

ARCHDIOCESE OF NEW YORK

PARISH COUNCIL HANDBOOK

PRACTICAL QUESTIONS ABOUT PARISH COUNCILS

WHY? WHO? WHAT? WHERE? HOW?

1. Anyone associated with a Parish Council wants to have answers for a few basic questions, and needs to know whether all the other people on the Council operate with the same ideas? The most basic questions include?

- Why have a Parish Council?
- Who should be on a Parish Council?
- What is a Parish Council supposed to do?
- When should it meet?
- Where should it meet?
- How can we make it effective?

2. **Why have a Parish Council?** People respond with answers like:

- Because the Archbishop says we have to
- Because the Synod made this a very high priority
- Because the Code of Canon Law speaks of councils
- Because other parishes have one

Those are very strong reasons from outside. Other powerful reasons come from Vatican II teachings that all of us are people of God, with gifts we must share for the good of one another, and with responsibility for accomplishing the mission of the Church, i.e. to spread the message of Christ and make all things new in Him.

3. One practical way we respect all, is to consult and collaborate with one another in established, ongoing forums. Bishops have adopted this as their ordinary way of life; their example prompts us to work in the same way in parishes. Pastors and parishioners learn from experience and get better at this; councils are becoming a permanent part of the fabric of life.
4. Having effective Parish Councils is certainly a strong wish of the Archbishop and a directive of the Synod. But councils have been proving themselves as very helpful to the parish and to the pastors as they give wisdom and credibility to necessary decisions. As written in the Book of Proverbs (11:14): "For lack of guidance, a people falls; security lies in many counselors."
5. The Code of Canon Law says that the pastor in his parish, like the bishop in his diocese, is responsible for the final decisions. Canon 536: "The pastor presides over [the parish council], and through it the Christian faithful, along with those who share the pastoral care of the parish in virtue of their office, give their help in fostering pastoral activity. This

council possesses a consultative vote only and is governed by norms determined by the diocesan bishop.”

6. **Who should be on a Parish Council?** Anyone who wishes to serve on a Parish Council should understand that he/she serves the whole parish and not just one part of it. Members have to be clear about their responsibilities of time and effort, and about the respective roles of the council and pastor. The council should always be, and act as, a Christian community.

There are two categories of members, all of whom can vote: *ex-officio* members (e.g. the pastor, parochial vicars, deacons, principal, director of religious education, trustees, chairperson of the Finance Council) and those who are appointed, elected, or selected. Total membership might be about twenty people.

Our recommendation is that membership be open to Catholics who participate in the prayer life of the parish, 16 years of age or older. Membership should reflect the make-up of the parish and include people of various ethnic and racial groups within the parish as well as those with special experience. We recommend a three year term, renewable once.

7. **What is a Parish Council supposed to do?** In one sentence, a Parish Council is supposed to cooperate with the pastor for the good of the parish.

This idea of cooperation is not as passive as it may sound. Getting along is a goal of mature people who want to accomplish something, and it works two ways. The “good of the parish” should be the litmus test for all our motivations and reactions, for what we say and do. Personal likes and dislikes should be minimized and issues should not be personalized. If that sentence above is kept in mind, then the Council will avoid unproductive tensions and will have its successes.

8. Some ways for the council to do its work include:
 - Helping to identify the present needs of the parish
 - Suggesting practical ways to address those needs
 - Doing the legwork to see what the options are
 - Taking on some responsibilities
 - Talking up good things and derailing quilt trips
 - Inviting and supporting new initiatives
 - Deciding what committee structure to use

9. **When should a Parish Council meet?** Monthly meetings are the best pattern to keep people interested and get results. Bimonthly meetings are too infrequent, unless committees actually meet in between. Councils do not always have to be doing business; in June or September there should be a Mass and

social. An occasional cancellation is not terrible; people appreciate not having to come out on a snowy night, or right around Christmas.

The dates for the meetings should be established in advance for the entire year. Choosing one night of the month and sticking to it will help attendance. People who might have a conflict on that night should not even seek appointment or election.

Reminders in the form of meeting announcements should be sent out ten days before each session. Meetings should begin and end on time, and we recommend that they take no more than ninety minutes

It is an attraction for attendance and promptness to always have the coffee and other refreshments ready fifteen minutes or so before the scheduled starting time.

10. Where should a Parish Council meet? Environment counts. Adults who have serious business to do should be in a suitable atmosphere. If the parish lacks an appropriate meeting space for a group like this, that should be an item for consideration.

The arrangement of the room is important. Chairs should be comfortable. Everyone should be able to see one another, and have table space. A square or U-shaped table arrangement is best. The pastor sits next to the chairperson, who conducts the meeting, the secretary, who keeps brief minutes, and the other officers.

10. How can we make the Council effective? Like good parties, good meetings require good preparation. There are certain things to be done beforehand:

- The Executive Committee and pastor should meet and set up an agenda about two weeks in advance.
- The chairperson should check in advance so that any person or committee scheduled to give a report is present and prepared.
- Follow an established order of business:
 - i. Opening prayer (not reserved always to the clergy and taking more than a moment)
 - ii. Chairperson's report (procedural matters, announcements, updates)
 - iii. Pastor's report
 - iv. Committee reports
 - v. Old business
 - vi. New business
 - vii. Closing prayer
- Frequently invite guest speakers from both church and government, e.g. police official, public school leader, planning councils, etc.
- Set some short and long range goals, and check on progress

- Be satisfied with small successes, and build to larger ones
- Publicize the work of the council and invite suggestions

11. A chairperson should facilitate, never dominate. Like a priest at Mass, the chairperson should not get in the way. Your role is to encourage and moderate; for example, by making sure the same few voices do not turn everyone off; offer each member a chance to speak at each meeting. Be sensitive to the feelings of the pastor, he has a lot invested, and his good will is important. Accept conflict in the group – that is the necessary steam to get movement. No pressure – no movement. Consult the pastor and the members about their expectations; let them know what you are doing about them. Keep meeting post-mortems to a minimum; let people talk in public. Be creative in setting the agenda; bring in interesting people. Be realistic; you will not please all the people all the time. Be patient results are often hard to see.

