

Official Church Resources for Consultative Bodies

Adapted from a Presentation by
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I. Vatican II Texts

Constitution on the Church ¹

8. “The one mediator, Christ, established and ever sustains here on earth his holy Church, the communion of faith, hope and charity, as a visible organization....”

“By the power of the risen Lord she is given strength to overcome, in patience and in love, her sorrows and her difficulties, both those what are from within and those that are from without, so that she may reveal in the world, faithfully, however darkly, the mystery other Lord until, in the consummation it shall be manifested in full light.”

37. “By reason of the knowledge, competence or pre-eminence which they have the laity are empowered—indeed sometimes obliged—to manifest their opinion on those things which pertain to the good of the Church.”

Decree on Bishops *Christus Dominus* ²

27. “It is highly desirable that in every diocese a special pastoral council be established, presided over by the diocesan bishop himself, in which clergy, religious, and laity specially chosen for the purpose will participate. It will be the function of this council to investigate and consider matters relating to pastoral activity and to formulate practical conclusions concerning them.”

Implementation of *Christus Dominus* ³

“16. With regard to the pastoral council, which the Decree *Christus Dominus* strongly commended:

“(1) The work of the pastoral council is to examine and consider all that relates to pastoral work and to offer practical conclusions on these matters, so that the life and activity of the People of God may be brought into greater conformity with the Gospel.

“(2) The pastoral council, which enjoys only a consultative voice, may be established in different ways. Although of its nature it is ordinarily a permanent institution, it may be temporary as regards membership and activity and exercise its function as occasion arises. The bishop may convene it whenever he considers it advisable.

II. The Immediate Post-Vatican II Period

The Directory on Bishops ⁴

“204. The pastoral council is a body set up to investigate and carefully consider whatever pertains to diocesan pastoral activities and to arrive at practical conclusions to help the People of God pattern their lives and actions more closely on the Gospel (CD 27; ES I, 16). By its study and reflection, the council furnishes the judgments necessary to enable the diocesan community to plan its pastoral program systematically and to fulfill it effectively.

The Circular Letter ⁵

1. All Christians consecrated by the Holy Spirit through the sacrament of Christian initiation “into a spiritual house and a holy priesthood” are called by Christ the Lord himself to cooperate actively in the saving mission of all the priestly people of God. Not all the faithful, however, exercise this common responsibility in the same way but a special task falls to each one, according to his state, in the communion of the Body which is the Church.

2. Therefore the salvific mission of the entire People of God in which all the faithful, according to each one’s status within the Church, have their own proper part and responsibility, cannot be restricted to one mission of the holy pastors or Church hierarchy: “For the pastors know that they themselves were not meant by Christ to shoulder alone the entire saving mission of the Church toward the world but, on the contrary, they understand that it is their noble duty so to shepherd the faithful and recognize their service and charismatic gifts that all, according to their proper roles, may cooperate in this common undertaking with one heart.”

8. The pastoral council “enjoys only a consultative voice. “ The counsels and suggestions of the faithful which they propose within the confines of their ecclesiastical communion and in the spirit of true unity are of great value for the formation of decisions. The actual obedience and reverence which the faithful must show their sacred pastors does not prevent but rather fosters an open and sincere manifestation of those things demanded for the good of the Church. Therefore, the bishop should greatly esteem its propositions and suggestions and seriously consider the judgments on which they agree, preserving the freedom and authority which are his by divine law for his pastoral service to that portion of the People of God committed to his care.

9. It is the function of the pastoral council “to investigate and to weigh matters which bear on pastoral activity, and to formulate practical conclusions regarding them so as to promote conformity of the life and actions of the People of God with the Gospel.”

But where the pastoral council exists, there always remains intact the right enjoyed by all Christians, including those who are not members of the pastoral council, of making known directly to their pastors, always in truth and prudence and with the integrity of faith preserved, their needs and desires, and they are to do so with that liberty and confidence which belong to the children of God and brothers in Christ.

III. Canon Law ⁶

The Obligations and Rights of All the Christian Faithful

Can. 208. In virtue of their rebirth (Baptism) in Christ there exists among all the Christian faithful a true equality with regard to dignity and the activity whereby all cooperate in the building up of the Body of Christ in accord with each one's own condition and function.

Can. 212. §1 The Christian faithful, conscious of their own responsibility are bound by Christian obedience to follow what the sacred pastors, as representatives of Christ declare as teachers of the faith or determine as leaders of the Church.

§2. The Christian faithful are free to make known their needs, especially spiritual ones, and their desires to the pastors of the church.

§3. In accord with the knowledge, competence and preeminence which they possess, they have the right and even at times a duty to manifest to the sacred pastors their opinion on matters which pertain to the good of the Church, and they have a right to make their opinion known to the other Christian faithful, with due regard for the integrity of faith and morals and reverence toward their pastors, and with consideration for the common good and the dignity of persons.

The Pastoral Council

Can. 511. In each diocese, to the extent that pastoral circumstances recommend it, a pastoral council is to be established whose responsibility it is to investigate under the authority of the bishop all those things which pertain to pastoral works, to ponder them and to propose practical conclusions about them.

