



Diocesan Pastoral Council and Canon Law

Speech

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Good morning, everyone.

For us to take our task of establishing a Diocesan Pastoral Council in a synodal way, understanding the role and function of such a council is crucial. In the video that we were asked to view for today's session, we heard Father Eamonn [Conway] speak eloquently on the spirit of a Diocesan Pastoral Council in the life of the Church.

Today, I have the much drier task of giving an overview of the nature and role of a DPC as set out in the Code of Canon Law.

Before we go on to Canon Law, I would just like to return to this quote that the Archbishop shared with us earlier. The decree on governance from the Australian Plenary Council gives us a context for the task ahead. And as we read before, it affirms that governance, in the Catholic Church should be exercised in a synodal manner with the appropriate participation of all the baptised, that is the underpinning context of where we are going.

As already pointed out to us at a parish level, this would mainly involve the participation of the Parish Pastoral Council, and the Parish Finance Council. For a diocese, this would involve participation of a number of governance structures, including a Diocesan Pastoral Council, and a Diocesan Finance Council.

The International Theological Commission of 2018 commenting on the synodality in the life and mission of the church states, that, bringing about an effective synodal dynamic in the local church requires that the Diocesan Pastoral Council and the Parish Pastoral Council should work in a coordinated way. So then, what is a Diocesan Pastoral Council?

A Diocesan Pastoral Council is a consultative body that provides advice and support to the archbishop in his pastoral care of the Diocese. The words to remember here is "Consultative Body" which gives advice.

Canon 511 gives us a bird's eye view of the nature, and the role of the DPC. Vatican II urged dioceses to establish a DPC, as I've said to assist the diocesan bishop in all things that pertain to pastoral works. This council is under the authority of the diocesan bishop, and he himself is the president of the council. He also establishes the statutes which, when necessary, he is able to modify.

First and foremost, a DPC is an advisory group, which is strategic. Its purpose is to investigate, consider and propose practical conclusions about those things which pertain to pastoral works in the diocese. In a synodal understanding, the DPC provides the prophetic voice of the Spirit, a broader vision, so God's mission is revealed and lived out actively within and outside the local church.

As part of the renewal of the Second Vatican Council, there was a re-discovery of the importance of collaboration between the local church, local bishops, and the laity. Canon 512 speaks of this collaboration to a degree. The DPC is composed of a representative group, which include clergy, religious and lay people. It is important here to understand that the DPC is not a lay Council. To consider it a lay Council is to misunderstand seriously the composition of the council and perhaps also its purpose. We must remember that the purpose of a DPC is not simply to be a vehicle for lay consultation, communication, or even planning.

At times, however, it may be necessary for the bishop to call for the establishment of lay committees to address specific issues concerning issues within the diocese. Such committees are dissolved at the end of that specific role. It is the bishop who determines how the members of the council are chosen.

Paragraph two of this canon provides some guidelines. It states that those who are elected to the council are to be selected in such a way that they are truly representative of the diversity of works and people of the diocese. For the DPC to function in a truly synodal manner, it would be important that members be capable of visionary thinking as well as drawing on the experience and wisdom of the church on the ground.

Paragraph three also states that the members of a DPC are to be members of the Christian faithful who are in full communion with the Catholic Church. Christians not in full communion with the Catholic Church can be invited to attend meetings as observers, when the bishop deems it appropriate, the invitation would come from the bishop.

Canon 513 tells us that a DPC is constituted for a period of time according to the precepts of the statutes issued by the bishop. This of course will vary from diocese to diocese. The DPC ceases when a diocese is vacant, or it can cease when it is dissolved by the bishop if he feels that the council is not fulfilling its proper role.

The manner of Operation

Canon 514 is very important. If we are to adopt a synodal approach in establishing and sustaining a Diocesan Pastoral Council, it is essential that we value the manner in which the council operates. The instruction sets out that the council is consultative in nature, this means

that the council operates in a decision recommending manner and not a deliberative or decision implementing manner. To operate in a decision recommending manner means that the council's task is to offer recommendations to the bishop, the council is not to have power and does not have power or the responsibility to execute them. Emphasising the consultative nature of the DPC highlights the understanding that the diocesan Bishop remains free to accept or not to accept the recommendations made by the council.

Finally, the bishop convokes the council at least once a year. He chairs the meetings. He also proposes the questions to be treated and decides whether or not it is appropriate to publish the themes considered. He determines how to reach conclusions. Remember, all this is done in consultation.

So, what have we heard?

The Diocesan Pastoral Council is a body under the authority of the diocesan Bishop. It provides advice and support to the diocesan Bishop. It is composed of members of the faithful, clergy, religious, lay faithful, that are truly representative of the diversity of works and people in the diocese. The DPC exists to investigate, consider, and formulate practical conclusions for those things which pertain to pastoral works within the diocese. Most important, it performs its function in a synodal manner.

I would like to conclude with a final remark from the International Theological Commission, which says the Diocesan Pastoral Council is proposed as the most appropriate permanent structure for implementing synodality in the local church. These paragraphs from Canon Law are not meant to be there to stifle what it means to establish and sustain a council. They are a guide in which we can allow the Holy Spirit to speak to us and therefore carry through a council that truly reflects what God really wants us to do.

Thank you.