

Infusing the Pastoral Council with the Spirit of Christ

By Sr. Kathleen Turley, RSM

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"What is the Spirit saying to the world today through the Church in the United States, particularly through the lives of lay men and women?" This question, asked by the U.S. bishops in *Called and Gifted for the Third Millennium* (1995), is an important one to be pondered by those who serve on diocesan, eparchial, or parish pastoral councils. To explore this question fully, however, pastoral council members must be deeply rooted in gospel values and be committed to living the mission of Jesus in their daily lives.

Spirituality is an essential component in the functioning of pastoral councils. In the late 1960's and early 1970's, when pastoral councils began to emerge, they appeared to be effective task oriented bodies, not unlike a typical board of directors or governing body. Like the story of Martha and Mary in the New Testament, these early councils often reflected the busyness of Martha much more than the meditative style of Mary. Through the years, we have learned that for councils to be truly effective they need to strive for a healthy balance between prayer and the necessary skills and practice to accomplish council business.

In his article "Spirituality and the Parish Councils," published in *Conference Papers* by the Conference for Pastoral Planning and Council Development (CPPCD), Rev. Msgr. Thomas A. Kleissler clarifies that "councils are a natural instrument to implement a theological point strongly stressed by the Church today. The Holy Spirit works in all members of the Church and the promptings of the Spirit are to be given careful attention." If one accepts this premise, one therefore needs to be open in mind and in spirit. For the collaborative process to work effectively, it must be rooted in a renewed and sound spirituality, and grounded in the documents of the Second Vatican Council and in Scripture.

In considering the spirituality of pastoral councils, I recommend focusing on three areas: individual spiritual development, communal spiritual development, and the development of a spiritual environment.

1. Individual Spiritual Development

To be fully attentive to the promptings of the Holy Spirit, individual council members must cultivate their own spiritual growth. A person cannot go to a council meeting, push a button, and expect to be a spiritual giant. If the way one lives everyday life is not consistent with what one believes, then a person cannot expect suddenly to be filled with the Holy Spirit simply because he or she is engaged in a spiritual task. In his apostolic exhortation *Christifideles laici*, Pope John Paul II states that:

Life according to the Spirit, whose fruit is holiness (cf. Rom 6:22; Gal 5:22), stirs up every baptized person and requires each to follow and imitate Jesus Christ, in embracing the Beatitudes, in listening and meditating on the Word of God, in conscious and active participation in the liturgical and sacramental life of the Church, in personal prayer, in family or in community, in the hunger and thirst for justice, in the practice of the commandment of love in all circumstances of life and service to the brethren, especially the least, the poor and the suffering. (#16)

In their pastoral statement *Called and Gifted* (1980), the U.S. bishops also stress that offering to the world the witness of holy lives is not only the responsibility of the clergy or religious, but indeed of every baptized person. The distinctive character of that witness shapes the spiritual heritage of the Church. Each pastoral council member is urged to take time for personal prayer, even if it is only five minutes a day. There are many ways to do this, including:

- pray one's favorite passage from Scripture
- reflect on the scriptural readings for the day
- spend quiet time alone with God
- say the mantra prayer in one's car while traveling to a destination
- foster family rituals and spirituality in one's home

A fundamental element of spirituality requires that each person find his or her own way of developing a personal relationship with God. There are many books and aids written on prayer to assist us on our faith journey. The kind of prayer a person chooses depends on the person. Spirituality must fit the person, as male or female, and the culture he or she inhabits. It is important that each person do whatever puts him or her best in touch with God. Ministry can only be fruitful when it grows out of a relationship with God. Since the pastoral council as a whole is only as strong as its individual members, it is essential for council members to cultivate a deep and vibrant prayer life.

2. Communal Spiritual Development

One of the purposes of the pastoral council is to form community as a sign and witness of unity for the larger diocesan, eparchial, or parish community. In order to grow as a community, council members need to develop a network of supportive relationships. Council members should model a living, caring community that witnesses the compassion of Jesus. This requires time beyond council meetings. Council retreats and days of reflection can help in cementing relationships and in allowing extended time for prayer and dialogue.

Spirituality is nurtured by education and reflection. A regularly designated time slot for education at each council meeting might afford members the opportunity to study issues and documents, such as those of the Second Vatican Council, the bishops' conference, and the local church. This type of education assists council members in making informed decisions and keeps them updated in their faith.

