

# COLUMNISTS

## Church shares decision-making

One of the lessons that those of us who studied history in high school learned is that one of the greatest marks of Western civilization is our gradual realization that the decisions that affect people ought to be made by them. I can remember learning, for example, about the Magna Carta, one of the earliest examples of "power sharing" between the people and those who govern them. The U.S. Constitution is one of the greatest documents in the history of the world, with one of its greatest strengths being the ingenious ways in which it provides for the American public to be involved in making the decisions that govern our common life in this country.

Our common heritage has taught us that organizations are governed better if the decisions are made by a broader base of constituents rather than by a single individual. Our experience has taught us that good decisions rely on sufficient information, so that broad consultation is required in any organization if good decisions are to be made. We know this in our political lives as a nation, and we know it from our life at work, from trying to manage family decisions, from watching news reports covering the highlights of the annual shareholder's meetings at Kodak and other local companies.

We've learned important lessons about this same reality in our parishes and in church governance as well. Parish councils exist now so that parishioners will have an influence and a role in the decisions made on behalf of parish life. We've learned that pastors, parish administrators, and parish staffs are able to make



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By PATRICIA SCHOELLES, SSJ

better decisions when they can consult with members of the parish and glean their insights into matters affecting the parish. We've learned that the decisions made are received better when those affected have had input in making them. An increased sense of "ownership" for decisions affecting our common life enhances our commitment and sense of belonging in the church, as it does in other arenas. Furthermore, we have come to recognize that the best leaders, whether in political life, corporate life, or church life, are those who have learned to listen to and respond to the views and needs of those whose interests are at stake.

This sense that decision making ought to be a shared process is not new to the church at all. From the very dawn of its existence, the church has used councils that come together to make the significant decisions about doctrine and church order. We see this as early as the Acts of the Apostles (chapters 13-16), and Paul's Letter to the Galatians (2:1-21). A single authority has never been the sole method of governance in the church. In fact, at the heart of the Catholic Church is the presumption

that we are a communion of individual churches, each headed by a bishop, with the College of Bishops providing the unity among us. The bishop of Rome is, ideally, the "first among his brother bishops" and uniquely serves the mission of the unity of the church. In this way, shared power and decision making is one of the most significant distinguishing marks of the Catholic Church.

I think this entire idea flows from our understanding of the Holy Spirit and God's continuing action among us. As the catechism tells us (No. 683), we know that by virtue of our baptism, the Holy Spirit in the church communicates to us, intimately and personally, the life that originates in the Father and that is offered to us in Christ. The outpouring of the Spirit effects and brings about the life of the church, and the Spirit is known and revealed in every aspect of church life. We readily acknowledge that we know the Holy Spirit in the Scriptures, in church tradition, in the sacraments, in prayer, in the witness of the saints.

I think, though, that while we are used to recognizing the Spirit's action in these many ways, we are less likely to consider that the Spirit is manifest also in the gifts and service that each one of us brings to church life. The catechism lists (#688) many ways in which the Spirit acts in the church, and includes "in the charisms and ministries by which the Church is built up," "in the signs of apostolic and missionary life," and in the "witness of saints (us!) through whom he manifests his holiness and continues the work of salvation."

Recent church history has encouraged

us to recognize the action of the Spirit in church leadership, but I think it has also allowed us to overlook the ways in which we are ourselves instruments of the Spirit of God as we take up our own roles in church governance and decision making. We have never been a "centralized church" in the sense that there is a single center or source of governance. From the earliest days of the church there have been councils, elections, and structures of all sorts to ensure that the baptized are empowered to execute their rightful role in decision making on behalf of the church. Our doctrines of the Holy Spirit and baptism undergird these practices and the entire notion of "shared power" in the church.

I recently took part in a conversation in which a parishioner described the way in which parish council members were selected in her parish. Apparently, they select council members by lot. This is a fine method, and was even used in the Acts of the Apostles, so I'm not disputing it at all. What I thought was peculiar, however, was her assertion that this method "ensures that it is the Holy Spirit and not we who choose our parish council." I'd like to suggest that the Holy Spirit acts through responsible human beings making thoughtful considered judgments, too, and that we ought never to abdicate our responsibility or our right to be part of responsible decision making in the church. The Holy Spirit is known in the gifts each one of us brings to church life.

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### Kids Answers from page 12

1. Genesis,
2. Exodus,
3. Joshua,
4. Ruth,
5. Psalms,
6. Isaiah,
7. Malachi,
8. Jonah,
9. Samuel,
10. Judges

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