

Parish Pastoral Councils -  
embodying the vision of Church.

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**INTRODUCTION**

40 years after the Second Vatican Council we are still discussing the meaning, structure and operating styles of parish pastoral councils (PPCs). There is still some doubt about whether the PPC can be helpful and can indeed be one of the means to enable the whole community to participate in the life of the parish. In the late 1960s we pronounced so enthusiastically that:

the faithful who by Baptism are incorporated into Christ, are placed in the People of God, and in their own way share the priestly, prophetic and kingly office of Christ, and to the best of their ability carry on the mission of the whole Christian people in the Church and in the world.’<sup>1</sup> More recently, Pope John Paul II has summarised the Vatican Council’s teaching on this three-fold mission of the laity.<sup>2</sup>

Most people - clergy and lay would agree with *Lumen Gentium* paragraph 31 but translating the theory into practice or going ‘from rhetoric to reality’, as Coleman would say,<sup>3</sup> has been less successful.

I hope to reflect in this paper why PPCs are, in most situations, not only possible but desirable as a structure to enable participation of the laity and the whole people of God in the common mission of Christ.

**1 SHARING A VISION OF THE CHURCH**

The first step in any pastoral planning or attempt to set up a PPC is to ensure that the whole community have a sense of where we are going and why. To share a vision of the church and its mission as we

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<sup>1</sup>*Lumen Gentium* - Dogmatic Constitution on the Church’ in Vatican Council II documents, Vol I, (ed.) Flannery, A., Dominican Publications, Dublin, 1981, para 31.

<sup>2</sup> John Paul II, *Christifideles Laici* - post-synodal apostolic exhortation on The Vocation and the Mission of the Lay Faithful in the Church and in the World. Catholic Truth Society, London, 1988, para 14.2-7.

<sup>3</sup>Coleman, J.A., ‘The Ecclesiology of Pastoral Planning’ in (ed.) Deegan, A. X., *Developing a Vibrant Parish Pastoral Council*. Paulist Press, New York NJ., 1995, p 15.

proceed through this 3rd millennium will produce a whole variety of different opinions and this first step is often the most difficult but also the most rewarding if carefully and respectfully carried out.

It is possible to side step the vision and set up PPCs as a mechanism to maintain and coordinate present ministries or organisations but the development of 'maintenance' PPCs is often a horizontal move from one-person clericalism to team-clericalism and is not to be mistaken for a real sharing in the mission of Christ. In this situation, where the PPC is the administrative support for the priest, one often hears about 'helping father' or things are done because 'father has suggested it and its a good thing to do'. The lack of participation of the whole community is regularly bemoaned at the meetings of these PPCs but the laity are not given a chance to see for themselves what the vision and mission of Christ is. They are often not treated as adults and given a choice in whether they want to be a part of this journey, embodying a particular vision.

There are many ways by which a vision of the church can be shared, developed and deepened among the people. But, first, I will try to say what this vision could consist of.

### ***Holy Scripture***

The first place to look for some key features of our vision is the Scriptures. People can be encouraged to explore what the Old and New Testaments, and the four Gospels in particular, call us to: Friendship with Christ as a hallmark of a Christian, (Jn 15:13-17); the all inclusive love of God where no one is excluded from the feast unless they want to be excluded (Isaiah 25:6-9); the relationship of God with his people through Christ - adoption, forgiveness (Eph 1:4-6); the priorities of the Lord (Lk 4:18); sent to the whole world (Jn 20:21 and Mt 28:16-20) but the Lord remains with us - 'where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.' (Mt 18:19); gathered and nourished for mission (Jn 6:51); called into community - to break the bread and live as sisters and brothers (Acts 2:44-47). Other quotations could be found for developing reflections on creation, sharing charisms, using the gifts of the Spirit and being prophetic.

### ***Second Vatican Council documents***

The second source of key direction statements is the documents of the Second Vatican Council. The renewed understanding of Baptism as quoted above from *Lumen Gentium* paragraph 31 is an example. Some other key passages could be identified to centre the people on Christ: 'All people are called to this union with Christ, who is the light of the world, from whom we go forth, through whom we live, and towards whom our whole life is directed.' (LG3); help people to see the value of community as against individualism: 'He (God) has willed to make men (all people) holy and save them, not as individuals without any bond or link between them, but rather to make them into a people who might acknowledge him and serve him in holiness' (LG 9.1); help them to recognize that there is a gap between what we live and what we profess in faith: 'One of the gravest errors of our time is the dichotomy between the faith which many profess and the practice of their daily lives...' (GS 43.1); encourage people to see that being involved in the affairs of the world is part of the lay charism: 'Christians cherish a feeling of deep solidarity with the human race and its history.' (GS 1); and 'At all times the Church carries the responsibility of reading the signs of the time and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel, if it is to carry out its task.' (GS 4).

### ***Asian Bishops' pastoral documents***

To give the people a sense of the Church in Asia it is useful to dig into the treasures that have been accumulating in the 35 year history of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) Offices and Plenary Assemblies. Most Catholic, Asian theologians and pastors have managed to be heard through the various offices and institutes that the Bishops have supported to advise them, to give the Asian church a sense of identity, and direction and to implement the vision of the second Vatican Council.

