

Topic: Parish Councils: Whose Interpretation of Vatican II Was Right?
Convener: James A. Coriden, Washington Theological Union
Presenter: Mark F. Fischer, St. John's Seminary, Camarillo
Respondent: John A. Coleman, Jesuit School of Theology at Berkeley

Mark Fischer argued that key texts from Vatican II about parish councils had been unsatisfactorily interpreted in the light of the 1983 Code of Canon Law in order to limit the scope of councils. These interpretations need to be corrected, he said, so as not to prematurely limit the freedom of pastors to consult as they see fit.

Fischer noted how councils at the parish level have flourished since Vatican II, with such councils in place in 75% of 19,000 U.S. parishes and with 150,000 Catholics participating in councils at any one time. His survey showed that U.S. bishops support councils by employing support staff (65.3% of dioceses), by consulting a diocesan pastoral council (62.2%), by mandating parish councils (82.7%), and by publishing guidelines for councils (89.8%). He then surveyed the official documents of the Church pertaining to councils.

Because councils have rapidly proliferated, certain authors (William Dalton, Orville Griese, John Keating, Peter Kim, and John Renken) have sought to guide them and limit their scope, said Fischer. They have done so by appealing to canon 536, which recommends councils in the language of the Vatican II Decree on Bishops (no. 27). The code ignores the language about councils in the Decree on the Laity (no. 26). This selectivity curtails the full vision for councils expressed at Vatican II, argued Fischer, and inappropriately makes the code the interpretive key for Vatican II, rather than vice versa.

In his response, John Coleman endorsed Fischer's major point. Vatican II is more than its reflection in the Code of Canon Law, which should be interpreted in light of the council. Coleman then raised three questions. He asked, first, whether the popularity of councils in the U.S. indicates an indiscriminating appropriation by parishes of democratic rule by the majority or a more subtle appreciation of spiritual discernment. Next, he asked whether the U.S. bishops, most of whom mandate parish councils, *ought* to mandate them. Finally, he asked whether national pastoral councils, declared "inopportune" in the 1973 Circular Letter on Pastoral Councils, written to bishops by the Congregation for the Clergy, should still be considered inopportune.

James Coriden, convener of the group, moderated the discussion among the twenty participants. Bishop Raymond A. Lucker (New Ulm) drew a parallel between parish councils and the "parish boards" recommended in the 1940s by the late Bishop Edwin V. O'Hara to promote religious education. But Bishop Richard J. Sklba (Milwaukee) cautioned against giving consultative bodies an unambiguously administrative role, and noted the tension which sometimes exists between Pastoral Councils and School Boards in his archdiocese.

Robert J. Gregorio (Diocese of Camden) expanded Fischer's list of official documents about councils by calling attention to no. 36 of the Decree on Bishops. It recommends provincial councils so that neighboring bishops might promote the common good and that of individual churches.

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