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## Pastoral Directives

### Department of Pastoral Planning

#### I. Establishment of Parish Pastoral Councils

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##### Foundation

“In the Church there is a diversity of ministry but unity of mission. To the apostles and their successors Christ has entrusted the office of teaching, sanctifying and governing in his name and by his power. But the laity are made to share in the priestly, prophetic and kingly office of Christ; they have therefore, in the Church and in the world, their own assignment in the mission of the whole People of God.”(*Decree on the Apostolate of Lay People, 2*)

“Participators in the function of Christ, priest, prophet and king, the laity have an active part of their own in the life and action of the Church. Their action within the Church communities is so necessary that without it the apostolate of the pastors will frequently be unable to obtain its full effect.”(*Decree on the Apostolate of Lay People, 10*)

“It is greatly desired that in each diocese a pastoral commission will be established over which the diocesan bishop himself will preside and in which specially chosen clergy, religious and lay people will participate. The duty of this commission will be to investigate and weigh pastoral undertakings and to formulate practical conclusions regarding them.” (*Decree Concerning the Pastoral Office of Bishops in the Church, 10*)

There is nothing to prevent the institution...of councils of the same nature and function, whether parochial or regional as they are called (for various deaneries or social bodies, etc.) (*Sacred Congregation for the Clergy, “Circular Letter on ‘Pastoral Councils’”, 12*)

*The Code of Canon Law, 1983*

**536.1** After the diocesan bishop has listened to the presbyteral council and if he judges it opportune, a pastoral council is to be established in each parish; the pastor presides over it, and through it the Christian faithful along with those who share in the pastoral care of the parish in virtue of their office give their help in fostering pastoral activity.



536.2 This pastoral council possesses a consultative vote only and is governed by norms determined by the diocesan bishop.

*The Statutes of the Fourth Synod of the Diocese of Trenton*

Statute 156. The Pastor of each parish in the Diocese of Trenton shall establish a parish pastoral council, unless the Pastor, after consultation with and permission from the diocesan Bishop, deems it prudent to delay the establishment of this Council.

Statute 157. The parish pastoral council possesses a consultative role only and is governed by the norms provided in its own constitution, prepared according to a model drawn up the diocesan Pastoral Council, and subject to the approval of the diocesan Bishop. The parish pastoral council ceases at the death or transfer of the Pastor.

“But now it is no longer an immediate goal that we face, but the larger and more demanding challenge of normal pastoral activity. With its universal and indispensable provisions, the program of the Gospel must continue to take root, as it has always done, in the life of the Church everywhere. It is *in the local churches* that the specific features of a detailed pastoral plan can be identified — goals and methods, formation and enrichment of the people involved, the search for the necessary resources — which will enable the proclamation of Christ to reach people, mould communities, and have a deep and incisive influence in bringing Gospel values to bear in society and culture. I therefore earnestly exhort the Pastors of the particular Churches, with the help of all sectors of God's People, confidently to plan the stages of the journey ahead, harmonizing the choices of each diocesan community with those of neighboring Churches and of the universal Church.” (*Novo Millennio Ineunte*, 29)

“The lay faithful ought to be ever more convinced of the special meaning that their commitment to the apostolate takes on in their parish; hence it is necessary to have a more convinced, extensive and decided appreciation for "Parish Pastoral Councils". There are clear reasons for such: In the present circumstances the lay faithful have the ability to do very much and, therefore, ought to do very much towards the growth of an authentic ecclesial communion in their parishes in order to reawaken missionary zeal towards nonbelievers and believers themselves who have abandoned the faith or grown lax in the Christian life.” (*The Priest, Pastor, and Leader of the Parish Community*, 26)



## **Establishing Parish Pastoral Councils**

The role of a Parish Pastoral Council is to help the pastor in coming to understand and live out its pastoral mission. The Parish Pastoral Council engages in both visioning and long-term planning. It is consultative to the Pastor. The Parish Pastoral Council is not a coordinating committee. It is not concerned with the day-to-day administrative operations that are the responsibility of the Pastor, parochial vicar(s), deacons and parish staff. It is distinct from the Parish Finance Council, as well.

The 8 -12 members that make up the Parish Pastoral Council are called forth from the community at large. They “make present” the wisdom of the various members of the parish. They do not represent certain ministries. They are not elected. The members are selected through a process of prayer and discernment.

The process should include: a period of prayer for the whole parish community; education for the community on the role of the pastoral council; an explanation of the criteria and characteristics necessary to serve; an open invitation to identify those who might serve; a gathering for those identified to help them understand the commitment; and a discernment session to select the members. The aim of the process is to calling forth those that are able and willing to commit the time needed for prayer, study and the work of the council.

Members of the Parish Pastoral Council should meet some established criteria. These criteria generally include: being a baptized, practicing Catholic; being a registered member of the parish for at least five years; participating in the ongoing life of the parish, especially Sunday Eucharist; and being at least 21 years of age. It is also helpful to have parishioners identify the characteristics they value in Christian leaders. Some examples are: willingness to listen, honesty, enthusiasm about the future of the parish, a commitment to work toward consensus, a desire for personal spiritual growth and the growth of the community, flexibility, openness to new ideas, etc.

Stability and continuity are important to the work of the Parish Pastoral Council. For this reason, it is appropriate that a length of service should be established that is a minimum of 3 years. The first members should have varied terms of service so that an orderly turnover is planned—with a few members being replaced each year after the initial period of service. Alternately, a Pastor may wish to have the members of a Council serve for three years together, then select a Council to replace them with all new members. In either case, members should rotate leadership roles within the council periodically.



## **Directive**

Each parish will establish a parish pastoral council. The Staff of the Department of Pastoral Planning are available to assist the Pastor with a process for establishing or revitalizing a parish pastoral council.

## **Recommendations**

1. Each parish should begin the process of establishing a parish pastoral council; or if one already exists, undertake a process of revitalization in order to prepare the council to fulfill its consultative role (investigate, ponder/reflect upon, propose/recommend).
2. The pastoral council of a parish ceases at the transfer or death of the current Pastor. A newly named Pastor may invite former council members to advise him. Their familiarity with the parish culture and relationship with parishioners can be a valuable asset to a new Pastor.
3. At a time judged appropriate, a new Pastor should begin a process to establish a (new) Parish Pastoral Council within the first year of his pastorate.
4. An annual calendar of meetings should be established for the Parish Pastoral Council. The members, working with the Pastor, should decide upon when, where, and how often to meet in order to fulfill its duties. It is recommended the Council meet monthly for two hours; but other formats can be equally productive. A Parish Pastoral Council should not meet less than four times in a year.
5. In order to fulfill its duties, the Parish Pastoral Council requires individual members to share the roles that are needed. The Pastor presides at meetings of the Council; most find it helpful to have someone to arrange the meeting site (convener), a facilitator, and a recorder. In addition, pairs or teams might share the responsibility of developing an agenda, arranging for training, and planning continuing spiritual formation for the council.

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