

# Selecting Effective Pastoral Council Members

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The Church, as an ordered communion, needs a structure that provides for the sharing of responsibility through advisement, advocacy, and accomplishment. Various Vatican II and post-conciliar documents established norms and guidance about just such a structure that we have come to know as pastoral councils. Pastoral councils are to be consultative in nature, a medium for communication, and models of cooperation and collaboration. An important and perennial question facing every diocesan and eparchial pastoral council is how to select members who will advance the mission of the council and help to ensure its effectiveness. Many factors account for council effectiveness, but quality membership is among the most critical.

## Qualities of Effective Council Members

One application of the principle of shared responsibility in the local church is found in the *Code of Canon Law* (c. 511-514) and in the *Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches* (c. 272-275). These canons briefly lay out a set of minimum requirements for the purpose of a diocesan or eparchial pastoral council without precluding a fuller understanding of such a council. At the very least, membership on a pastoral council requires the capability and commitment to fulfill the purposes defined in Church law. This is a starting point for determining desirable qualities in council members.

To be able to fulfill the purposes of a pastoral council, members must also share an understanding of and commitment to the mission of the local church or diocese/eparchy. This shared sense of mission provides the essential context for members to carry out their responsibility as a council, "which under the authority of the bishop investigates, considers, and proposes practical conclusions about those things which pertain to pastoral works in the diocese." (CIC, c. 511; cf. CCEO, c. 272)

### Diversity

Canon law stipulates that pastoral council members should be Christians in full communion with the Catholic Church, and that they be outstanding in faith, morals, and prudence. The members should be drawn from all regions and social groups of the diocese or eparchy. An effective pastoral council thus reflects the diversity of the larger community, deliberating and advising on behalf of the whole community rather than on behalf of any constituency groups within it. A good mix of members will bring a range of personal and professional competencies that expand and enrich the knowledge and wisdom base of the council.

### Competence

Think about what characterizes a valuable advisor. How do you recognize a worthwhile advocate? Whom do you choose when you want to accomplish a task? The talents for advising, advocating, and accomplishing will inform the roles and functions of those called to serve on a pastoral council.

*To advise.* Advisors can be those who have learned from living and have integrated that learning with their beliefs, values, and behavior. Advisors can also be those shaped by experience in their vocation, career, aspirations, and even their failures.

Effective advisors have prior acquired knowledge, gather pertinent information, and are open to ideas that both fit or challenge their own thinking. Genuine advisors set aside prejudice and personal agendas to listen, absorb, and then offer the truth from their perspective. They do so simply, without expectation of reward, but for the benefit of those seeking advice. They can let go of their personal wisdom and allow it to belong to others. Advisors such as these are the basic cornerstones of an effective pastoral council.

*To advocate.* Pastoral councils also need advocates. Advocates have insights about specific issues and the skill to articulate clearly the needs and resources involved in a situation. Advocates proceed constructively, build coalitions, and collaborate to advance a cause. They are adept at presenting information in a compelling manner, engaging others in dialogue, and negotiating differences.

Diocesan, eparchial, and parish pastoral councils need advocates who understand the role of membership on such councils and know the difference between advisement and judgment. They extend the boundaries of dialogue, raise consciousness, and call for reflection with resolution, all without condemnation and oppressive tactics.

*To accomplish.* Pastoral councils cannot function without people who are doers, willing to take responsibility and bring research, discussion, and pondering to a conclusion. Every council must have several members who want and are able to accomplish tasks in keeping with their purpose. Too often, pastoral councils offer recommendations for what others should do, without taking on appropriate activities commensurate with their responsibilities of investigating, bringing judgment to bear on their findings, and presenting practical conclusions rooted in consensus – along with a plan for communication and cooperation.

## **Spirituality**

Underlying these many competencies is the fundamental quality of all council members, namely of nourishing a deep personal commitment to an active prayer and faith life (recognizing that personal spirituality may be expressed in a variety of ways). The living spirituality of individual members enhances the corporate spirituality of the council, creating a climate of openness, trust, mutuality, and respect that models the communion of the universal Church as the Body of Christ. To ensure viability, council members should view their service as a significant ministry of the local church.