Parishes, Pastors and Parochial Vicars

Can. 536. §1. 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; 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.

§2. This pastoral council possesses a consultative vote only and is governed by norms determined by the diocesan bishop.

Can. 537. Each parish is to have a finance council which is regulated by universal law as well as by norms issued by the diocesan bishop; in this council the Christian faithful, selected according to the same norms, aid the pastor in the administration of parish goods with due regard for the prescription of can. 532.

IV. More Recent Documents

Synod Propositions ⁷

“The church has its full presence in any place under the form of a diocese. Therefore, the use of consultation and collaboration and—in keeping with the subject matter—the principle of decision making will be promoted in a more eminent way by the creation of a diocesan pastoral council, with lay participation, and by appropriate recourse to it.....

“It is in the parish that most Catholics learn that they have been constituted as church (or a portion of the church) and that, at the same time, they experience how to form the church. The collaboration of clergy and men and women religious as well as laity is needed to achieve this. This collaboration requires the consultation of the laity to determine the pastoral needs and aspirations of the community. A more fitting way to reach this goal is the establishment of a pastoral council in which all can take part, whatever their age or condition.” (proposition 10, p. 502)

Christifideles Laici ⁸

“In this sense, the recent synod has favored the creation of diocesan pastoral councils as a recourse at opportune times. In fact, on a diocesan level this structure could be the principal form of collaboration, dialogue and discernment as well. The participation of the lay faithful in these councils can broaden resources in consultation and the principle of collaboration and in certain instances also in decision making—if applied in a broad and determined manner.” (no.25,p.573)

“The [Second Vatican] Council’s mention of examining and solving pastoral problems ‘by general discussion’ [A.A., no. 10] ought to find its adequate and structured development through a more convinced, extensive and decided appreciation for ‘parish pastoral councils,’ on which the synod fathers have rightly insisted.” (no. 27, p. 574)

Ecclesia in Asia ⁹

“Every particular church must be grounded in the witness of ecclesial communion that constitutes its very nature as church. The synod fathers chose to describe the diocese as a communion of communities gathered around the shepherd, where clergy, consecrated persons and the laity are engaged in a ‘dialogue of life and heart’ sustained by the grace of the Holy Spirit.

“It is primarily in the diocese that the vision of a communion of communities can be actualized in the midst of the complex social, political, religious, cultural and economic realities of Asia. Ecclesial communion implies that each local church should become what the synod fathers called a ‘participatory church,’ a church, that is, in which all live their proper vocation and perform their proper role. In order to build up the ‘communion for mission’ and the ‘mission of communion,’ every member’s unique charism needs to be acknowledged, developed and effectively utilized. In particular there is a need to foster greater involvement of the laity and consecrated men and women

in pastoral planning and decision making through such participatory structures as pastoral councils and parish assemblies.

“In every diocese, the parish remains the ordinary place where the faithful gather to grow in faith, to live the mystery of ecclesial communion and to take part in the church’s mission. Therefore, the synod fathers urged pastors to devise new and effective ways of shepherding the faithful, so that everyone, especially the poor, will feel truly a part of the parish and of God’s people as a whole. Pastoral planning with the lay faithful should be a normal feature of all parishes.” (Paragraph 25, p. 372).

Novo Millennio Ineunte ¹⁰

“It is not therefore a matter of inventing a ‘new program.’ The program already exists: It is the plan found in the Gospel and in the living tradition; it is the same as ever. Ultimately, it has its center in Christ himself, who is to be known, loved, and imitated so that in him we may live the life of the Trinity and with him transform history until its fulfillment in the heavenly Jerusalem. This is a program which does not change with shifts of times and cultures, even though it takes account of time and culture for the sake of true dialogue and effective communication. This program for all times is our program for the third millennium.

“But it must be translated into pastoral initiatives adapted to the circumstances of each community With its universal and indispensable provisions, the program of the Gospel must continue to take root, as it has always done, in the life of the church everywhere. It is in the local churches that the specific features of a detailed pastoral plan can be identified - goals and methods, formation and enrichment of the people involved, the search for the necessary resources - which will enable the proclamation of Christ to reach people, mold communities and have a deep and incisive influence in bringing Gospel values to bear in society and culture.

I therefore earnestly exhort the pastors of the particular churches, with the help of all sectors of God’s people, confidently to plan the stages of the journey ahead, harmonizing the choices of each diocesan community with those of neighboring churches and of the universal church.” (from number 29, p. 499).

“Communion must be cultivated and extended day by day and at every level in the structures of each church’s life. The relations between bishops, priests and deacons, between pastors and the entire people of God, between clergy and religious, between associations and ecclesial movements must all be clearly characterized by communion. To this end the structures of participation envisaged by canon law, such as the council of priests and the pastoral council, must be ever more highly valued. These of course are not governed by the rules of parliamentary democracy because they are consultative rather than deliberative; yet this does not mean that they are less meaningful and relevant. The theology and spirituality of communion encourage a fruitful dialogue between pastors and faithful: on the one hand uniting them *a priori* in all that is essential and on the other leading them to pondered agreement in matters open to discussion.

