

Re-imagining Pastoral Councils

Briefing Paper

“How needed pastoral councils are! A bishop cannot guide a diocese without pastoral councils. A parish priest cannot guide the parish without the parish council. This is fundamental!”

Pope Francis, Pastoral Visit to Assisi, 4th October 2013

Since the Second Vatican Council, the Church has been seeking ways of living out the call to collaboration and co-responsibility in its community life. Pastoral councils have been seen as one of the ways in which such co-responsibility can happen, bringing clergy and laity together to “investigate, consider, and propose practical conclusions about those things which pertain to pastoral works”. All too often, however, pastoral councils which were founded in good faith and which indeed may have worked well for a year or two, have diminished over time. This can be due to a lack of purpose, disengagement by members, change of parish priest, or external circumstances. Where pastoral councils are absent or underperforming, there can be real challenges, including both the struggle to resolve ongoing pastoral problems;

and the overwhelming responsibility and workload that falls on the parish priest. The absence of clear vision can make for frustrating meetings, and tensions descend too easily into polarisation, while a lack of transparency in decision-making fuels distrust. Even where parishes or dioceses function well without a council, this is often due to the skill and personality of the bishop or parish priest, leaving the community vulnerable to a change of leadership. The widespread problems of pastoral councils suggests that simply having better meetings or taking better minutes will not make long-term change. We suggest a wholesale re-imagining of pastoral councils, a distinctly Catholic model of decision-making, which does not rely on business methods but draws on centuries-old practices of spiritual discernment.

Questions to ponder

- What have been your experiences of pastoral councils?
- If they have been good, what factors helped?
- If they were not good, why?

This briefing paper is a project of the School for Synodality in partnership with Northampton, Hexham and Newcastle, and Clifton Dioceses together with the Jesuit Institute.

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Synodal Councils – A Vision

That expression – “We have always done it that way” – is poison for the life of the Church... The danger, in the end, is to apply old solutions to new problems... It is important that the synodal process be exactly this: a process of becoming, a process that involves the local Churches, in different phases and from the bottom up, in an exciting and engaging effort that can forge a style of communion and participation directed to mission.

Pope Francis, Address for the Opening of the Synod

Pope Francis has said that synodality is ‘the way of being Church in the third millennium’, causing us to re-imagine all aspects of our communal life. In finding ways to live synodally through our structures and decision-making, this model provides a roadmap for:

- Navigating shared responsibilities in a hierarchical Church
- Discerning under the guidance of the Holy Spirit
- Re-gaining a new sense of mission
- Prioritising the marginalised through a distinct option for the poor

These are not necessarily straightforward changes. Moving to more synodal ways of being demands a collective commitment to openness and humility, relinquishing notions of power, making room for the Holy Spirit, and listening to all voices, even when they challenge our comfort zones. The benefits far outweigh the challenges, however, with the potential for more robust and mission-driven communities, building trust through transparent decision-making processes, attracting a new and diverse membership, intentionally engaging women in decision-

making, and sharing leadership responsibilities throughout the community. Synodal processes, by encompassing a range of voices including those on the fringes, establish a bridge to a rapidly evolving world. By creatively holding tensions and embracing discomfort, these processes open us to the voice of the Holy Spirit, offering the prospect of reconciliation and renewal.

Characteristics of a synodal church

While many have been committed to notions of collaboration and co-responsibility outlined in *Lumen Gentium*, it has not been straightforward to put this into practice. Synodality is offered as an outworking of those virtues for our time. Some of the characteristics of a synodal church are that it

- Is rooted in the vocation of all the baptised
- Exercises co-responsibility
- Listens to the signs of the times – is open to being disturbed
- Uses gracious listening and gracious speaking skills to create safe spaces where all can be heard
- Holds tension without forcing it into uniformity
- Through discernment - is open to the Holy Spirit
- Moves to action – leaders have to be decision-takers
- Is not a personal burden but a task for the whole community

*(taken from *Instrumentum Laboris* for 1st Assembly of Rome Synod on Synodality, Section A1)*

A Synodal Council

- Is a living faith community founded in shared prayer and a commitment to personal renewal
- Is committed to discerning the Spirit through gracious listening and speaking
- Listens to the signs of the times and asks “whose voices are not being heard?”
- Is open to being disturbed and can hold a variety of perspectives
- Is focussed on the mission of the parish, with buildings/ financial issues dealt with elsewhere (eg finance committee)
- Knows how to engage others to get things done
- Is not separate from the rest of the parish

Choosing members

Heads:

- People who have knowledge and wisdom
- Theological understanding helpful
- People who will understand the potential ‘pitfalls’ of any suggested project
- Head people represent the concern for direction. They can solve problems and make decisions.

Hearts:

- People of passion, with a real desire to listen to the voices of others,
- Care about the impact that decisions can have and will seek to respond with compassion and understanding.
- Will raise the challenging questions E.g., what are we doing about the local people living in poverty?

Hands:

- People who have practical skills or the capacity to encourage others to use their skills
- People who will say ‘We know what we want to do, we understand the different views, now let’s get on with it.’
- Hands people represent the concern for achieving goals. It deals with holding people and processes accountable and ensuring that the group performs.

A typical meeting

- Start with prayer – recommend ‘lectio divina’ (prayer lead)
- Reflect on the agenda
- What is most important/ difficult/contested item – tackle that first?
- Where are you seeking the voice of the Holy Spirit?
- Consider a spiritual conversation
- Remain focused on your mission
- Who else needs to be involved to get things done?

Questions for conversation:

1. What have been your good and bad experiences of pastoral councils and decision making?
2. What would an ideal PPC/PAC look like for you? (dream dreams!)
3. What needs to happen so that an ideal PPC/PAC can come into being, and what challenges or tensions do we need to recognise?
4. What learning has already come through the synodal process – where is God working already?
5. How does the tension between canonical authority and co-responsibility play out in a pastoral council? How can these be overcome?