The Essential Characteristics of a Parish Council

The Parish Council is both a process and a structure which enables parishioners to accept and to share more fully the task of continuing the Church's work in the parish and neighborhood, of helping to call forth and affirm the many gifts and competencies needed to meet the pastoral needs of God's people, and for more effectively permeating the whole area with the presence of Christ. In order that a parish council successfully serve its leadership role in the parish, we feel that it should possess a number of important characteristics lest it get bogged down in conflicts and clashes that often plague us imperfect human beings.

1. A parish council is **prayerful**. Its members are to be persons of prayer; that is, they see the value of private prayer for their own personal growth in holiness as well as the value of community prayer for growth in Christ's community of faith and love. The council thus spends time together in prayer and retreat experiences for the purpose of drawing together in love and trust, to heal divisions, and for the discernment of God's will for the community.
2. A parish council is **pastoral**. It strives to discern the movement of the Holy Spirit among God's people in the parish for the purpose of investigating and weighing matters that bear on pastoral activities affecting the lives of parishioners, and to them. The council decides what specific actions or programs a parish should adopt to perform its *spiritual* mission, that of making the Gospel known and of helping people in their spiritual journeying. Only then can it determine what resources (people, facilities, money) it needs to carry out those actions or programs and how to provide such resources.
3. A parish council is **representative**. It is a representative body rather than a body of representatives. A council member is not the representative for a particular neighborhood, age bracket, special interest group or organization: each councilor ministers to the entire parish community. Thus the council represents in a holistic sense all areas of parish life; old and young, men and women, laity, clergy and religious people with divergent viewpoints and ethnic/cultural backgrounds. All work together in an atmosphere and spirit of trust and openness, merging their expertise, insights and experiences to further the mission of Jesus among all people.

The priests of the parish and a sufficient number of persons, with their respective gifts and talents, are to be members of the council. Any religious attached to the parish may also be appropriately represented. Parish trustees, by virtue of their special position with the parish corporation, are to be *ex-officio* members. Eligibility requirements for council membership are to be reasonable; some form of elective/selective process in which the entire parish is involved seems necessary. All members of the council are voting members.

4. A parish council is **discerning**. Its members participate effectively in the policy-making process for the parish by bringing together the needs and the hopes of the parishioners and of the entire community (neighborhoods) in which they live. Through dialogue and deliberation, it merges the insights, the diverse experiences, the expertise and the faith of the councilors in order to provide vision and direction for the parish community. That vision finds expression in the priorities established and the broad policies adopted.

Three principles are to be observed in this connection:

- a. Only policy decisions are to be made by the parish council; day-to-day parish administrative decisions are made by the parish staff.
 - b. The council's decisions are to be consistent with faith and morals, civil and church law, and archdiocesan policies.
 - c. The pastor/pastoral team ratifies the decisions of the Council through his/their presence at meetings and participation in the discussion and refinement of proposals.
 - d. Since the pastor/pastoral team is accountable to the Diocesan Bishop for the parish, and as part of the presbyterate is responsible for the spiritual life of each parishioner, councilors must be open to reconsideration of a decision in light of this responsibility.
5. A parish council is **prophetic**. As a result of experiencing the fullness of God's Word, it brings a broader, more challenging vision to parish life. It strives to move outward to tackle some of the bigger issues within the church and in the world, seeking to be a credible sign of concern for justice, peace, reconciliation and practical love, bearing witness to all that the reign of God is already unfolding. It is a group of people who are not afraid to challenge and take risks; who support, affirm and share their convictions of faith with one another as they strive to build more trusting relationships in the continual process of building up the Body of Christ. Council membership calls people to be sensitive to the anguish and pain of others and to respond in healing, reconciling ways.
 6. A parish council is **enabling**. It strives to recognize and acknowledge the giftedness in God's people and to enable each person's unique giftedness to surface, to be shared and organized for the up building of the community of faith, and finally to be celebrated. It seeks to help persons discover that for which they were created, and monitors the ongoing renewal of parish life. To aid the council in this challenging task, the council works with standing committees which correspond to the

church's mission of proclamation, worship, service and community: Worship/Spiritual Life; Christian Education/Formation; Human concerns/Works and Justice/ and Parish Renewal. Other committees or sub-committees may be established as required. An Administrative Service committee (finance, buildings and grounds) may be established to support the parish mission.

The council works to promote unity in diversity – keeping the parish together by enabling people to think, pray, work and play together. At the same time it unites, it respects diversity of the community by encouraging each person to bring forth his/her special competence in ministry and service to others.

MEMBERSHIP ON A PARISH COUNCIL: A JOB DESCRIPTION

In a Church as large and diverse as the Archdiocese of New York, with more than 2,000,000 Catholic people in over 400 parishes, it is impossible to give one description of Parish Council membership that will fit every situation. However, there are many things most people agree on, and so this description is offered to help people already on a Council to be more certain of their roles, and to help recruit and orient new members.

Purpose of Membership

Serving on a Parish Council is a true Christian ministry that should contribute to the spread of the Gospel and the growth of this parish.

A person should join a Parish Council with the intention of cooperating with the pastor and other parishioners for the good of the whole parish. Everyone should be willing to commit himself or herself to these ideals:

- A willingness to trust in the Holy Spirit, to test and reexamine his/her own opinions, and to accept and support the final wisdom of the council.
- A desire to identify and support the things that are best for the whole parish, as opposed to insisting on any hidden agendas or narrow interest
- A forthright, active participation in all aspects of Council membership, including raising issues, doing committee work voting in an informed way.

