchs, diocesan and eparchial pastoral council staff, pastoral council members, and senior diocesan and eparchial staff. Responses were collected from territorial archdioceses and dioceses as well as every archeparchy and eparchy in the U.S. The major findings which follow are based on the results compiled by CARA. The full report was reviewed and approved by the NCCB sponsoring committees.

Of the 190 archdioceses, dioceses, archeparchies, and eparchies in the U.S., 102 have a PC or similar body (44 percent are PCs, 5 percent are similar bodies). In addition, another 27 (14 percent) are currently planning to start a PC or similar body. On average, membership in these bodies consists of a bishop or eparch, four secular priests, a deacon, 26 lay members, and three religious, primarily women religious.

Findings

The major findings which follow summarize the results for each of the particular areas examined by the project. They are organized in the order in which they may be found in the major sections of the narrative report which follows.

- *Presence of Pastoral Councils.* Sixty-three percent of U.S. dioceses and eparchies have or plan to soon start a PC. But this presence varies by region, from 100 percent of dioceses in parts of the Midwest to 35 percent of dioceses in parts of the Southwest.
- *Structure.* Almost all dioceses and eparchies which have a PC have enacted statutes or by-laws by which the purpose, constitution, government and operating procedures for the PC are defined. Because the universal law prescribing PCs is quite flexible, such councils may assume many unique characteristics or adaptations. As compared with past studies of PCs, the average number of members belonging to PCs in the U.S. has decreased somewhat. Meetings typically occur between two and four times a year, although in some dioceses or eparchies they may take place on a monthly basis, and often include an overnight stay at a central meeting place.
- *Membership.* PCs include, by definition, lay, ordained, and consecrated members. In the U.S. most PCs are specifically designed to reflect regions, ethnic groups, gender, and other social conditions. Some PCs are designed to represent parish or regional pastoral councils. About one-fifth of PC members are directly selected by virtue of their office or by the

diocesan bishop or eparch. The wide variety of selection processes reflects local efforts to implement the universal law in its intention to have a consultative body that reflects the entire local church.

- *Purpose.* PCs accomplish what they are intended to do. Those who work with PCs describe them as bodies that study pastoral issues, make recommendations on pastoral issues, and serve as a consultative body to the diocesan bishop or eparch.
- *Scope of Agenda.* PCs in the U.S. focus on pastoral issues such as evangelization, Catholic education and formation, and lay ministry development. They give least attention to resource allocation issues.
- *Sources of Agenda.* PCs relate to all aspects of the diocese or eparchy in the course of their work, but are most influenced by the diocesan bishop or eparch. They report relatively stronger linkages with diocesan or eparchial offices than parish pastoral councils, and are least shaped by the finance council.
- *Helpfulness to Diocesan Bishops and Eparchs.* Given their stated purpose, PCs are a qualified success in the U.S. Most diocesan bishops and eparchs are pleased with their PCs because they make important recommendations useful in the decision-making process. However, the data also suggests that many diocesan bishops and eparchs have limited expectations for their PC, or have limited success in establishing a successful PC.
- *Receptivity to the Work of the Pastoral Council.* Both PC members and senior staff identify the diocesan bishop as the person most receptive to the work of the PC. However, diocesan bishops and eparchs are not convinced that the PC's work is well known and PC members as well as senior staff do not feel the work of the PC is taken especially seriously by the people of the diocese.
- *Overall Effectiveness of Pastoral Councils.* Diocesan bishops and eparchs find their PCs to be helpful in their work. Senior staff surveyed are more ambivalent overall in their evaluation, and less likely to rank the helpfulness of PCs as highly as others.

Conclusions

The principal research findings suggest a number of significant conclusions about the relative success of PCs in the U.S.:

- *Where they exist, PCs have been successful.* PCs provide an effective structure for collaborative input in the pastoral decision-making process of the diocesan bishop or eparch. Although not mandated by the *Code of Canon Law* and the *Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches*, the fact that they can be found to exist or to be in the planning stages in 63 per cent of all dioceses or eparchies (with another 5 percent of dioceses or eparchies reporting bodies similar to, but technically not, a PC) suggests that thirty years after being first envisioned by the Second Vatican Council PCs have become a regular feature of life in the local church.
- *PCs are most successful when they are true to their nature as established by canon law.* PCs work best when consulted by diocesan bishops and eparchs on issues central to

Church life where broad input is essential, such as Catholic education, evangelization, or lay ministry development. The PC gives relatively little attention to matters for which other consultative bodies exist, or for which specialized competence is required, such as financial issues.

- *PCs are most true to their nature when their membership reflects the diversity inherent in the diocese or eparchy.* Members are lay, consecrated, and ordained; they come from different parts of the diocese or eparchy, and reflect various ages, ethnic backgrounds, genders, and professions. While members do not represent different constituencies, they typically come from a diversity of backgrounds, allowing them to share their experiences and perspectives with each other in a consultative process. PC members value their opportunity to serve the diocese and the diocesan bishop.
- *PCs are more likely to be successful when the bishop or eparch is directly involved in their life and work.* Since a PC ultimately exists to assist a diocesan bishop's or eparch's decision-making process, successful PCs count on planning and leadership from the diocesan bishop or eparch.
- *Perception of the PC's effectiveness depends on the vantage point of the observer.* While diocesan bishops and eparchs generally indicate a high degree of satisfaction with their PCs, PC members rank certain aspects consistently higher than diocesan bishops and eparchs. On the other hand, senior staff are somewhat more ambivalent, and consistently give significantly lower ratings on almost every measure.

Notes

Where this study refers to a pastoral council, it should be interpreted as referring to an archdiocesan pastoral council and an archeparchial or eparchial pastoral council as well as a diocesan pastoral council, unless otherwise specified.