

On Consensus

At St. Vincent de Paul Church Parish Council

Spring, 2009

Introduction

Since the inception of a newly dedicated Parish Council with a Council Constitution at St. Vincent's in May 1974, the Council addressed its most difficult questions with a process that attempted to consider all sides of an issue and all opinions of the Council members. Since the approval of an Amended Council Constitution in November, 1992, the Council has attempted to address its most important questions using a consensus model of decision-making. Straightforward and less-controversial questions are traditionally decided via means of an informal poll of Council members; if all members are comfortable with an action, it is considered approved and may go forward. More challenging and difficult questions must be put through a process of discernment, with the goal being that the final decision will be the right one for the life of the Parish in its mission to the world. This document helps to detail that discernment process.

History of the Council and the adoption of the consensus process

One of the principal themes of the second Vatican Council was that of collegiality, and several of the VII documents indicate that the establishment of parish pastoral councils would be beneficial to the life of the Church. The 1983 Revised Code of Canon Law also supported the institution of parish councils, as well as requiring the establishment of a finance council for every parish. Pertinent sections of some of these documents are appended.

Approximately three-quarters of American parishes have some form of parish council. The Archdiocese of Baltimore requires that every parish have a Council, and publishes some guidelines for the process.

St. Vincent's established a Parish Council in the late 1960's. The model was broad, and resembled a Town Meeting; all parishioners were invited to participate in episodic assemblies to consider the concerns of the parish. Attendance diminished, and these Council meetings did not continue. When Father Lawrence became Pastor in 1973, he re-established a Parish Council, with a model similar to the one currently in operation.

Preliminary understandings

- This document is meant to serve as a guide only. The very nature of the consensus process ensures that it cannot be defined or bound by a set of rules, and each unique circumstance must be dealt with as it arises;
- Council members, ideally from diverse backgrounds and representative of all liturgies at St. Vincent's, work together patiently and with an expectation of mutual trust;
- No model of decision making is perfect;
- The Council never acts independently, but with the guidance of the Holy Spirit;

- The Consensus process described here is not a Parish-wide process. The Council, with the Pastor, serves the Parish, represents the hopes and concerns of the Parishioners, and is entrusted with the decisions that will affect the Parish.
 - The Parish Council ought to seek Parish-wide input through various mechanisms when considering issues immediately affecting Parish life.

Consensus in our Parish Council

- Is built on prayer.
- Seeks the will of God.
- Seeks to honor the hopes and expectations of Parishioners.
- Is based on mutual trust among Council members.
- Demonstrates the courage of Council members to address issues of concern.
- Honors the teachings of Scripture and the Church.

Consensus does not involve

- Resignation (members don't give in merely to keep peace)
- Competition (there are no winners and losers)
- Quick decisions (working through to consensus takes time)
- "Closed" issues (all options must be on the table)
- Dependence on a leader (all engage in the discussion and come to a decision)

The steps of our consensus process at St. Vincent's

Before beginning, the Council may need to decide on the question of a facilitator. When an important issue or proposal comes before the Council which will require consensus for approval, the Council President may consider appointing a facilitator for the discussion. This contingency is implicit in Article XI, Paragraph 2 of the Council Constitution. The facilitator must agree to take a neutral stance, refraining from voicing any position on the issue at hand.

1. Presentation of information on the issue or proposal. This may come from various sources. Presenter(s) should:
 - Clearly state the issue.
 - Present detailed and thorough background information.
 - Give opportunity for clarification.
2. Discussion of the issue.
 - Facilitator introduces issue, its alternatives and additional options, others respond.
 - Facilitator ensures that every member of Council has an opportunity to express his/her viewpoint.
 - Various alternatives to round-table discussion may be employed at this point, including brainstorming, written response, small groups, etc.
 - When all viewpoints have been expressed, facilitator tests for consensus.
3. Reflection. Council member will ask themselves:
 - Does what is proposed support the Gospel?

- In light of our Parish Mission Statement, will this be good for the entire parish?
- Can each of us live with this and support it?
- 4. Review.
 - The Facilitator will summarize the issue and the basic background, the areas of agreement and disagreement, and any statement of consensus reached.
- 5. If there is no consensus, continue to give consideration to the problematic areas. This may involve further discussion, and/or the utilization of resources listed below.