Responsibility of a Parish Council

According to the Code of Canon Law, councils are consultative rather than decision-making bodies. Parish Councils have a responsibility to foster pastoral activity in the parish; they advise and assist the pastor, while respecting the fact that he is responsible for the final decisions.

Composition of a Parish Council

A Parish Council should be a representative body that reflects the makeup of the parish. The majority of members on a Parish Council are lay persons who are not on the parish staff. The proportional make-up of the Council is specified in a Constitution. Some members are *ex-officio*; they serve on the Parish Council in virtue of their office. Other members are appointed, elected, or chosen by lot in a process called "selection."

Task to Be Performed

Members of the Council are kept informed about current developments in the Church; they serve as a community of advisors the pastor can count on, and the Council itself should be a model of Christian respect and practical effectiveness.

Some key things that members of the council are expected to do:

- Regularly attend Council meetings and participate in proceedings
- Offer advice (and assistance) to the pastor and other appropriate persons about ways to improve the parish
- Communicate information to, and gather support from parishioners
- Present the concerns and interests of members of the parish
- Publicize and advocate support for the parish and its programs

Time Commitment

The ordinary obligation of a member is to attend one meeting a month from September to June, on an established night. Meetings are generally ninety minutes long; participation on one committee is expected.

Length of Commitment

Parish Council members serve a three year term of office. A member can serve one more three-year term consecutively, but must then go off the Council for at least two years.

Benefits of Service

In giving, we receive. By participating on the Parish Council, a member may find benefits and satisfactions such as;

- Associating with supportive and motivated laity, religious and clergy
- Becoming more knowledgeable about the working of the church
- Contributing suggestions and ideas and seeing them be implemented.

PARISH COUNCIL CHAIRPERSON

Congratulations! You've just been chosen chairperson of your Parish Council. Here are some things you might like to think about.

The "power" of being the chairperson lies first of all in the ability to awaken others to their giftedness. If the council is to become an effective leadership body, the giftedness of each person must be called forth and affirmed. This means a council chairperson exercises a style of leadership that is not dominating (no "monologues") but facilitating, drawing forth from the members the best each has to give toward the accomplishment of common goals. Good organization/communication skills are important.

Secondly, a council chairperson must have *vision*. Since the mission of the church is broader than the parish, a good council leader is keenly aware of the responsibility of the council to implement the mission in creative ways.

Finally, an effective council chairperson is always conscious of the ongoing formation of the council as a community that grows in faith and love, recognizing that each meeting is an experience as well as a task.

This Constitution is a guide for parishes that **appoint** members to a parish council. It is only a suggested model and you may need to adapt it.

The Constitution of the Parish Council Church Name, Location

ARTICLE 1 – NAME

This organization shall be known as the Parish Council of Church Name, Location.

ARTICLE II – PURPOSES

This Parish Council shall be a consultative body with several tasks:

- To be a Christian community and model for other organizations
- To minister with the pastor for the good of the parish
- To identify the needs of the people and attempt to meet them.

ARTICLE III – MEMBERSHIP

This Parish Council shall have a membership of approximately 20 persons, who serve *ex-officio* because of their responsibilities in the parish, or because they are **appointed** by the pastor.

- *Ex-officio* members include: the pastor, parochial vicars, principal of the parochial school, director of religious education, parish trustees, chairperson of the Parish Finance Council
- 15 members, men and women are appointed by the pastor, after consultation with the existing parish council, to reflect the makeup of the parish and to include any needed expertise or experience.

ARTICLE IV – ELIGIBILITY FOR OFFICE

Membership on this council shall be open to Catholics who participate in the prayer life of this parish and who are 16 years of age or older.

ARTICLE V – TERM OF OFFICE

Ex-officio members serve for as long as they are in their positions. Appointed members serve a three year term, renewable once. After two consecutive terms, members must leave the Council for at least one year.

ARTICLE VI – APPOINTMENT PROCESS

1. The terms of one-third of the appointed members shall expire each year. If another opening has occurred (for example, a member resigns after one year) someone shall be appointed for the balance of that term. That balance is considered a term of office, even if only for one year.

2. Each Spring the Council members will be asked to suggest to the pastor the names of people who might be considered for appointment to the council. The pastor may also contribute names. Notice shall be given in the parish bulletin inviting people to submit their own or other people's names for consideration.
3. In May, the pastor announces the names of the people he has appointed, and they begin their services at the meeting in June.

ARTICLE VII - OFFICERS OF THE COUNCIL

1. This Council shall have four officers: Chairperson, Vice-Chairperson, Recording Secretary, Corresponding Secretary/Treasurer.
2. Elections of Council officers shall be held every year at the last meeting of the Council in June.
3. Officers serve a one year term, renewable once for that office. The officers form an Executive Committee which plans agendas with the pastor.
4. The duties of each officer shall include the following:
 - a. The Chairperson conducts all meetings.
 - b. The Vice-Chairperson assists the chairperson as needed, and performs the duties of the chairperson in his/her absence.
 - c. The Recording Secretary keeps the minutes of all meetings
 - d. The Corresponding Secretary/Treasurer distributes the minutes, notifies members of meetings, attends to other correspondence, and handles any monies allocated to or spent by Council

ARTICLE VIII – MEETINGS

1. This council shall meet monthly from September to June on the third Tuesday of the month, at 8 pm in the rectory meeting room.
2. Meetings are open to all parishioners. Non-members who wish to speak at a meeting must first be recognized by the chairperson.

ARTICLE IX – VOTING AT MEETINGS

1. All members have the right to vote, although they may abstain.
2. On matters that require a formal vote, one-half plus one of the members being present constitutes a quorum.
3. As much as possible, matters shall be decided by consensus.