The situation of Asia, its rapid changes, poverty, youthfulness, oppression of women, etc, is very often described in these documents. This is accompanied by a list of pastoral priorities and particular attention is drawn to certain alarming situations. To be a relevant presence in these situations the bishops say we need 'a new way of being church in the 1990s':

The Church in Asia will have to be a communion of communities, where laity, Religious and clergy recognize and accept each other as sisters and brothers. They are called together by the word of God which, regarded as a quasi-sacramental presence of the

Risen Lord, leads them to form small Christian communities... there they pray and share together the Gospel of Jesus, living it in their daily lives as they support one another and work together, united as they are "in one mind and heart".<sup>4</sup>

'The Church in Asia must foster a threefold dialogue: with the many different faiths of Asia, with the cultures of Asia and with the poor multitudes of Asia.'<sup>5</sup> This dialogue is crucial in Asia where the Christian presence is a tiny minority and where the great religious traditions have existed before Christ and have a highly developed history of creation and salvation. Bishop Emeritus Angelo Fernandes of New Delhi believes that:

interreligious dialogue is no more to be considered a fringe activity, but is a framework within which the Church's normal activity takes place in full fidelity to the Church's vocation to give witness to the universal love of God revealed in Jesus Christ... one theological basis for dialogue is the Incarnation, God's dialogue with the world...<sup>6</sup>

The fourth plenary assembly of the FABC on the topic of the laity made the point that lay people are called to public life for the common good: 'The involvement of the lay person in political activity confirms his/her rootedness in Christ, who called his community of disciples to be a leaven in the world and thus to labour for the common good...'<sup>7</sup>

### ***Other church documents and writings***

The task of evangelising Henri de Lubac calls an 'inner necessity' when he explores the 'utter need to be missionary'. He quotes St. Paul's first letter to the Corinthians (9:16) and says that 'to give (to evangelize) is to participate in the divine Life, which is Gift'.<sup>8</sup>

In *Redemptoris Missio* Pope John Paul II says: 'mission is seen as a community commitment, a responsibility of the local church, ... reading the Acts of the Apostles helps us to realize that at the beginning of the church the mission *ad gentes*,... was in fact considered the normal outcome of Christian living to which every believer was committed through the witness of personal conduct and through explicit proclamation whenever possible.'<sup>9</sup>

Some documents from the World Council of Churches or Christian Conference of Asia are also very helpful to give some idea and inspiration about how to live the Gospel in Asia today in our churches. The reason for taking some time over the features of a vision of church in Asia is because no structures can be effective if they are not built up or allowed to grow out of a particular vision and sense of direction and mission. The way in which the whole Christian community is invited to explore the above documents themselves, will already give a message about this vision of church which is a community of equals but with different gifts and functions. The opportunities provided for the whole community to study, reflect, pray and celebrate without any strings attached; these truly open-ended exchanges under the invocation of the Holy Spirit, will give people a sense of being responsible for the church and its mission even before they make any choices. They will feel free to say 'no' or to accept to go further and only with a free choice can any beginning be made to build a participatory church.

### ***Pastoral strategies to share the vision***

Each parish will need to work out what suits them best. There are many pastoral strategies to provide 'days' or 'events' or 'weekends' to bring people together to reflect. A programme can be designed that builds awareness through the homily on Sundays - a little printed passage in the Sunday bulletin that is shared between adults in the pew as part of the homily for example. A team of three (members of the

<sup>4</sup>Final Statement of the Fifth FABC Plenary Assembly', FABC papers, Hong Kong, FABC secretariat, (1990) para 8.1.2.

<sup>5</sup>Final Statement of the Sixth FABC Plenary Assembly', FABC papers, FABC secretariat, Hong Kong, (1995) paragraph 6.3.

<sup>6</sup>Fernandes, A., *Experience of Dialogue*. Gujarat Sahitya Prakash, Gujarat, India, 1994, p 95.

<sup>7</sup>Final Statement of the Fourth FABC Plenary Assembly', FABC papers, Hong Kong, FABC secretariat, (1986) paragraph 3.1.3

<sup>8</sup>Paxton, N., (ed) *Vision of Church 2000*. Essays in memory of Cardinal Henri de Lubac SJ, St Philip's University Press, Salford, UK., 1994, pp 30-31.

<sup>9</sup>John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio* - Encyclical on Missionary Activity. Origins, USA, 1990, paragraph 27.

parish training team) to present aspects of the vision in 4 or 5 minutes.

Consultation techniques can be used for sharing a vision of church. For example, all existing organisations could hold a series of meetings using texts specially designed for small groups in which the vision and mission of the church is developed through study and group discussion. All parent and catechist meetings as well as the parish ministry groups, could use the same texts. Those house bound or sick could be visited and some thoughts shared with them and they could be invited to pray for the effort or write if they wished to encourage some others. The important aspect here is to mobilise people's opinions in a very open way with solid foundations of formation built into the process so that opinions can be based on a wide selection of materials. Minority groups who speak other languages should be catered to and the young can be included through youth programmes and catechetical sessions.