In some dioceses and eparchies, the diocesan/eparchial pastoral council sponsors an annual conference for parish leaders and volunteers that focuses on a particular theme, providing prayer experiences, keynote addresses, and workshops for in-service education. Possible themes include pastoral council ministry, evangelization, social justice, collaborative ministry, communication and decision-making, ministry to youth, and prophetic leadership. Participants can be asked to grapple with such questions as "What does it mean to be a Catholic leader in the 21st century? What are the characteristics of successful leaders? How do I identify my own gifts? How do I share my faith story with others?" Not only are such convenings an opportunity for updating, but they are also an opportunity to pray with and to network with people from all parts of an often large geographical diocese/eparchy. Events such as these give people the occasion to experience being an important part of the diocesan/eparchial church, as well as active members of their individual parishes.

Some parish pastoral councils seek to develop communal spirituality by adding extra time to their regular meetings to allow the group to share a simple meal and discuss what is going on in their lives. No council business is discussed during this fellowship time. This enables members to get to know one another better and to build unity among the group. Faith sharing can become an essential component of prayer at parish, eparchial, or diocesan pastoral council gatherings.

3. Development of a Spiritual Environment

Msgr. Kleissler states that "the business and spirituality of pastoral councils are not separate items but one and the same thing. The business of the council is the business of Jesus, himself. The council is busy about carrying out his mission. Reference to the Lord, appeals for guidance should be integral parts of council meetings."

Bishop Howard Hubbard of Albany, in a keynote address at a diocesan conference, cautioned pastoral council members about the use of so-called "bookend prayer," wherein the group begins and ends with a prayer, yet no references to the Lord or to gospel values are made during the more substantive discussions of the meeting. What he called for is prayer that moves hearts and changes lives. Christ's presence should be evident throughout council meetings. The desired atmosphere is more like an "upper room" where the people gathered are open to and respectful of one another.

Sr. Carol Ann Collins, SND, a former diocesan director for council development, described the pastoral council meeting as a setting for conversion. When council members come to meetings with their ideas as gifts rather than weapons – with open hearts and ears rather than with predetermined conclusions – the stage is set for conversion. A decision comes to the council, rather than the council coming to a decision. Sr. Collins stresses that the ability to enter into dialogue with an attitude of openness to the Spirit requires a willingness to be changed. She goes on to say, "True dialogue is indeed a conversion process: I bring my piece of the truth; I listen intently to yours – both you and I see new ways of making connections. The pieces fall in place in a way neither of us could conceive, an experience not unlike a Eucharistic celebration." A generous amount of pastoral council time should be given to prayer and reflection.

Calling for quiet moments of reflection in the midst of meetings can provide the opportunity for being more open to the Holy Spirit. A pastor once told me of an experience he had with the parish pastoral council where the group was engaged in a heated debate that was going nowhere. After about forty minutes, one council member suggested that the group break for ten minutes to reflect on the conversation and consider what Jesus would do in the situation. When the group gathered again, it came to consensus very quickly. For this device to work, it is important that the whole environment of council meetings be one of prayerfulness and respect for one another to allow the Spirit to make healthy and productive human relations possible. The way people in the Christian community interact with one another, rather than what is achieved, says more about who we are as Church.

If a pastoral council is to carry out the mission of Jesus, then it must be aware of the concerns of the people within its communities, especially in matters of justice, just as Jesus was concerned for the poor and outcasts of his day. Council members should listen to the hopes, dreams, fears, and needs of the people in its communities and work to design ways to address them. Each pastoral council is a

planning body that searches for a response to the question "Where is God calling us in these situations?"

At the end of each pastoral council meeting, it may be helpful to allow time to review and process the meeting, asking such questions as:

- How were we true to our mission?
- How did we interact with each other?
- How were gospel values fostered?
- As you make your way from the parking lot to your car, ask yourself, how has this meeting made me a better person? In what ways did I find and reflect Jesus tonight?

The teachings of the Second Vatican Council remind us that all of the baptized are responsible in some way for the life and mission of the Church. We are called to be Church in a new way. The pastoral council can be a vehicle to envision a new future, to provide leadership to implement the vision, and to witness the unconditional love of God and the healing presence of Christ in our world. To enable this to occur, all must strive to live as Jesus did. If we do so, our councils will be fueled with the life of Jesus, creating unlimited power to transform our world. The late Cardinal George Basil Hume of Westminster, England summed it up well when, in an address prepared for the Catholic Common Ground Initiative, he said, "I believe unity in the Church in the next millennium will be dependent on two essentials: the primacy of spirituality in the lives of individuals and society, and a rediscovery of the centrality of Christ as the way, the truth and the life."

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