ARTICLE X – COMMITTEES

1. This Council shall have an Executive Committee, composed of the pastor and four officers, which is responsible for preparing meeting agendas.

2. Other committees and their tasks may include:
 - Education Committee, which promotes the educational responsibilities of the parish, including parochial school, religious education programs, adult education, and special education
 - Liturgy Committee, which promotes and coordinates matters of worship and spiritual development
 - Christian Service Committee, which organizes action on issues of peace, justice, and advocacy for the poor
 - Finance Committee, which is the Finance Council of the parish and helps the pastor in the financial affairs of the parish
 - Social Activities Committee, which promotes community building events and assists with public relations for the parish.
3. Temporary committees for special purposes (i.e., ad hoc committees) may be named by the council chairperson as needed.
4. Each committee elects its own chairperson and sets its own agenda and meetings.

ARTICLE XI – LIAISON WITH VICARIATE

This Parish Council shall select one member to serve on the Vicariate Council and act as liaison, reporting on meetings and activities when appropriate.

ARTICLE XII – ADOPTION/AMENDMENTS

1. This Constitution becomes effective when approved by two-thirds of the council members, after discussion at one meeting and after a vote at the next meeting.
2. This constitution can be amended by following the same process.
3. Each new member of this council shall be given a copy of this Constitution.

Proposed: Date

Adopted: Date

Appendix:

SOME NOTES ABOUT THIS SUGGESTED CONSTITUTION

1. There is no intention to slight deacons, or any other members of the pastoral staff, by not including them as *ex-officio* members. Their support for the Parish Council is very important. The concern is that including them as *ex-officio* members could overload the Council with “insiders” and discourage participation from “average parishioners.” The balance will be a local decision considering how many people are involved. Certainly the pastor can appoint deacons and other staff members to the council.
2. The Code of Canon Law, n. 537, requires that every parish have a Parish Finance council. This body has to be distinct from the Parish Council, but the two groups need to work closely together. The Revised Guidelines for Parish Finance councils (June, 1989) help the working relationship:
 - If two trustees, and the chairperson of the Finance council, if that is someone other than a trustee, are *ex-officio* members of the Parish Council.
 - The Parish Council needs to know and discuss parish finances, but there is no duplication of committee work, because the chairperson of the Finance Council reports to the Parish Council and the Finance Council serves as the Finance Committee of the Parish Council.
 - It is the Parish Council which strives to formulate the overall vision of the parish, its priorities and needs.
3. There are some inclusions in this constitution that might have been kept aside and made into by-laws. However, simplicity was our goal.

This Constitution is offered as a guide for parishes that **elect** members to a Parish Council. It is only a suggested model and you may wish to adapt it.

THE CONSTITUTION OF THE PARISH COUNCIL NAME, LOCATION

ARTICLE 1 – NAME

This organization shall be known as the Parish Council of Name, Location.

ARTICLE 11 – PURPOSES

This Parish Council shall be a consultative body with several tasks:

- To be a Christian community and model for other organizations
- To minister with the pastor for the good of the parish
- To identify the needs of the people and attempt to meet them.

ARTICLE III - MEMBERSHIP

This Parish Council shall have a membership of approximately 20 persons, who serve *ex-officio* because of their responsibilities in the parish, or because they are **elected** by vote of the congregation, or because they have been **appointed** by the pastor.

- Ex-officio members include: the pastor, parochial vicars, principal of the parochial school, director of religious education, parish trustees, chairperson of the Parish Finance Council
- 9 members are elected by the congregation
- 6 members are appointed by the pastor, after consultation with the existing parish council, to reflect the makeup of the parish and to include any needed expertise or experience.

ARTICLE IV – ELIGIBILITY FOR OFFICE

Membership on this council shall be open to Catholics who participate in the prayer life of this parish and who are 16 years of age or older.

ARTICLE V – TERM OF OFFICE

Ex-officio members serve for as long as they are in their positions. Elected and appointed members serve a three year term, renewable once. After two consecutive terms, members must leave the Council for at least one year.

ARTICLE VI – ELECTION/APPOINTMENT PROCESS

1. Each year in May, three persons shall be elected to the Parish Council by the parishioners, and two shall be appointed by the pastor.

2. Among the purposes of electing members is to involve the congregation more fully and to respect its choices. Among the purposes of appointing members is to have adequate representation of all ages, areas of the parish and ethnic groups, and to include on the Council special expertise and experience that might be valuable.
3. The council shall be consulted by the pastor for the names of people who might be appointed to the Council. The pastor can also surface names, and he makes the final decisions.
4. If additional openings have occurred (for example, if a member resigns after one year) replacements shall be elected or appointed at this time for the balance of that term. That balance is considered a term of office, even if only for one year.

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3. Officers serve a one year term, renewable once for that office. The officers form an Executive Committee which plans agendas with the pastor.
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BEYOND ELECTION OR APPOINTMENT: HOW TO “SELECT” NEW COUNCIL MEMBERS

The two most common methods of the 1980's have been election and appointment. Each has strengths and weaknesses, and your council probably is constitutionally committed to one or the other.

But there is a third possibility that you should know about, which we recommend, and which you may wish to think about if your other method of incorporating new members does not serve you well.

Selecting New Members

The problem some parishes face with elections include the possibility that they cannot get people to run. Elections do create losers and losers can feel hurt, so some good candidates, perhaps especially newcomers, refuse to run.

Having the pastor appoint all new council members, even with the consultation of the existing council is open to suspicion and non-involvement by those who charge that he will choose just his trusted friends. Even the allegation creates an uncomfortable position for the pastor.

Fortunately, a third way has surfaced and been tried by some parishes in our Archdiocese and the drawbacks of the other methods have been avoided.

