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Councils

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"After the diocesan bishop has listened to the presbyteral council and if he judges it opportune, a pastoral council is to be established in each parish," Canon 536 states. "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."

However, Canon 536 also points out that the parish pastoral council serves in a consultative or advisory role. The pastor or administrator is required to consult with the council on major decisions and to take into account its input, but is ultimately responsible for making final decisions.

"The pastoral council possesses a consultative vote only and is governed by norms determined by the diocesan bishop," Canon 536 states.

Additionally, Canon 537 called for each parish to establish another lay council to address financial matters.

"Each parish is to have a finance council which is regulated by universal law as well as by norms issued by the diocesan bishop," Canon 537 reads.

In 1970, Rochester Bishop Joseph L. Hogan directed diocesan parishes to establish lay councils.

According to a 1975 report by the former diocesan Office of Pastoral Ministry, the number of parish councils in the diocese subsequently increased from 37 to 140 between 1970 and 1975.

Father Raymond H. Booth, pastor of St. Paul's Church in Webster, has enjoyed the involvement of enthusiastic parish councils at both St. Christopher's Church in North Chili, where he was pastor from 1975 to 1988; and at St. Paul's, where he has served since 1988.

"They did not want to take over or run the church, but they were concerned about the 'ongoingness,'" Father Booth said.

Indeed, diocesan officials noted that the parish councils are intended to give a sense of direction for the parish and be involved in making major decisions, but not in the day-to-day operations of the parish.

Father Booth also served at Rochester's Our Lady of Mount Carmel Church in the early 1970s when that church established its first parish council. However, according to Father Booth's co-pastor at that time, Father Laurence C. Tracy, parish-



ioners balked at the opportunity to take greater ownership of parish ministry.

"The people were very traditional Catholics who wanted to pray, pay and obey. It was like pulling teeth because they were deferring to 'Father.' So we put the decision-making process in their hands and refused to make the decision for them," said Father Tracy, who currently serves as parochial vicar in Rochester's Community of Hope cluster.

Sister Mary Ann Binsack, RSM, conducted several workshops in the late 1970s and early 1980s for infant parish councils. She, also, observed an air of hesitancy.

"It's a lot easier to have somebody tell you what to do instead of being a part of the decision-making process — because then you have ownership of your decision and are responsible for it," remarked Sister Binsack, currently the diocesan Faith Development Ministry director.

However, Sister Binsack said, overall parish participation has grown greatly in recent years. She attributes this development to an evolution in the parish-council model from rigid, hierarchical bodies to groups who seek widespread participation in assessing the needs of their parish community.

"Where parish councils are working well, it's because there's a spirit of collaboration and a real involvement of the people in bringing about the kingdom of God in their area," Sister Binsack added. "Where they're struggling is where they're focusing on the structure, rather than the mission."

Bishop Matthew H. Clark stressed col-

laboration in a 1987 directive issued to parish leaders. He indicated that the pastor and parish pastoral council involve the entire parish community in its decision-making processes.

"The pastor represents the parish in all juridical matters and is charged to administer the goods of the parish according to the laws of the universal Church," Bishop Clark stated. "The effectiveness of this leadership is acutely enhanced when we encourage open dialogue, shared decision-making and appropriate action among staff and parishioners."

In addition, Bishop Clark indicated that parish pastoral councils should expand their visions and goals beyond the parish.

"The goal of a parish pastoral council is not simply to serve the needs of the parish but to develop a common vision and purpose, actively advocate for the poor and the powerless, and extend our Christian commitment to the neighborhoods and communities around us," Bishop Clark noted.

Another change, according to Deacon Lester, was the addition of lay councils that serve more than one church. He noted that the four-church Cayuga Team Ministry cluster, as well as the three-church Eastside Catholic Parish in Elmira, have established cluster councils to operate along with pre-existing parish pastoral councils at each individual church.

Deacon Lester observed that a decline in the number of priests will cause many parishes to restructure in the upcoming years. However, he stressed that parish pastoral councils should not be considered as viable replacements for priests.

"Parish pastoral councils are not administrative bodies. And, canonically, they can't be," Deacon Lester said. "The council is to set a direction and have a vision for the community."

St. Ignatius Loyola Church in Hornell offers such a vision. According to Diane Brooks, parish pastoral council chairperson, the council ardently supports such community-minded groups as the Crop Walk Committee and the Christmas Outreach Program.

In addition, Brooks said that the council emphasizes diocesan Synod priorities. For example, the parish has established committees to oversee implementation of Synod goals 1 (lifelong faith formation) and 4 (small Christian communities).

Brooks added that the 10 parish pastoral council members serve as contact people for more than two dozen commit-

tees and ministries operating out of St. Ignatius Loyola. These ministries thrive, she feels, because the parish pastoral council stresses open communication.

Brooks noted that this air of inclusiveness in the Southern Tier parish stems from her pastor, Father Jeremiah P. Moynihan.

"Father Moynihan is a tremendous supporter of empowerment of the laity," Brooks commented. "We find ourselves as a 'bottom-up' parish, starting with the people, rather than a 'top-down' parish."

Deacon Lester stated that the best councils exist in parishes where the pastor is actively involved, but not over-involved.

Ninestine, for one, said she feels "extremely lucky" to have a pastor who supports the parish pastoral council without attempting to sway the decision-making process.

"Father Harley gives you something and you run with it. I think if there's too much involvement (by the pastor), it's kind of like you're being looked at over your shoulder," Ninestine said.

She added that "other parish councils in our area have told me, 'We can't do this and we can't do that' because those councils' pastors don't support their ideas."

Father Harley stated that such tactics ruin the spirit of parish pastoral councils.

"When people have pretty much relied on priests for leadership, I have never been comfortable with that," Father Harley said. "My primary role is as an enabler, coordinator and encourager of (parishioners') gifts."

Deacon Lester acknowledged that some pastors continue favoring the notion that a priest makes the parish's decisions without input from the parishioners.

However, he added, most pastors have met the concept of parish pastoral councils "with genuine enthusiasm."

Sister Binsack cited as an example of the extent to which pastors now rely on their parish pastoral councils the fact that while negotiating school subsidy payments for the diocesan Department of Catholic Schools, pastors often tell her that they must first discuss the matter with their parish finance committees.

Such ready consultation with parish committees, Father Booth said, has become the norm.

"The whole idea of the pastor being in control and making the decisions is something that's disappearing rapidly, if it's not already gone completely," Father Booth commented.

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