Resources

The Council has a variety of resources and actions which will provide guidance in the situation of important decision-making for the Parish. These include, but are not limited to, the following:

- The Parish Mission Statement
- The Parish Council Constitution
- The Pastor's experience
- Communication from the parishioners to Council representatives
- Referring questions to standing parish committees for reports
- Convening Parish-wide town meetings for broad consultation
- Creating Ad Hoc committees for additional research
- Holy Scripture
- The *Catechism of the Catholic Church*

When consensus is difficult to reach

- If the discussion is "going around in circles," the Council may drop the matter and return to it later, giving all members the opportunity for prayer and reflection.
- If there seems to be missing information, the Council must do further research and gather more data before trying to complete the consensus process. Any combination of the resources mentioned above may assist in this effort.

Unfortunate challenges to consensus which are to be avoided

- Status quo.
 - A minority of the Council could block new decisions in order to keep things as they are, disregarding the potential value of the proposed change.
- The model can be abused.
 - Less flexible members of the Council have the potential to "hold hostage" a decision on which the balance of the Council agrees.
 - More vocal members of the Council have the potential to dominate any open-forum discussion during the decision-making process, skewing the apparent group understanding and leaving less-vocal Council members' opinions unheard.
- An unwillingness by Council members to engage in difficult decision-making.
 - The Council could agree on or deny a proposal because no-one is willing to go against the perceived group agreement (as in not wanting to "make waves").

- The Council could deny approval for a proposal because implementing it would probably require additional time, money, or attention by Council members and/or Parishioners.
- Impatience for a decision.
 - Sometimes the time required for discernment of a difficult issue can be emotionally fatiguing and members may try to achieve consensus simply to be finished with the process.

The Parish Council assumes that all deliberations will be held in good faith. We also trust that the Holy Spirit will provide the grace needed to avoid the problems discussed above. If, however, Council members do abuse the consensus process, in one of the ways mentioned or in any other way, it is up to the members of the parish to hold them accountable.

Where there are dissenting opinions

- Dissenters ought to review the following questions carefully:
 - Am I considering what is best for the whole parish?
 - Does the decision run against our Parish Mission statement?
 - Do I fully understand the data presented?
 - Have I carefully justified my reasons for disagreeing?
- The whole of the Council has the duty to reconsider. There may be times when dissenting opinions will cause Council members to change their views.
- Dissent should be reserved for matters of great concern.

Three options where there is no unanimity

In practice, St. Vincent's Parish Council strives, not only for consensus, but for unanimity. There will be times when unanimity is not possible. However, the expectation of mutual trust and careful and thorough discernment will cause every member of St. Vincent's Parish Council to strive for near-unanimity on difficult decisions. When one or more members of the Council feel that they cannot go along with the decision of the rest of the Council, that decision must be respected by the Council. The decision on which of these options is appropriate will be made collectively, but led by the majority.

1. Dissenters may choose to say, "I don't agree completely, but I see the validity of the position and I can live with it."
 - The Council may consider amending the proposal or issue at hand to accommodate the dissenting view.
2. Dissenters may choose to "stand aside." This means that the dissenting Council members are convinced of the character of the body of the Council and are willing to stand behind it. This includes the circumstance of a condition in which dissenting members, if acting alone, would not make the same decision.
 - The Council must honor this difficult decision and make every effort to see that the effects of the decision are tempered by prudence and due

consideration of the dissenting view. This effort might often consist of parish-wide consultation.

- *We have reached near unanimity in this case. We have given serious consideration to the views of the dissenter. We honor those views. Nevertheless, the Council has determined that, in this case, near unanimity is enough to find that there is consensus regarding this action.*

3. The Council, upon reflection, may decide to not take the action favored by the majority. This would be an act of deference by those in the majority.

- *But for the objection of the dissenting member or members, we would have taken this action. However, we highly value the independent views of each of our members. In view of the dissent we will not take this action. It is more important in this case to honor the discernment of the individual than to take this action.*

The “Doomsday Clause” of the Council Constitution (Article IV, Sec. 8)

This is not really part of the consensus model. Rather, it is a dissolution clause.

Invocation of the Doomsday Clause is an admission of failure. The Pastor and Council are admitting that they are unable to effectively govern the Parish. It is then up to the Parish, as a community, to come up with a new system of governance.

- Why We Have the Doomsday Clause
 1. To provide necessary perspective. There are almost no questions which ought to be able to effectively divide a Pastor and Council.
 2. To strengthen the Council's role. There is a natural and right influence exerted by the Pastor, who is entrusted with the critical responsibility of the head of the parish. A Pastor will present opinions and suggestions in Council which will be given due respect and attention by Council members. However, the model of this Parish Council is one which seeks a balance of power in the process of decision-making. Therefore, the Doomsday Clause exists as an encouragement to work out in practice this Council's long-held principle that the Pastor shall have no authority without the Council and the Council shall have no authority without the Pastor.