This new approach is really an ancient one, similar to what happened when the early church wanted to choose a twelfth apostle to replace Judas. The story of how Matthias was added to the company of apostles through a process of nomination, special prayer, and choosing by lot is told in the Acts of the Apostles, Chapter 1.

Some parishes have called this a “Selection Process” and they use this rather than election or appointment. The steps are as follows:

1. Let us say that five of the fifteen members of the council have served their three year term, and it is now ending. New members should be at the June meeting.
2. On two Sundays in April bulletin announcements invite nominations for the open Parish Council seats. Anyone may nominate him/herself, or any other parish member 16 or older.
3. A “Job Description” sheet should be posted in the church and summarized in the bulletin. People should know obvious details of when the council meets, and understand the role and consultative nature of the council.

4. A council committee receives the nominations, and checks to see that all nominees are acceptable to the pastor. There will ordinarily be no objection, but he may have information or strong feelings about someone's competence or suitability.
5. All nominees are contacted, complimented, and asked if they are willing and able to serve on the Parish Council, if chosen. The selection process is explained to them.
6. All nominees, and those who will continue on the council, attend a specified Mass in May. After the homily, which makes reference to what is occurring, the names of all the nominees are placed in a vessel of some kind, and a prayer is said, as in the days of Matthias, asking God's guidance on this choice. Then five names are drawn out, and those five, chosen by lot, are the council members.
7. Those selected are honored, those not selected are not dishonored; they have not lost, they just were not chosen. You might want to conclude this event by thanking the outgoing council members and by calling all the new and veteran members to the altar and blessing the council for their work, as found in the Book of Blessings.

CONSENSUS DECISION MAKING

Most councils are familiar with the parliamentary form of decision making. In this system a simple majority rules. If a motion gets 51% of the votes, it passes. A few motions, such as unseating a member, require a two-thirds majority. The parliamentary system of voting is derived from the English Parliament. General Henry Robert incorporated that system into his famous Robert's Rules of Order, in use since 1915. This system is useful in keeping some kind of order in meetings of large assemblies. However, when used in council decision making, it can divide the council into winners and losers. Even if it does not polarize the council, it often means the "losers" are not disposed to support the "other side's" decision. At best, they feel it is not really their decision. At worst, they feel angry and frustrated. In either case, they will not be enthusiastic when it is time to commit their time and energy. Many councils feel that the win-lose syndrome, which is often a by-product of the parliamentary system, is inappropriate for a Christian community and that there is nothing distinctively Christian about Robert's Rules.

Traditional rules of order are based upon debate as the single process by which decisions may be made. Debate begins with a proposal, a main motion, that someone offers the group. With a second to support it, if the assembly is large, the proposal can then be debated.

Because debate requires participants to identify with the pro or the con of an issue, the people's egos become attached to the victory or defeat of the proposal. When the vote is taken, one side wins and the other side loses. In such debates, wisdom is lost, the purposes of the organization are lost, the cohesiveness and camaraderie of the participants are lost, the interest of the membership are ill-served, and the organization loses the participation of those members who cannot see much joy in battle.

Consensus **Decision Making**

In recent years, more and more councils have adopted the consensus form of decision making. It is a process in which a workable decision is reached through dialogue, compromise, and modification of the contribution of all council members. Many councils feel this community way of making decisions has a number of advantages; it emphasizes maintaining the unity of the Christian community in the council; it gives a higher priority to persons and the growth of the council as a community of persons; it is less rigid, formal and competitive; it is another way of saying, contrary to tendencies in our modern society, that people are more important than efficiency and productivity. It provides a better forum for exercising the gift of discernment and for the emergence of the prophetic voice. In 1 Cor. 12:10, it is clear that the gifts of discernment and prophecy are given to every baptized Christian. Decision-making systems need to be in service of the Spirit's gifts.

Steps Toward Consensus

Consensus decision making can be described in two phases; the first deals with consensus on broad goals and objectives; the second deals with the group process regarding specific issues discussed during a particular meeting. Councils generally work toward a consensus on the broad goals and objectives during a weekend planning session.

The second phase of consensus decision making concerns how specific issues are discussed during a council meeting. In the consensus system there is a communal dialogue, but no vote. Consensus is achieved when everyone can live with the decision. In actual fact, no one has achieved exactly what he or she wanted. But everyone has offered input that has been taken seriously.

In most cases the proposal under discussion has changed because of the input. Thus more people can identify with and support the final decision.

The facilitator seeks consensus by listening to the dialogue and by watching for signs of agreement. Each person is allowed to state his or her position once during the initial dialogue period and is asked to refrain from any remarks that depart from the issue. The facilitator may have to ask specific questions like "Joe, do you feel you can go along with this decision?" the facilitator may also encourage members to present alternatives that could result in consensus (the group is continually working through possible alternatives to reach its decisions). Again, the facilitator "tests" for consensus. If consensus seems to be reached, it is very important that the facilitator confirm this by stating: "We have a consensus decision that...." When the facilitator moves toward stating consensus, no further dialogue is allowed.

If, in spite of dialoging for some time, the council cannot reach consensus, the facilitator is careful to try to define the exact area of disagreement, asking for all the reasons on the negative and all the reasons on the affirmative side. Finally, he or she asks: "do we have all the facts?" At this point the council may be willing to table the issue to allow more time to gather additional data or to study the issues at greater length. This is especially true when a straw vote indicates the council is really divided on the issue. Generally, additional facts and more time will move the council toward a compromise solution. In such cases, it may be helpful to refer the matter back to an appropriate committee.