## **Ensuring Representation with Competencies**

It is a challenge to recruit and develop a diocesan, eparchial, or parish pastoral council that represents the diversity of the local church and encompasses as well the necessary personal and professional competencies for its work. An implicit and much needed council responsibility is the ongoing recognition and preparation of leadership within the larger faith community. A pro-active council can promote lay leadership through various ministries and council committees. Being alert to the leadership potential of others, particularly new or young community members, makes it possible to foster relationships and identify opportunities for service that could eventually flower into leadership.

Because the primary focus of a council's work is pastoral planning, it is usually helpful to include among the members some people with expertise in planning, information systems, and organizational development. The presence of persons with skills in finance, group process, and human relations is also beneficial. The mix of membership might also be geared to the particular priorities and projects of

the diocesan or eparchial bishop, such as evangelization, stewardship, combating racism, or advocacy for the poor. When a council has the benefit of persons from different theological perspectives, an array of disciplines, the arts, and liturgical, religious and general education, its work will be greatly enhanced. All these competencies, blended with the diversity of cultures, geographic regions, gender balance, and spiritualities reflective of the local church enable a council to leap ahead in effectively pursuing its mission.

## **Methods of Selecting Council Members**

Canon law stipulates that the diocesan or eparchial bishop is to determine the method through which members will be designated to serve on the diocesan/eparchial pastoral council. Election and nomination/appointment are the two common ways in which a bishop can gather council members, although a direct invitation from the bishop may be utilized as well.

### **Election**

Many laypersons who serve as diocesan or eparchial pastoral council members are elected. It is common for various parish, deanery, or regional councils to elect one of their own members for service at the diocesan or eparchial level, with the bishop then confirming the elected person to a position with the diocesan/eparchial pastoral council. Some dioceses and eparchies have called conventions or assemblies of all interested Catholics in their area to provide for discernment and then election of members.

Clergy and religious who serve as diocesan or eparchial pastoral council members may also be elected, if they do not already serve *ex officio*, that is by virtue of an office or position they already hold. Bishops may, for example, specifically request the presence on the council of the chancellor, moderator of the curia, or vicar general. Apart from these *ex officio* members, priests and religious may also elect their peers to the diocesan/eparchial pastoral council through Presbyteral Councils or councils of sisters or brothers.

By electing diocesan/eparchial pastoral council members from existing councils, bishops usually get councilors who are experienced in Church consultation. Elections also ensure that a wide variety of people have input into who is selected for diocesan or eparchial pastoral council membership. Sometimes, the same few people can be elected repeatedly, so local councils need to be encouraged to develop continually the leadership potential of new and additional members.

### **Nomination and Appointment**

Many other dioceses and eparchies do not elect laypeople to serve on pastoral councils, rather bishops invite trusted colleagues in ministry to nominate people for pastoral council service. Members may be nominated, for example, by pastors, deans, vicars, parish pastoral councils, or by the Catholic population in general. Nominees are often screened by a diocesan/eparchial staff person or by a committee named by the bishop to this task. The staff person or nomination committee then presents selected nominees to the bishop, who may choose to install them.

A single staff person or small nominating committee, however, may be unaware of very capable candidates with the potential to serve simply because they fall outside their circle of acquaintance and

knowledge. Accepting nominations from the broadest base can help mitigate this possibility.

### **Invitation by the Bishop**

In addition to other processes, most diocesan or eparchial pastoral council constitutions allow the bishop to appoint a limited number of additional members. This type of proviso exists usually to add laypeople to the pastoral council, laypeople whose voice the bishop particularly wants to hear. The appointment is often a means to achieve a more balanced and representative voice (in terms of ethnicity, apostolate, gender, race, etc.). Bishops recognize that neither the election nor the nomination/appointment of council members necessarily guarantees the most effective council, namely a council that reflects all the people of God

### **Conclusion**

The Church particularly prizes pastoral council members who have the ability to study a matter deeply, reflect on it thoroughly, and draw sound conclusions. Investigating and evaluating potential council members to detect these talents takes real skill, whether done by local councils, a screening committee, or the bishop. One way to hone the ability to assess potential pastoral council members, whether on the diocesan/eparchial or parish level, is to perform periodic self-assessments of current council members, examining the qualities that contribute to their effectiveness in fulfilling the council's mission.

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