Conclusion / Looking Forward

At this point, the question of what constitutes near-unanimity remains unanswered, as does the question of what percentage of dissenting voices constitutes sufficient reason to either expect the consensus process to continue, or to make a decision in favor of the dissenting voices.

Each year's Council will have different members, who bring a desired diversity of life experiences, personal interests and hopes, and styles of communication to the table. We trust that every Council will consider all the questions, small and large, that affect St. Vincent de Paul Church with love, respect, and attention.

Appendix A (in progress, June 2009)

Examples of successful and less-successful Consensus Decision-Making by the Parish Council

Appendix B

Relevant paragraphs from Vatican II Documents and the Code of Canon Law:

Lumen Gentium, November, 1964.

37. The laity have the right, as do all Christians, to receive in abundance from their spiritual shepherds the spiritual goods of the Church, especially the assistance of the word of God and of the sacraments. They should openly reveal to them their needs and desires with that freedom and confidence which is fitting for children of God and brothers in Christ. They are, by un of the knowledge, competence or outstanding ability which they may enjoy, permitted and sometimes even obliged to express their opinion on those things which concern the good of the Church. When occasions arise, let this be done through the organs erected by the Church for this purpose. Let it always be done in truth, in courage and in prudence, with reverence and charity toward those who by reason of their sacred office represent the person of Christ.

The laity should, as all Christians, promptly accept in Christian obedience decisions of their spiritual shepherds, since they are representatives of Christ as well as teachers and rulers in the Church. Let them follow the example of Christ, who by His obedience even unto death, opened to all men the blessed way of the liberty of the children of God. Nor should they omit to pray for those placed over them, for they keep watch as having to render an account of their souls, so that they may do this with joy and not with grief.

Let the spiritual shepherds recognize and promote the dignity as well as the responsibility of the laity in the Church. Let them willingly employ their prudent advice. Let them confidently assign duties to them in the service of the Church, allowing them freedom and room for action. Further, let them encourage lay people so that they may undertake tasks on their own initiative. Attentively in Christ, let them consider with fatherly love the projects, suggestions and desires proposed by the laity. However, let the shepherds respectfully acknowledge that just freedom which belongs to everyone in this earthly city.

A great many wonderful things are to be hoped for from this familiar dialogue between the laity and their spiritual leaders: in the laity a strengthened sense of personal responsibility; a renewed enthusiasm; a more ready application of their talents to the projects of their spiritual leaders. The latter, on the other hand, aided by the experience of the laity, can more clearly and more incisively come to decisions regarding both spiritual and temporal matters. In this way, the whole Church, strengthened by each one of its members, may more effectively fulfill its mission for the life of the world.

Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity, November, 1965

26. In dioceses, insofar as possible, there should be councils which assist the apostolic work of the Church...

Councils of this type should be established as far as possible also on the parochial, interparochial, and interdiocesan level as well as in the national or international sphere.

The Code of Canon Law, Revised, 1983

Can. 536

1. If the diocesan bishop judges it opportune after he has heard the presbyteral council, a pastoral council is to be established in each parish, over which the pastor presides and in which the Christian faithful, together with those who share in pastoral care by virtue of their office in the parish, assist in fostering pastoral activity.

2. A pastoral council possesses a consultative vote only and is governed by the norms established by the diocesan bishop.

Can. 537

In each parish there is to be a finance council which is governed, in addition to universal law, by norms issued by the diocesan bishop and in which the Christian faithful, selected according to these same norms, are to assist the pastor in the administration of the goods of the parish...

For Reference

Making Parish Meetings Work

by Medard Laz (Ave Maria Press, 1997)

Revisioning the Parish Pastoral Council

by Mary Anne Gubish (Paulist Press, 2001)

Four Ways to Build More Effective Pastoral Councils: A Pastoral Approach

by Mark F. Fischer and Mary Margaret Raley (Twenty-Third Publications, 2002)

Publications from the Archdiocese of Baltimore (see www.archbalt.org):

Baltimore Building One Body in Christ: The Ministry of the Parish Pastoral Council.

With a letter from William Cardinal Keeler, Archbishop of Baltimore. 1995.

The Ministry of Shared Responsibility: Serving as Parish Council in the Archdiocese of Baltimore. With a letter by Archbishop William D. Borders. 1988.

The Archdiocese of Baltimore Temporal Goods Policy Manual, 2007

<http://www.archbalt.org/temporal-goods/upload/section%20200-203%20parish%20pastoral%20council.pdf>