Faith Communities/Decision Reaching

Generally, consensus should be used for major decisions affecting parish life; at times, a simple majority vote may serve as well. The consensus system will not be effective when councils are not genuine faith communities, are polarized around strong personalities, or are being manipulated by pressure groups. In such cases, the council would do well to honestly admit these

obstacles and then set aside some meeting time to build up the council as a faith community and to reflect on its internal dynamics. If the council is not at least trying to become a faith community, long discussions about decision-making techniques will be a waste of time.

The words "decision making" carry with them a real danger of a misplaced emphasis. In actual practice councils spend most of their meeting time, not in decision making, but in decision reaching. They learn, discuss and share information. They may need four or five meetings of this kind of sharing before they reach the point of decision making. The whole process of decision making is, of course, more important than the moment of decision making.

PARISH COUNCIL COMMITTEES

Parish Council committees gather not as a social group to decide whether “we should do this or that” but in faith and prayer to search out what God is calling them to do. Working together, the pastoral staff, the Parish Council and its committees are to study, pray and act to bring about the genuine renewal of Christian life within the parish and to make the parish the real center of action by which the Church carries out its mission.

The Committee Always Serves the Council

Committees are the working bodies of the council, the implementers of the council's priorities and goals. Without the committee system, the council would find its job overwhelming. Through committee work, all the people of the parish are given the opportunity to use their unique gifts and talents in service to the mission of the Church. No committee operates in a vacuum apart from the parish council and its other committees. All council committees should be aware of the basic parish priorities and goals. Whatever a committee proposes to a council, then, must help the parish move toward becoming the kind of Christian community outlined in its goals. A regular evaluation by the council of each committee's ministry is important. Some councils require committees to submit budgets for approval before each council year begins. The budgets are based on the committee's realistic recommendations as to needs in its area of concern. Membership on each committee should be representative of the parish, with a balance of men and women. Generally speaking, no one should serve on more than one committee at a time. Committees may form sub-committees or “working groups” as needed to carry out the ministry of the committee (i.e., liturgy teams under the spiritual life and worship committee).

Role of the Chairperson

Each council committee is delegated by the council to accomplish a particular task. The chairperson should have a clear idea of what the committee is expected to accomplish, and what resources – physical, financial and personal – are available to accomplish its task. The chairperson is responsible for the organization, coordination and promotion of the committee's work. The most competent person to chair a committee may not be on the council. However, if the chairperson of a committee is not a council member, a council members should be appointed to serve as liaison to the committee. So that members are prepared, a regular meeting date and a specific agenda are also helpful.

Qualification of Members

In seeking members, the committees can keep these qualifications in mind:
1) Interest in and knowledge of the area of responsibility and the willingness to learn more. 2) understanding of how the work of the committee relates to

overall parish goals, and the relationship of the committee to the pastoral staff; 3) Willingness to search out the needs of the people, and respond to those needs; 4) Ability to work effectively with others.

Proposal Procedure

Much of the committee's work is ongoing, and can be summarized in a written monthly report to the council by the chairperson which is then ratified by the council. If an idea for a program or project is presented to a committee which would involve a major policy decision by the council, however the committee checks to see if the idea is feasible, considers alternatives and prepares a **proposal** for the council. The committee then takes the proposal to the agenda committee for inclusion on the council's meeting agenda. If it is accepted by the council, it is then referred to the proper committee for implementation. The key to successful council/committee work is to keep what are basically committee matters off the council agenda.

Some primary areas of committee responsibility are:

Spiritual Life: - The significant task of this committee is to provide opportunities to deepen the faith life of the parish through good prayer experiences and liturgical celebrations, particularly the Sunday liturgy. It is also responsible for an ongoing program of liturgical education and training for liturgical ministers.

Education/Formation: Religious formation can be described as the process of becoming free to experience the Lord. This committee has the responsibility for the total religious education program for the parish with emphasis on adult formation, as well as for the parish school, youth ministry, and family ministry, parenting education, bereavement support groups, etc.

Social Ministry: This committee's task is to discern the human needs of people in both the parish and larger community – all types of families, the elderly. Opportunities should be developed for members of the parish to meet these needs, as well as to support those in the parish who are already involved in service (i.e., social worker, etc.). The committee's responsibility is two-fold: to meet immediate needs and to work for changes in the structures of society which are oppressive. World issues of justice, peace, hunger and a concern for the missionary function of the church would be within the scope of this committee.

Parish Life Committee: To be concerned with the renewal of parish life and building community among all parish members through small group formation, social activities, good communications, welcoming and hospitality efforts, including the development of new members, and the coordination of efforts in evangelization/RCIA (Christian Initiation of Adults). This committee

may also serve as a vehicle for the promotion of the concept of stewardship in the parish.

Administrative Services: This committee works closely with the other committees of the council and the council itself. It covers such areas as finance, budget, buildings and grounds, and fundraising. This committee needs to have a firm foundation in stewardship.

Executive Committee: The purpose of this committee is to supervise the formation of the council agendas, and determine which committees deal with particular issues. It could also serve in an emergency when the regular council cannot be called together.

Parish Planning Process Committee: The purpose of this committee is to assist the council in planning for the long-range needs of the parish community. This committee also needs to be very knowledgeable about stewardship.

Interdependence of Committees: Other committees or sub-committees may be formed as the needs of the parish community dictate. However, in order to insure a continuity and communication on vicariate and Archdiocesan levels, each parish should establish some means to include all areas of concern described above. Smaller parishes would, of course, require a much simpler committee structure, incorporating functions. Cooperation between all the committees serving the council eliminates overlap and encourages interdependence. Parish organizations relate to this council committee which corresponds to the work they are doing in the parish. Prayer and spiritual growth are an integral part of the parish. Prayer and spiritual growth are an integral part of the work of the committee which represents a Christian parish community. This is true for an administrative services committee as for a spiritual life committee. The members of any council committee, just as councilors themselves, need a clear grasp of the importance of their role in making Jesus present within the community.

