

Part I: Pastoral Council History: Mistakes We Have Made

By Dr. Mark Fischer

Three big problems continue to face the pastoral council movement. These have to do with the purpose of councils, the role of pastors, and the way by which councilors are selected.

A. The Council of Ministries?

Let us begin with the purpose of councils. This purpose has never been clarified by the U.S. bishops, who have never published a document about parish pastoral councils. We have to "read between the lines" of the Vatican II and post-conciliar documents in order to grasp the documents' true intention. The problem lies with the Vatican II Decree on the Apostolate of the Lay People, one of the council documents which recommends the establishment of councils. The laity decree states that councils should be set up to assist the Church's apostolic work, and that these councils "can take care of the mutual coordination of the various lay associations and undertakings" (par. 26). A number of popular publications in the United States have misinterpreted this decree as calling for a full-blown structure of parish standing committees, all under the authority of the parish council.

The main job of what certain authors call the parish "council of ministries" is to coordinate the parish's ministries through commissions or standing committees, such as evangelization, education, liturgy, and the like. The tasks of the parish council are, in this scheme, seemingly endless--to provide a forum for parish issues, to model shared responsibility, to foster communication, to reconcile parish divisions--and somewhat unrealistic. The most unrealistic, in my opinion, is a purpose to which some people still subscribe. They say the parish council's job is to plan and coordinate the overall policy of the parish; or, as one publication pretentiously puts it, to "ensure that ministry takes place." The parish council sets policy and delegates to each commission the issues which fall within its purview.

I believe that this is a mistake on three counts. First, ministry will continue whether the parish council is coordinating it or not. Second, the coordination of all parish ministry is beyond the scope of a volunteer group which meets two hours per month. Third, policy setting and delegation are administrative tasks which do not harmonize with the consultative role of the pastoral council. The "council of ministries" approach too closely resembles the management style of a city council.

B. Ratifying by Participation?

The second mistake made by the council movement has to do with the role of the pastor. Some publications suggest that the council, with the pastor as one among other members, should take the initiative in setting council agendas. If the wisdom of the

parish community resides in the council, they say, the council should be the true decision-maker. The role of the pastor then becomes a limited one. His job is merely to participate with the council in its search for truth. The council makes the decisions, according to this theory; the pastor merely ratifies them by his presence and participation. In the interest of promoting lay leadership, initiative belongs to the council.

I take issue with this point of view. It minimizes the pastor's role as "presider" in the council and downplays the consultative nature of the council's work. A genuine pastor is more than a mere participant in the council. He communicates his vision to the group not merely "by his excitement and enthusiasm," as some might suggest, but by leadership. He ought to be the one, I believe, who actively consults the council by defining problems, exploring solutions, and deliberating which solution is best for the community. This is not clericalism or authoritarianism. It is leadership. A good pastor focuses a task, frees the gifts of councilors, and in this way shapes the mission of the parish. To minimize the role of the pastor in the name of lay leadership is to misinterpret pastoral leadership. It turns pastors into wimps.

C. Representative Councils?

The third common problem which has troubled the council movement is its overemphasis on the "representative" nature of the council. Most guidelines for parish councils published by dioceses recommend that council selection be "representative." By this they usually mean what canon 512 in the 1983 Code of Canon Law says about diocesan pastoral councils, namely, that members be selected in such a way "that the entire portion of the people of God which constitutes the diocese is truly reflected." Parish council guidelines usually state that all councilors should put the good of the parish before that of the group which they represent. But by suggesting that councilors should represent different constituencies, or that they should reflect the demographic profile of the parish, the council guidelines have led to abuses.

We abuse people, I believe, when we elect them to councils without providing them or us with opportunities to test whether they have a real gift for the council ministry. Instead of using the gifts of councilors to develop pastoral plans and solve pastoral problems, we subject them to what the Portland canonist, Father Bertram Griffin, calls "the growing sense of boredom on parish super councils where the only action month after month is hearing reports from committees, commissions, and organizations, each having a reserved seat on the board." I would say that having qualified councilors is more important than ensuring that the council has so many members of this parish organization, race, or culture.

The Diocese of Trenton has not avoided all of these mistakes. The 1993 document on "Parish Pastoral Council Models," for example, refers to the lay facilitator of the council

as a "president." This is a problem, since canon law states that the pastor is to preside over the council. The lay facilitator ought not to be described as a "president," I would say, but as a chairman or chairwoman. In most respects, however, the document suggests that Trenton is a progressive leader. No one says that a pastor's role in Trenton is merely to ratify the council's decisions by his presence, participation, excitement, and enthusiasm. Your document, "Parish Pastoral Council Models," has preserved an understanding of the role of the pastor and the importance of election committees.