



... let us profess the truth
in love and grow to the full
maturity of Christ the head.
Ephesians IV, 15.

GUIDELINES FOR PARISH COUNCILS

INTRODUCTION

The Second Vatican Council speaks to the world in pastoral accents. It addresses itself amicably and with remarkable clarity to the anguishing burden of modern man, — his loneliness. In emphasizing the inherent dignity of the human person and the unique role each individual plays in the world community, — indeed his indispensable and expectantly awaited contribution to the Church in the late Twentieth Century, the Council Fathers have given an effective sign that God is alive and at work, calling after His prodigal sons, binding the wounds of His fallen friends, and gathering what has been scattered.

The Church, then, ever faithfully mindful of the Saviour's charge to "make disciples of all nations" (Matt. XXVII, 19), ardently reemphasizes the desire to employ proper means to fulfill her mission. The Second Vatican Council calls upon all the people of God to take part fully — each according to his vocation — in the life and work of the Church.

Thus the laity equally with the clergy and religious are seen as fully recognized partners for the realization of Christ's stated goal that all may be one as He and the Father are One (John XVI, 21). They truly share responsibility in making this ideal a reality.

Nor is the cooperation of the laity to be limited to providing counsel and advice in one's field of special competence alone. The Catholic, raised up to God in the status of adopted sonship at his Baptism, publicly and personally sealed in commitment to Christ at his Confirmation, nourished and sustained throughout his earthly pilgrimage by the "bread of life" and "spiritual drink" at the Eucharist, is called upon to live today as Paul of Tarsus saw himself after awakening to the reality of Christ-still-at-work-in-the-world: "The life I live now is not my own; Christ is living in me . . ." (Gal. II, 20).

It is in keen awareness of this continuing reality that the Church is calling at this very time for the formation of Diocesan Pastoral Councils wherein all who are united in the

household of faith work together to study the needs of mankind, to seek and to find the best practical means to fulfill most effectively the teaching-saving mission of Christ's Church on earth. These Councils are urged as stimulators for responsible consultation and cooperative action on the parochial, regional, and even international levels so that in the Church diversity of service and unity of purpose may be made clearly visible.

The reason the Church strives to draw all the laity and clergy together to collaborate closely in their Father's business is not exclusively or even primarily a material or practical one. It is, rather, deeply rooted in the spiritual mission of the Church which, called to manifest its holiness by obedience to the Eternal Father, responds in faith first of all through authentic public worship and concomitantly through unhesitating witness in word and work. In this entire response the members, having fostered among themselves a mutual esteem in fraternal dialogue, reveal that the bonds which unite them in Christ are mightier than anything which divides or can divide them.

The clear priority of function for the Parish Council must be service. It is proposed as a forum for the expression of needs, the exploration of possible means to address these needs, and the implementation of the means chosen as most appropriate in the given circumstances. It is understood that the parish as the basic cell of the Church which is Christ's Mystical Body "exists solely for the good of souls" (Decree on the Bishops' Pastoral Office in the Church, n-31). Wherefore, in view of the all too obvious spiritual agitation of the times, it is particularly imperative that the Catholic layman, living unavoidably in the midst of this agitation and the causes which foment it, be called to a conspicuously active role in proclaiming the peace of Christ.

The laity are acknowledged to have in different ways and in different degrees involvement in world activities as well as recognized expertise in various fields of endeavor. Laymen have insights and talents, both native and acquired, which the Church cannot and dare not disregard. Every Chris-

tian fully alive in Christ professes uncompromisingly "one Lord, one Faith, one Baptism, one God and Father of all . . ." (Eph. IV, 5). This unity does not at all inhibit the legitimate expression of various opinions and the proposals of diverse techniques for meeting the perplexing demands of our day. In the expression of opinion and the proposal of technique, the primacy of charity must be recognized. This point is clearly indicated by the words of the Vatican Council: §

"Often enough the Christian view of things will itself suggest some specific solution in certain circumstances. Yet it happens rather frequently, and legitimately so, that with equal sincerity some of the faithful will disagree with others on a given matter. Even against the intentions of their proponents, however, solutions proposed on one side or another may be easily confused by many people with the gospel message. Hence, it is necessary for people to remember that no one is allowed in the aforementioned situations to appropriate the Church's authority to his opinion. They should always try to enlighten one another through honest discussion, preserving mutual charity and caring above all for the common good."

(Church in The Modern World—n. 43)

It is to be expected that, fully exemplifying the unity which is a mark of Christ's Church, the distinctive character of particular parishes will face problems toward the resolution of which its own people will be particularly well qualified to respond. Hence, Parish Councils are envisioned both as forums for local decision-sharing and the foundation for the vertical structure from which foresight and insight at the "grass roots" can readily be conveyed to the Diocesan Pastoral Council under the presidency of the Bishop. (Decree on the Bishops' Pastoral Office in the Church, n-27).

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