THE PARISH FINANCE COUNCIL

The universal law of the church – the Code of Canon Law, n. 537 – says this: “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.”

After several years of interim rules that followed the publication of the 1983 Code, the Vicar General of the Archdiocese promulgated “Revised Guidelines for Parish Finance Councils in June 1989. These guidelines should be known to all members of both the Parish Council and the Parish Finance Council.

1. The official title of this body, in accord with the language of Canon 537, will be: The Parish Finance Council.
2. The purpose of the Council is to assist the Pastor with the financial affairs of the parish.
3. The Council works with and provides advice for the Pastor. It is a consultative body. The Pastor makes the final decisions and is responsible for them according to Canons 532, 1281-1288.
4. Members of the Finance council are appointed by the Pastor. Members should ordinarily be members of the parish, prudent and trustworthy, and knowledgeable in financial affairs. Men and women should be considered for this appointment. In certain situations a pastor may appoint an individual who is a non-parishioners and/or a non-Catholic.
5. There should be between five and members of this Council:
 - a. The two Trustees of the parish serve as ex-officio members of the Parish Finance Council during their term of office because of their fiduciary responsibilities. When they are no longer trustees, they are no longer ex-officio members of the council. The need for financial acumen should be a serious consideration when the pastor recommends the appointment of a trustee.
 - b. The other members serve on the Finance Council at the pleasure of the pastor for a term of three years, with the possibility for reappointment for a single consecutive term.
 - c. A current listing of the membership should be submitted to the office of the Chancellor annually.
6. There are numerous ways in which the Finance Council may be of help to the Pastor in regard to the temporal affairs of the parish:
 - a. The Finance Council should assist the pastor in the preparation of the required annual financial reports for the parish as well as those for the school(s) and/or cemeteries, if any.

- b. The Finance Council would also be expected to provide assistance in the development and review of the annual operating budgets for the parish, school, and or cemetery, if necessary.
- c. The Finance Council, through its representation o the Parish Council, is to report formally to the Parish Council on the financial condition of the parish at least twice a year:
 - When the actual results of the prior fiscal year are available in the fall;
 - When the budgets for the subsequent fiscal year are completed in the spring.

Efforts to share this financial information with the entire parish, as well as a report of service, are to be encouraged.

- d. The Finance Council is to be consulted by the pastor with regard to expenditures in excess of \$15,000 the pastor must also obtain approval from the Archdiocese for all projects in excel of this amount.
7. The Chairperson of the Finance Council, appointed by the pastor after consultation, as well as the two parish trustees are to serve as ex-officio members of the parish council. The Finance Council should serve as the Finance Committee of the Parish Council.
 8. There should be close communication between the Parish Council and the Finance Council. The Parish Council strives to formulate a vision of the parish, its priorities and needs. This cooperation will assist that vision be financially viable.
 9. The Finance Council should plan to meet four times a year and more often if required by the Pastor.
 10. No close relative of the pastor, nor any individual who may be perceived as having a potential conflict of interest through such service, should be a Member of the Council. Parish employees such as managers, accountants, bookkeepers, and/or secretaries are expected to serve as resources to the Finance Council as may be required. Such individuals should not be members of the Council.

The Relationship of the Parish Council and the Parish Finance Council

The Parish Finance Council is separate from the Parish Council because the Code requires it. Canon 536 establishes parish councils as consultative bodies in which people “give their help in fostering pastoral activity.” Canon 537 then establishes a separate council to assist the pastor with the administration of material things. Thus “pastoral activity” and “finances” though they certainly interrelate in many ways – are legally distinguished.

But they are also connected because the two groups must work together. For one thing, both are consultative bodies to the pastor, who presides at both meetings. As you read in the diocesan guidelines, parish trustees serve *ex-officio* on both bodies, and the Finance Council must give semi-annual reports to the Parish Council.

In a nutshell, we characterize the relationship of the two councils in this way: the Parish Council strives to formulate an overall vision of the parish with its priorities and needs. The Finance Council tries to provide the information and resources that are needed. In their collaboration, they serve the Church.

Checklist for Parish Council Committee Chairpersons

1. Responsibilities:

Be fully aware of the tasks and responsibilities of the committees commissioned by the parish council. Know your committee's competency and limits of action. Although the principle of subsidiary is operative in the relationship between the council and committees, no committee is an autonomous body, but is always accountable to and in communication with the council, and with the other committees. Be familiar with the parish council constitution and by-laws. Remember that the purpose of the committee is not to do all the work in its area of responsibility alone, but to involve as many parishioners as possible.

2. Formation of Members:

Provide formation for members of the committee in the area of concern it covers, taking advantage of offerings on vicariate and archdiocesan levels. Help committee members to develop a sharing of responsibility and formation as a community of faith. Recruit new members for the committee.

3. Planning:

Determine priorities for programs and services to be developed by the committee for the council year. Find out about budget constraints. Decide how parishioners will be informed about plans for implementation of these programs and services.

4. Council Meetings:

Attend all council meetings, or ensure that the committee is represented at meetings. If the liaison system is used, make certain the liaison is fully informed as to what he/she is to report to the council.

5. Committee Meetings:

- a. Schedule regular committee meetings, arranging for comfortable surroundings.
- b. Prepare a written agenda in advance of the committee meeting.
- c. Appoint a vice-chairperson and secretary; a report of committee meetings should be submitted to councilors at least a week prior to the council meeting, (preferably written)
- d. Conduct the business of the committee in an effective, open manner, using consensus decision-making whenever possible so as to honor the gifts and points of view of all the members. Do not allow a "power block" to develop in the committee.
- e. Set aside part of each meeting for prayer and reflection together.

