

Discerning the Future of the Parish Pastoral Council
A Reflection on the Selection Process for New Members
by Robert Choiniere

A wise teacher once declared, “Everything we do teaches something!” This simple statement is a cautionary exclamation as well as a rousing acclamation. It seems to imply that every part of our life and all the actions we undertake teach others something about who we are and what life is like. All of our actions educate others about our values, our agendas, and our deepest held beliefs. In the way we answer the phone and greet people at our door, we teach something about hospitality and how we approach others. Through the choices we make about how we spend our time and in the methods we use to make those decisions, we teach something about our priorities and what we hold dear.

This is an especially important lesson to remember for those of us engaged in parish ministry. The parish is committed to being a place where the mission of Jesus Christ is lived out in word and in deed. Therefore, it is important for us to remember that our actions teach volumes about what we hold to be important and even sacred. This extends from the way we reverence the tabernacle when entering church to the way needy folks are received when they arrive unexpectedly at our doors.

In many ways the lessons we teach are not found exclusively in the ends we achieve, but are embedded in the methods we use to achieve those ends. In fact, placing a higher priority on the methods we use is a lesson in itself. The values we hold should make themselves apparent in the means and methods (dare I say processes) we use to achieve our intended goals.

With that said, I would like to move to an examination the way in which parish pastoral council members are selected within the parish. In many parishes, this is an annual event and one which can be a grueling experience for all involved. The preferred type of process in many parishes is a simple election. Assuming that all of our methods teach something, what does the election method of selection teach? In many cases it can show that the primary qualification for membership on the parish pastoral council (PPC) is popularity. As with all elections, people vote for who they know. The assumption here is that if you are known, then you are the most qualified. In addition, the election process produces losers as well as winners and can often pit candidates against each other which seems to go against our communal values. Finally, elections are based on majority rule which assumes that the movement of the Spirit in our community always rests with the majority. This is an assertion that does not seem consistent with the prophetic voice of God throughout Scripture. Robert’s Rules of Order can be a helpful resource at times, but the Church has never considered Robert’s Rules to be divine revelation and they should never trump our understanding of community which comes to us through the Holy Scripture.

So, how should a parish approach the selection of new members to the PPC in a way which is more consistent with our values as Christians? My humble suggestion is a process of discernment in which the entire community is given a voice and the selection is made based on gifts through a process of listening. Discernment is rooted in selecting people based on their giftedness and their ability to articulate the mission of the parish, not necessarily on their popularity. This process also depends upon the consensus of all the nominees and though only a few are selected all are heard and all are affirmed leaving no hard feelings when it is over. And, though the intended end is the selection of new members, many new names are surfaced through

out the process all of whom are named because of their gifts and their willingness to offer those gifts to the service of the parish. Such a list of names would be an valuable asset to any pastor.

The process itself usually has three parts: the nomination process, the information evening, and the discernment itself. The process is simple and truly surfaces those who are most qualified and willing to serve on the council.

The Nominations

The process begins by announcing that the parish will be entering a time of discernment to select new members to the parish pastoral council. This is an opportunity for the pastor or existing council members to educate the parish about the role of the parish pastoral council within the parish. The parish as a whole will be making nominations so it is important they know clearly what the PPC is and what it does. Parishioners are also told some important qualifications to consider when nominating someone. For instance, nominees should be registered parishioners, open to working with people, able to listen, and have a vision for the future of the parish, etc. All parishioners are asked to nominate people and those nominations are collected. Parishioners should also feel free to nominate themselves if they wish.

These names, once collected, are a goldmine in and of themselves. This list represents the individuals who others feel have the qualities for leadership. They are names selected by the community for some reason, because of a gift that someone else saw, and those people are all potential movers and shakers in the parish.

The Information Evening

Once the names are collected an invitation is sent to each person. This invitation congratulates them on their being nominated and invites them to an information session where they will learn about the role of the parish pastoral council.

Typically, not everyone that is nominated shows up for the information evening. This is intended. Throughout the discernment process the numbers are dwindling. This is a naturally part of the process.

Those that do return are welcomed and affirmed as being nominated for the gifts which others have seen in them. An extended period of prayer begins this evening with a period of faith-sharing. Again, this models the experience of the council and the importance of sharing our faith with one another.

During this evening someone gives a presentation on the role and purpose of the council. This evening can be facilitated by a Diocesan services representative or by members of the existing council. This presentation should provide the big picture: the mission of the parish; the relationship between the parish and the PPC; the relationship between the pastor, the parish staff, the finance council, and the PPC; an overview of pastoral planning and goal setting, as well as the importance of listening to the needs of the parish and articulating the mission of the parish to the wider community. The presentation can also include a short history of the work of the PPC.

This evening ends with prayer and with one small request. All nominees are asked to take this information home with them and to take the week to pray and reflect. They should also be assured that the existing council members and the pastor will keep them in prayer as well. A special intention during the mass that week for those in discernment would also be appropriate.

The Discernment

The night of discernment occurs one week after the information evening. The entire evening is held in the context of prayer, specifically prayer to the Holy Spirit for guidance. The nominees are welcomed and invited to a period of faith-sharing and reflection on the given reading. The discernment is a night of listening to each other. Through the course of the evening all will have a chance to be heard and all are asked to listen deeply. The nominees themselves will be the ones making the choices, so listening is key. What follows is several rounds of questions. These begin simply by having everyone give their name, the number of years they have been in the parish, what they have been involved in at the parish, and what they enjoy most about the parish. After each person speaks the group affirms them and prays for that person. This is important because it shows that we appreciate and value that person for who they are. In the second round of questions, individuals are asked to reflect on the gifts they have that would contribute to this ministry and why they felt moved to offer them to the work of the PPC. During the third and final round the group is asked to reflect on the parish by stating what they feel is the greatest need or what would make the greatest difference. This is a time to hear about their concerns and their dreams for the parish. At some point throughout the questioning process the pastor is invited to share his vision for the council.

Now that everyone has spoken, those that wish to withdraw their names are asked to do so. After this a new set of rounds begin. During these rounds each person is asked to name 2 or 3 people who they feel would be an asset to the council and why. This is an amazing time, full of affirmation, but rarely do people ever name themselves. Everyone is focused outward at this point on the well being of the community and on those around them. After everyone has a chance to offer names a process of consensus is used to judge who will be selected. If there is no clear consensus for all the open slots, the rounds begin again. If there is still no consensus than those who have been named are asked to adjourn to another room and to reflect among themselves until they come to a consensus. At the end of the evening, a prayer of thanksgiving is offered and the evening ends with a sign of peace. As a natural consequence to this evening, relationships are created and new friends made. Everyone in the room will know each others names and concerns by the end of the evening. This is one of the many fruits of the experience.

The process of discernment has many fruits. It focuses the attention of the parish on the gifts that exist within individuals, it helps to nurture relationships, and it provides a transparent process where the Spirit can work through the community gathered. An election process or simple appointment may be more efficient and produce faster results, but a process of communal discernment allows for all parishioners to be heard, it provides a space to educate the community about the mission, and it encourages thoughtful reflection on the needs and gifts of the parish. In the end, discernment teaches the importance of listening, the value of affirmation, and our ultimate reliance on the Spirit moving within the community to guide and shape our future.