

PRAYER AND PASTORAL COUNCILS

THE PURPOSE OF PASTORAL COUNCILS

The parish pastoral council is a leadership group through which priests and people work together as partners in furthering the mission of Christ in their own place. It does this through building up a vibrant Christian community that is rooted in baptism and marked by its faith, worship and service.¹

The Code of Canon Law speaks of the purpose of a Diocesan Pastoral Council as *to study and weigh those matters which concern the pastoral works in a diocese, and to propose practical conclusions concerning them.*² The Parish Pastoral Council has the same responsibility at local level – in other words, to ask the questions: How can we be more faithful disciples in this parish at this time? What are the needs in this parish? In this area? What gifts and resources might we need to address these needs? How can we put the needs and the resources / gifts together? Where is God calling us as a community?

WHY IS PRAYER IMPORTANT?

Prayer is an expression of our relationship with God, listening and speaking, being drawn into the very life of the Trinity. One image for this communion with God and each other is that of Jesus as the vine whose life flows into us as the branches. We are invited to remain in him (communion) and to ‘bear fruit’ (mission). Through prayer, we become attentive to the presence of God’s Spirit in us as individuals, in the community, in the local area and in the world. Prayer can change us as it opens us to new possibilities and ways of living as people who are in the process of conversion to Jesus Christ.

PRAYER IN THE LIFE OF THE PASTORAL COUNCIL

1. At Pastoral Council meetings

Prayer at Pastoral Council meetings is not an optional extra. It invites us to remember that members gather as disciples to share in the work of God at this time

¹ Irish Catholic Bishops’ Conference, Parish Pastoral Councils: A Framework for Developing Diocesan Norms and Parish Guidelines, Veritas Publications, Dublin, 2007, p18

² Canon 511

and in this place. It helps us to focus on the fact that it is not our work or agenda that brings us together – we are there to carry forward the work of Christ under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. If we forget this, we run the risk of being concerned only with our own agendas. Pope John Paul II reminded us that *there is a temptation which perennially besets every spiritual journey and pastoral work: that of thinking that the results depend on our ability to act and to plan.... God of course really invites us to cooperate with his grace, and therefore invites us to invest all our resources of intelligence and energy in serving the cause of the Kingdom. But it is fatal to forget that 'without Christ we can do nothing'. It is prayer which roots us in this truth.*³

When a Pastoral Council has a long agenda, it is often tempting to shorten the time set aside for prayer, or to omit any opportunity for individual or shared reflection. When someone asked St. Francis de Sales how much one should pray, he suggested a half hour each day, unless a person was busy, in which case they should pray for an hour. On this basis, time for prayer is the first item to be put on the agenda for a meeting, and the last item to be removed if time is short. Through their shared prayer at meetings, members are enabled to focus on both the identity and the mission of the Pastoral Council, and are formed into a community of faith at the heart of the parish.

It is strongly suggested that at least 15 minutes is timetabled for prayer at the beginning of the meeting, and 7-10 minutes at the end of the meeting. It might also be appropriate to pause for a few moments of quiet prayer during the meeting, especially if the discussion has become heated, or appears to be going nowhere. Reminding ourselves that God is working in and through every person at the meeting will be especially helpful at this point.

a) Creating a prayerful environment

A simple focus consisting of a candle, bible or lectionary, an image of Christ etc can create a prayerful environment for the meeting, and act as a reminder of the Council's purpose and mission.

b) Leading prayer

Since the Pastoral Council works in as collaborative a way as possible, the privilege of leading prayer is shared by all members of the group. While some people will be comfortable leading prayer on their own, others may be happier leading the prayer as part of a small group. Prayer leaders should aim to maximise participation in the prayer through inviting others to read and ensuring that there is time for quiet reflection as well as sharing the fruits of that reflection.

³ At the Beginning of the New Millennium, para 38

Saint Paulinus of Nola encourages us *to listen to what all the faithful say, because in every one of them the Spirit of God breathes*. Time for shared reflection in a prayerful setting gives each person the opportunity to benefit from the Spirit's inspiration in others.