“To this end, we need to make our own the ancient pastoral wisdom which, without prejudice to their authority, encouraged pastors to listen more widely to the entire people of God.” (from number 44, p. 503).

Address by Pope John Paul II to the American Bishops of Pennsylvania and New Jersey ¹¹

“While the bishop himself remains responsible for the authoritative decisions which he is called to make in the exercise of his pastoral governance, ecclesial communion also presupposes the participation of every category of the faithful, inasmuch as they share responsibility for the good of the particular Church which they themselves form.

“Within a sound ecclesiology of communion, a commitment to creating better structures of participation, consultation and shared responsibility should not be misunderstood as a concession to a secular democratic model of governance, but as an intrinsic requirement of the exercise of episcopal authority and a necessary means of strengthening that authority.”

Address by Pope Francis to the coordinating committee of the Episcopal Conference of Latin America (CELAM) ¹²

“Consequently, we, as pastors, need to ask questions about the actual state of the Churches which we lead. These questions can serve as a guide in examining where the dioceses stand in taking up the spirit of Aparecida; they are questions which we need to keep asking as an examination of conscience. . .

“4. Is pastoral discernment a habitual criterion, through the use of Diocesan Councils? Do such Councils and Parish Councils, whether pastoral or financial, provide real opportunities for lay people to participate in pastoral consultation, organization and planning? The good functioning of these Councils is critical. I believe that on this score, we are far behind.”

Sources

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- ² Vatican II, “Decree on the Pastoral Office of Bishops in the Church,” *Christus Dominus*, October 28, 1965, trans. Matthew Dillon, OSB, Edward O’Leary, OP, and Austin Flannery, OP, in Austin P. Flannery, General Editor, *The Documents of Vatican II*. Preface by John Cardinal Wright (New York: Costello Publishing Company, 1975)
- ³ Paul VI, *Ecclesiae Sanctae I*, August 6, 1966, “Apostolic Letter, written *Motu Proprio*, on the Implementation of the Decrees *Christus Dominus*, *Presbyterorum Ordinis* and *Perfectae Caritatis*,” translated from the Latin text in *AAS* 58 (1966) pp. 757-758 by Austin Flannery, in Austin P. Flannery, General Editor, *The Documents of Vatican II*. Preface by John Cardinal Wright (New York: Costello Publishing Company, 1975).
- ⁴ Sacred Congregation for Bishops, *Directory on the Pastoral Ministry of Bishops (Ecclesiae imago*. May 31, 1973) translation prepared by the Benedictine monks of the Seminary of Christ the King, Mission, British Columbia (Ottawa: Publications Service of the Canadian Catholic Conference, 1974).
- ⁵ Sacred Congregation for the Clergy, “Private Letter on ‘Pastoral Councils’” (*Omnes Christifideles*, 1/25/73), reprinted in James I. O’Connor, editor, *The Canon Law Digest*. Vol. VII: Officially Published Documents Affecting the Code of Canon Law 1968-1972 (Chicago: Chicago Province of the Society of Jesus, 1975), pp. 280-288. Also published as “Patterns in Local Pastoral Councils,” *Origins* 3:12 (Sept. 13,1973): 186-190.
- ⁶ John Paul II, Pope (Karol Wojtyla), *Code of Canon Law. Latin-English Edition, Translation* prepared under the auspices of the Canon Law Society of America (Washington, D.C.: Canon Law Society of America, 1983).
- ⁷ Synod of Bishops (1987), “Synod 1987: The Synod Propositions.” *Origins* 17:29 (Dec. 31,1987): 499-509
- ⁸ John Paul II, Pope (Karol Wojtyla), “*Christifideles Laici: Apostolic Exhortation on the Laity*,” based on the 1987 World Synod of Bishops, January 30, 1987, *Origins* 18:35 (Feb. 9, 1989): 561, 563-595.
- ⁹ *Apostolic Exhortation of Pope John Paul II presented in New Delhi, India, on November 6, 1999* to more than 100 Asian Bishops. It is based on the work of the April 19 - May 14,1998 Special Assembly for Asia of the Synod of Bishops, one of the regional synods called for by the pope as part of preparations for the Jubilee Year 2000. Published in *Origins* 29:23 (November 18, 1999): 357, 359-384.

¹⁰ Pope John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Novo Millennia Ineunte* (“At the Beginning of the New Millennium”), January 6, 2001, published in *Origins* 30:31 (January 18, 2001): 489, 491-508.

¹¹ Pope John Paul II’s address to the American Bishops of Pennsylvania and New Jersey, Sept 11, 2004, as reported by
http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/speeches/2004/september/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_20040911_ad-limina-usa_en.html

¹² Pope Francis’ address to the Leadership of the Episcopal Conferences of Latin America (CELAM) during the General Coordination Meeting, July 28, 2013, as reported by
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