

PRACTICAL THEOLOGY

- Topic: The Role of the Parish Council
 Conveners: Kathleen A. Cahalan, St. John's University
 Raymond J. Webb, University of Saint Mary of the Lake
 Moderator: Elizabeth Willems, Notre Dame Seminary
 Presenters: Mark F. Fischer, St. John's Seminary
 Gaile Pohlhaus, Villanova University
 Bradford E. Hinze, Marquette University
 Respondent: William Clark, College of the Holy Cross

The session addressed the question of the "consultative-only" (Canon 536) role of parish pastoral councils. Mark Fischer argued that parish pastoral councils are, in fact, a post-Vatican II success story. He described how, initially, he had tried to soften the consultative-only clause by appealing for diocesan norms that would mandate consultation, would give councils the right to appeal a pastor's decision, or would define consultative as executive decision making by the council. Eventually, he came to regard the consultative nature of councils as prudent and liberating. The Church's teaching emphasizes the rightful purpose of councils—not to legislate for the parish, but to seek wisdom. It gives pastors the freedom to reject bad advice and councilors the freedom to discover the truth. If pastors fail to employ councils as the Church teaches, this may be a call to improve the quality of vocations to the pastoral ministry.

Bradford Hinze contended that the consultative-only clause in the 1983 Code of Canon Law symbolized the compromise reached at Vatican II between the older hierarchical ecclesiology that had emerged during the late medieval period and reached its apogee in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and a newer ecclesiological trajectory associated with renewed christological, pneumatological, and trinitarian theologies and the development of a fuller theology of baptism and eucharist. The latter called for the full and active participation of all Catholics in the threefold offices of Christ and every member's active responsibility to contribute to the fuller realization of the identity and mission of the Church. The council introduced this newer ecclesiological trajectory, which in significant ways was based on new receptions of ancient biblical, liturgical, and practical traditions, but was unable in the time allotted to develop these fully or to work out their implications related to the older approach.

Hinze argued that diocesan bishops and parish pastors should be required to establish pastoral councils that are not only consultative about the spectrum of pastoral issues, but that also engage in communal discernment and decision making in matters pertaining to the pastoral work and mission of the local church. The pastoral council should determine collectively the agenda for meetings, what individuals or groups make which decisions, who is consulted, and who implements these decisions. For Hinze, the leadership of the bishop and pastor functions in communion with the local church and parish as represented

by the members of the pastoral council, and their authority and credibility are derived neither solely nor primarily from their office, but from their being-and-acting-in-communion with the local community which they lead and represent, as well as with ecclesial representatives and entities at the regional, national, and universal levels.

Gaile Pohlhaus reported on the Voice of the Faithful, which was organized after the revelation of widespread sexual abuse in the Archdiocese of Boston. Within six months it had grown into an international organization which two and a half years later has more than 30,000 members. The group has dedicated itself to (1) support of sexual abuse survivors, (2) supporting priests of integrity, and (3) structural change of the Church. Working committees have evolved around each of these goals. The national working group formed around structural change has face to face members from Pennsylvania to Maine and virtual members through an active email list serve. Parish pastoral councils were identified as the best way to work for structural change. To test this assumption a survey was sent to all VOTF members and one third responded to the survey. The sample analyzed represented over 350 different parish pastoral councils in the United States. Despite the inherent biases of the survey (very active members of the Church, 60% from suburban parishes which are presumably middle and upper class as well as well educated) the survey demonstrated that the consultative-only clause with respect to pastoral councils does not preclude an active council where pastor and council work mutually for the benefit of the parish.

William Clark commented that the ministerial authority of the pastor and the baptismal authority of the community itself ideally are not opposed to one another, so the question is about what sense of proportion and order ought to be conveyed by the legal structure. He hoped we could find ways of demonstrating to our communities that pastoral accountability can be required. He was struck by Ignatius of Antioch's strong position on the role of the bishop as having an overall spiritual authority within the community that is "summed up," guarded, and enabled by the office of pastor. The whole relationship of parishioners and pastors, a "being and acting in communion," needs to be assisted by a legal framework in which a genuine sense of mutuality is expected by the systematic arrangements themselves.

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