

Parish Pastoral Council & Parish Finance Council: A Clarification

By Fr Michael Pui

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(This document is an updated version of the one written on 27th January 2008 which was given to members of the Parish Council in Kaiapoi and then updated again in 2012 for OLV, Sockburn, and in 2020)

Most parishes have Pastoral and Finance Councils. They are **both important**, but they have quite different roles. Nevertheless, many matters which belong to one of the Councils usually overlap the domain of the other. Most of the time, especially when things tick along smoothly in a parish, these overlaps do not matter. But sometimes these overlaps can lead to tension between the two. It is therefore good, from time to time, to re-visit what the mind of the Church is in relation to both councils and to clarify their roles. A good place to start is to read the various official documents of the Church. One important document is the Code of Canon Law;

Paragraphs that pertain to Parish *Finance* Councils

Canon 537

Each parish **is to *have* a finance council** which is regulated by universal laws as well as by norms issued by the diocesan bishop; in this council the Christian faithful, selected according to the same norms, aid the pastor in the administration of parish goods with due regard for the prescription of Canon 532.

Paragraphs from Canon Law that pertain to Parish *Pastoral* Councils

Canon 515

#1 A parish is a definite community of the Christian faithful established on a stable basis within a particular church; the pastoral care of the parish is entrusted to a pastor* as its own shepherd under the authority of the diocesan bishop.
#2. The diocesan bishop (etc...)

Canon 519

The Pastor is the proper shepherd of the parish entrusted to him, exercising *pastoral* care in the community entrusted to him under the authority of the diocesan bishop in whose ministry of Christ he has been called to share; in accord with the norm of the law he carries out for his community the duties of teaching, sanctifying and governing, with the cooperation of other presbyters or deacons and the *assistance of the lay members of the Christian faithful*.

Canon 536

#1 After the diocesan bishop has listened to the presbyterial 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*.
#2 The pastoral council possesses a *consultative vote* only and is *governed by norms determined by the diocesan bishop*.

*N/b a) *These are American Translations of the Code of Canon Law. In America, 'Parish Priests' are referred to as 'Pastors'*. b) *All Emphasis above are mine.*

The Roles of the Pastoral and Finance Councils

The words “pastoral” and ‘finance’ *already* actually state the roles of each council! The former has to do with ‘pastoral’ matters, and latter ‘financial’ matters.

- The main role of the Parish’s Pastoral Council is to help the parish priest in fostering pastoral activity and initiatives and to deal with matters pertaining to the pastoral care of the people.
- The main role of the Parish’s Finance Council is to help the parish priest in the administration of parish goods.

(In the Diocese of Christchurch, the administration of the temporal goods of the Diocese and parishes are clearly set out in a set of ‘Norms’ promulgated by the Bishop. It is a reasonably ‘large’ document, but there are important sections of which the Parish Priest should make both PPC and Finance members aware.)

One of the reasons I am writing this document is because I discovered several parishes with Pastoral Councils that have unwittingly taken on the role of the Finance Councils. Sometimes, members of the Pastoral Councils even erroneously think that Finance Council members are there only to ‘pay the bills’, while they ‘manage’ the parish. This is far from the mind of the Church. The financial welfare of the parish is the responsibility of the Parish Priest and is managed by the Finance Council, while the Pastoral Council is one with the priest in fostering *pastoral* activities, and in his care for his flock.

A brief commentary on importance of the Parish *Pastoral* Council

Other official documents also shed some light on the above as to the mind of the Church on these matters. In ‘Christifideles Laici’ (Pope John Paul II’s Post Synodal Exhortation ‘On the Vocation and the Mission of the Lay Faithful in the Church and in the World’), we read: *‘The Council’s mention of examining and solving pastoral problems “by general discussion” ought to find its adequate and structured development through a more convinced, extensive and decided appreciation for “Parish Pastoral Councils”, on which the Synod Fathers have rightly insisted’*. This highlights the importance of the Parish Pastoral Council. Sometimes the phrasing of Canon 536 that the Pastoral Council enjoys only a ‘consultative vote’, gives rise to the misunderstanding that the Pastoral Council’s role is minimal. On the contrary, elsewhere in ‘Christifideles Laici’, the term “co-responsibility” is used to describe how pastoral responsibility is to be exercised by the ordained priest along with the delegated members of the community. The word “co-“ means “together” or “not without the other”.

The Pastoral Council’s possession of a ‘consultative vote only’ simply expresses the Church’s teaching that the Parish Priest receives his mandate to exercise pastoral care of the parish, not by a majority vote, nor is he merely an executive of the community, but that his mission comes from the whole Church through the bishop. Thus the ideals behind it express also the Parish Priest’s role of *unifying* the community – the parish Council is to be united with him, and the priest hopefully is able to draw out the various talents and perspectives of each member. It is therefore more fruitful not to get caught up with the narrow and often pejorative view of the the words “consultative vote only”, but to focus on the ‘togetherness’ and the ‘co-responsibility’ as the basis of the Parish Priest with the flock entrusted to him. Furthermore, the consultative nature of the Parish Council opens up the possibility for a much more

Christian type of government which emphasises service, rather than our accustomed democratic approach which emphasises power. The ideals remind us that the relationships and leaderships in the Church are governed by the teaching of Christ Himself who said: “You have only one Master and you are all brothers (and sisters) – Matthew 23:8.

Conclusion

I have always wanted my Parish Council to be more involved with the ‘people’ type activity – in other words, ‘pastoral’ – just as the Church asks of me. I do not want a Council that sees itself simply as ‘managing’ the parish, meeting only to discuss what other people ‘have done’ and then ratifying the minutes, but in effect not adding anything much more to what is already going on in the parish.

Parish Council members are invaluable in getting my pastoral vision into fruition! I want more of my Council members and more from them – not less!

As for Finance council members, as the Church sees it, you are invaluable in making sure that we are able to function as a parish because we are financially viable!

Fr Michael Pui