6. Sub-Committees:

Establish sub-committees as necessary to accomplish the assigned tasks; these sub-committees report directly to the committee. A sub-committee could be formed on an ad-hoc basis, or may even consist of just one resource person.

7. Archdiocesan Relationships:

Be in regular communication with the Office for Parish Councils and other archdiocesan offices and agencies which are resources for the committee's area of concern; review and carry out archdiocesan policies. Participate in vicariate meetings, or appoint a representative to attend.

8. Succession:

Make recommendations to the Parish Council to help provide for self replacement. Insure a smooth transition by assisting the new chairperson to understand the committee's past history, responsibilities and resources. Transfer all committee materials to the new chairperson.

A BLESSING OF PARISH COUNCIL MEMBERS

Rationale for a Blessing

"The celebration of blessings holds a privileged place among all the sacramentals created by the Church for the pastoral benefit of the People of God. As a liturgical action, the celebration leads the faithful to praise God and prepares them for the principal effect of the sacraments. By celebrating a blessing, the faithful can also sanctify various situations and events in their lives."

These words from the Decree for the publication of the Book of Blessings are sufficient in themselves to justify an annual blessing of the members of the parish council. There are other worthy reasons as well, including:

- To publicize the council's existence
- To introduce its members to the parish
- To teach about the council's role.

A public blessing is a bonding event for the members. At first, some may be reluctant to come, and others may appear blasé, but people and groups benefit from being singled out and prayed for and congratulated.

The human dynamic of being acknowledged for service is essential; we do more, and do better, if we know that people expect something of us. A public blessing implies and causes accountability. And the prayer dimension is especially powerful for those who are rarely publicly prayed for. Council members are often nervous and uncertain at first; communal prayer is reassuring, telling us that this is God's parish, and we do this with His help.

Thus the ceremony is as much for the parish as for the council. As with a wedding or baptism, we ritualize our hopes for the people involved, and speak of our fondest ideals. If the reality later on proves to be disappointing, at least we reminded one another of how things should be, and almost certainly the people involved did better than if we had never celebrated the event or challenged them to match the description on greatness.

A Model Source

The Book of Blessings, published in English in 1989, provides a model for our need. Chapter 64 is titled, "Order for the Blessing of a Parish Council." In the following paragraphs I have added some elements and addressed some details that the rite in the Book of Blessings does not, viz., logistics, summons by name, and applause. The prayers being quoted are from the official book.

Even though this ceremony is very simple, it will be done best if people have had a brief rehearsal, e.g., after a recent meeting. Then on the day itself, members of the council meet before Mass, preferably dressed in suits and dresses.

Everyone should be early. The front seats should be reserved for the council members, and other pews for families and friends.

Members enter in the procession, behind the crossbearer, in front of the lector and Eucharistic ministers. Reaching the head of the aisle, members bow or genuflect and go directly to their seats. The celebrant welcomes them in his opening words, and then refers to the work of the council in his homily, thus preparing people for the ceremony that will immediately follow.

After the homily, the celebrant (logically, the pastor) returns to his seat and sits down. The ritual makes no mention of the Profession of Faith on this occasion so someone who is not on the council (e.g. a former council chairperson, or the lector) goes to the lectern and calls the council members by name to come to stand as a group in the sanctuary. A printed program, with the names of the council members and the order of blessing, is a valuable option, and a memento.

When gathered at the altar, the faces of the council members should be visible to the congregation; depending on the sanctuary space, they might form a U or semi-circle, with the celebrant at his chair in the midst of them. Note all clergy and religious members should be present too.

As soon as the names have all been called, it seems appropriate to invite people to applaud. Clapping for friends as soon as they step forward seems natural, and dispels any unease in the group set apart; the action and sound affirm the members and involve the congregation in what happens next.

Thus, as the final person moves to the altar, the announcer could say something like "People of St. John's let us all stand now and show support for our parish council members by giving them a round of applause."

After that, everyone in church remains standing as a brief ceremony follows. The celebrant addresses the congregation in these or similar words:

"My dear Parishioners, I am happy to join you today in saluting and praying for members of St. John's Parish Council. A Parish council is an essential part of community life, a consultative body that I rely on for advice and assistance in serving the needs of our whole community.

I want you to know that I admire these people because they are dedicated to spreading the Gospel and improving our pastoral activities. They sacrifice themselves to come to monthly meetings, to be patient and charitable and truthful. Together we try to see what is best for the whole parish, and we truly rely on your prayers and cooperation to make these hopes and ideals come true.

Therefore, at the beginning of this new year of service (or, now with the selection of new members) it is appropriate that we come before you to seek God's blessing and to ask for your prayers."

Then the lector comes right in with petitions, including:

- For the members of our parish council, that they may give witness to the presence of Christ by lives manifesting faith, hope and love, we pray to the Lord...
- For all concerned with the welfare of this parish, that they may be open to the movement of the Holy Spirit and be always ready to carry out God's will, we pray to the Lord...

Just a few other petitions could follow, such as one for the families of the members:

- For all those family members and co-workers who make it possible for the council members to get to our meetings and make their contributions, let us pray...

Then the celebrant concludes with this prayer from the ritual:

Ever living God,
You gather us together as the parish of St. John
To carry the Gospel of Christ to all people.
Bless the members of this parish council.
Let your Spirit enlighten their minds and guide all their actions
That they may be renewed in faith,
United in love,
And bring to fulfillment the work of your church
To your greater honor and glory.
We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Then, as usual, the congregation sits, a hymn begins, the collection is taken up. The council members return to their seats, except for some members who go to the table with the gifts and then bring them to the altar in procession. Later, at the Sign of Peace, the council members could fan out to different parts of the church. At the end of Mass, they should process out and receive the greetings of the congregation. Coffee and cake would be a nice touch.

By: Msgr. William Belford