At a practical level, the person / people who are leading the prayer at a meeting should spend time preparing for this beforehand, and ensure that there are enough copies of any materials being used in the prayer for all council members.

c) Prayer at the beginning of the meeting – a suggested format

Invitation to prayer

An opportunity for people to become still and focus on the presence and power of God, and to lay aside other concerns.

Perhaps play a piece of quiet music...

Focus for prayer

This might be

- the Gospel (or one of the other readings) for the following Sunday
- a Scripture passage or extract from Church document that is relevant to an aspect of the mission of the parish that will be under consideration at the meeting
- a poem, song, or work of art expressing something of who we are and who we are called to be

If a text is being used, it is suggested that

- the passage is read once
- there is a time of quiet
- people are invited to say aloud a word, phrase or image that struck them (this is not a time for discussion, or saying why something has been chosen)
- the text is read again
- there is a time of quiet with some questions for reflection e.g. What is God inviting us to through this text? What challenges does this text offer us as a Pastoral Council? As a parish / Pastoral Area?
- people are invited to share their responses to these questions. Again, these are not for comment or discussion.

Praying for guidance

The time of prayer is brought to a close by asking the Holy Spirit to guide the work of the Council and the meeting.

A resource which could be used for either the opening prayer or closing prayer at Pastoral Council meetings is Prayer for Parish Groups , a collection of over 100 prayer resources (details at end).

d) Prayer at the end of the meeting – a suggested format

- A re-reading of the text used at the beginning of the meeting
- A time of quiet reflection in which members are invited to review the work of the meeting
- Intercessions / prayers for the needs of the Pastoral Council, the parish / Pastoral Area, the neighbourhood, the world
- Time of thanksgiving for insights etc shared during the meeting – people might be invited to name these insights aloud
- ‘Glory be...’

2. Prayer in the lives of the members of the Pastoral Council

a) Individual prayer

The prayer of a Pastoral Council is grounded in the prayer of individual members of the council, who are each conscious of an ongoing need to develop a deeper relationship with God and a greater responsiveness to his calling. Time in personal prayer might involve:

- Reflecting on a passage of Scripture, perhaps one of the readings for the day or for the coming Sunday, or on a poem, work of art or piece of music
- Spending a few moments quietly each day becoming aware of the presence and action of God
- Taking time at the end of each day to give thanks to God for all that has happened during the day
- Prayer with others in the home e.g. family rituals

b) Days of reflection / retreat for members of the Pastoral Council

It is important for members of the Pastoral Council to take time on a regular basis for ongoing reflection (e.g. on a church document) and for more extended prayer than can happen at a meeting. Pastoral Councils might set aside two half days each year for this.

Members of the Diocesan Department for Pastoral Formation are willing to facilitate these days, or support them in whatever ways are necessary.

Prayer gives us the 'why' of the work of any parish leadership group. The very dynamic of prayer has at its core God's calling of us and our response, underscores the collaborative spirit in which we are called to engage with one another in the parish. The dialogue that emerges in prayer keeps us in touch with the mission of God's people, in which we are all called to share. The direction in which prayer leads us sets us on the path of God's work – a work greater than ourselves but a work in which we are called to participate for the building up of the kingdom of God in the places in which we dwell.⁴

Further reading:

O'Brien, Oonagh & Kavanagh, Julie, Parish Leadership Groups: A Resourcebook, Dublin: The Columba Press, 2001

Harrington, Donal and Kavanagh, Julie, Prayers for Parish Groups, Dublin: The Columba Press, 1998

As well as prayer resources which could be used for Pastoral Council meetings, the book contains an introduction (p11-19) on 'Praying Together: The heartbeat of every parish group' which could usefully be discussed at a Pastoral Council meeting.

'Infusing the Pastoral Council with the Spirit of Christ', Sr Kathleen Turley RSM at www.usccb.org/laity/turley.shtml

Department for Pastoral Formation
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⁴ O'Brien, Oonagh & Kavanagh, Julie, Parish Leadership Groups: A Resourcebook, Dublin: The Columba Press, 2001 p145