Six Priest’s Input about Parish Councils

# Composite Summary

## The Parish Council, Its Role, Purpose Relationships and Structure

‘The most important thing I’ve told parish councils is that we (meaning the Council and the priest) are on the same team. No us vs. him. This has actually been very helpful over the years.’

“I treat the council as though their baptism makes them ordained; but I don’t have to make a big deal of it because in 25 years I have never had a council member who did not want their experience to be sincerely churchly.”

For me the most important aspect of the Parish Council is that they take seriously the fact that they are actually co-ministers of the Gospel with the clergy and everyone who serves the Church.  They do not have any role which is in opposition to the clergy, nor that is not the clergy's interest, or which is reserved uniquely to them.   Everyone in the parish is there to love God and love neighbor, and the Parish Council is as responsible as the clergy and all the laity to make that happen in the parish, to make the parish to be the Body of Christ.

Of course, this *requires the clergy to understand this as well and to fully work with and respect the work of the parish council*.  Not every decision as parish or a parish council has to make requires a seminary degree.  But every decision is spiritual in every sense of the word.  The business of the parish - paying bills, maintaining the building, dealing with mundane issues - is all spiritual because the parish is the Body of Christ.

Members of parish council should hold to vision that they are personally and collectively responsible to make the parish be the Body of Christ --to love God and love neighbor.  If they can't work in that Spirit, they don't belong on parish council.

## Sense of Urgency

We do a lot of things right at \_\_\_\_\_\_ parish. It proves the positive action of the Holy Spirit at work. Parish Council however, is probably our weakest area.

… Our PC president has sort of assumed the job for life –in part because others don’t want it. He is a good person and committed to the parish yet because of a controlling nature he can suck the life out of our efforts his timetable is his own and painfully slow. What should take us a week, can take six months; what takes a month, can take a year, and what should take a year, can take five.

We eventually get to where we are going, but it takes so much longer than it should.

I have truly come to understand the importance of committed lay leadership and the powerful impact they can have on an entire community. Unfortunately, I learned this in a negative kind of way.

## Ownership and Control

I firmly believe that parish communities, particularly small ones, have seen so many clergy come and go over the years, they are hesitant to empower them with any matters not spiritually related.

The belief is, ‘I was here before you got here and I will be here long after you leave, for another parish. So, this is mine/ours; bug off.’

It’s the ownership syndrome, and ultimately about control.

## Structure

Parish Council’s need a new structure. “At large” council members without a specific job fall into the habit of becoming disinterested critics –as opposed to workers. I'm convinced that *ministry driven* Councils are the only way to go. Every member of the Council needs to have an important job/ministry role that can be represented to the entire council regularly.

Likewise the council needs to model the Eucharist. He who presides at the Eucharist presides over the parish –in love and conciliarity. Anyone sitting in on PC meetings should have a sense that the meeting reveals the Kingdom of God -- as the Liturgy is supposed to.  The work of the people of God in the liturgy is not separate from the work of the council.

## Council Meetings…

“Everything in the church should be an icon of the Kingdom of God and of the love between the Persons of the Holy Trinity.   Councils should think and talk about how even their council meetings and the annual parish meetings are to be icons and signs of the Kingdom of God!  Let them understand it is their responsibility, not just God's or the clergy, to make that happen.   Anyone sitting in on their meetings should have a sense that the meeting reveals the Kingdom of God as the Liturgy is supposed to. “

“We have a permanent line item on the agenda called "pastoral matters", which implicitly reminds the council that they have a pastoral role without having to harp on it and people have always responded.  While this never reveals items of an inappropriate nature, it usually takes the form of a review of new members or inquirers who might need more attention from council members, *whom I gently encourage to think in terms of having a duty to these people as council members;*   it also gives a minute to update the council on prayer needs, and even prompts them to share their own.  Our meetings can go long, but we almost always end them with a litany related to the people or matters raised in the pastoral section of the meeting.”

“Meetings need a good chair that will keep things on track. This includes being willing to be firm about refocusing tangential discussions.”

“Agendas need to be adhered to with all agenda items, including "New Business," need to be added before the meeting (i.e. no, "Just one more thing..."). This helps avoid meetings morphing into free-for-alls.”

“Parish Councils need to know what is their responsibility and what is the responsibility of other ministries/people in the parish. A PC meeting does not need a 20 minute discussion about why the youth group kids don't know how to cross themselves properly. This relates to good stewardship of the time and talents of council members and the specific tasks these folks have been elected to fulfill.”

## Areas of Disagreement

“TERM LIMITS! Even the best PC members can get stale if they are around too long.”

OR

“I want parish council members to develop fluency in the jobs they do and a commitment to doing it with excellence. This takes time. A job for life carries potential problems however long term assignments build an effective council and a future vision.”