The methodology in small groups for study, reflection and discussion can be the 'Pastoral Cycle' which is a session or a project that lasts days or weeks in which people come together, they describe their situation or experience, they exchange their stories and explore them together, they reflect on scripture or the life and teaching of the church, then a plan of action or next step is planned and a celebration helps to integrate the stages into their lives and give it a wider focus.<sup>10</sup> There are many similar methodologies available. Yvonne Craig suggests that 'Our theological assumptions, or the way we see ourselves as church, strongly influences not only the *content* but also the *way* we lead, teach, support, guide, advise and facilitate...' <sup>11</sup> she says there are some theological questions we must ask ourselves before we can plan a programme for example: 'Is the church an ark of salvation or a mission station in and to the world? Is it where the saved are nurtured or should it form servants who will stand alongside the poor and the oppressed?' <sup>12</sup> So, church leaders need to allow truly open-ended study and discussion so that the whole community can arrive at a vision and mission statement that truly reflects their insights and inspiration together with the pastors and pastoral workers.

## 2 THE LINK BETWEEN VISION AND STRUCTURES

Unless the whole parish community is aware of what the church of the 1990s is meant to be and could be with their collaboration, they will elect members onto a Parish Pastoral Council (PPC) who will maintain the old type of parish. They themselves, if chosen to be councilors will only be able to think within the framework of the way things have always been done. In a parish which values highly its work with migrants, they will want to have someone on the council who is interested in justice and peace issues and wishes to continue such projects. If the parish is interested mainly in expanding its physical plant, then the building contractors and architects might be seen as the best councillors. In both cases the role of the pastoral council is seen as coordinating existing projects and organisations and we shall see that this is not the role of the council as outlined by the Second Vatican Council and the Revised Code of Canon Law. Unless the Christian community embrace the vision and mission of the church for themselves, and want to be facilitated in its implementation, the work of the PPC will be for a small elite and will meet with continuous resistance or apathy from the whole congregation.

### *The parish community*

For most Catholics and Christians, the place where they express their faith is the parish. 'The place where the very "mystery" of the Church is present and at work,... not principally a structure, a territory, or a building, but rather, "the family of God, a fellowship afire with a unifying spirit", ...a Eucharistic community',<sup>13</sup>

'The origin of the word parish is "one who lives beside", the neighbour, often meaning the alien or the stranger. So the "parish church" sees everyone as neighbour, not just as potential converts, and is therefore able to represent them before God and to represent God before them.'<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid, p 17.

<sup>11</sup> Craig, Y., *Learning for Life - A Handbook of Adult Religious Education*. Mowbray, London, 1994 p. 11.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, p 12.

<sup>13</sup> *Christifideles Laici*, paragraph 26.2

<sup>14</sup> Newbigin, L., 'On Being the Church for the World', in (ed.) Ecclestone, G., *The Parish Church?* Mowbray, London 1988, p 143.

In order to implement the vision and to enable the whole community to participate, some structures are needed to facilitate the process. Structures do not give life and direction, they are an enabling framework within which people are freed to take part in a process of consultation, reflection, planning, and prayer. Structures can also provide a framework for people to experience the communion which is the source and fruit of mission.<sup>15</sup>

The Fourth Plenary Assembly of Asian Bishops emphasised that:

The principles of communion, collegiality and co-responsibility stressed by Vatican II demand that we re-examine our ecclesial structures... The renewal of inner ecclesial structures does not consist only in strengthening and multiplying the existing parochial and diocesan organisations, nor in creating new ones. It consists in creating the right atmosphere of communion, collegiality and co-responsibility for an active and fully lay initiation, participation and action.<sup>16</sup>

Coleman quoting Castillo Lara, reminds us that ‘at the very heart of the concept of communion is found the concept of participation. Communion is not only a relational bond but also participation in common goods, in the mystery of the Trinitarian communion, in the gifts of the Holy Spirit, ... in the mission of the Church.’<sup>17</sup>

### *Small Christian Communities*

To enable the whole community to participate, some form of ‘decentralization’<sup>18</sup> of parish ministries and mission is needed. One way of doing this is the formation of Small Christian Communities (SCCs) or Basic Ecclesial Communities (BECs). The East African Bishops (Association of Member Episcopal Conferences in Eastern Africa - AMECEA) call them the ‘most local incarnation of the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church’<sup>19</sup> They are a pastoral priority for many churches in Asia and have already become a ‘way of being church’ for many Christians.

## **3 THE PARISH PASTORAL COUNCIL**

### *Membership in Parish Pastoral Councils*

There are many differing opinions on who should be on a Council and how they should be chosen. Fischer thinks that representation is not necessary and can be a hindrance to people using their gifts. He prefers to choose people who have the appropriate gifts for PPC membership.<sup>20</sup> He makes the fatal assumption that as priest or pastoral leader he knows the people and their gifts better than their neighbours. He also fails to acknowledge that if a priest chose his council he may choose people who are like-minded and are not going to challenge his views. Pineda, feels that:

‘if a pastoral council is to authentically serve its parish community, its membership must reflect the diversity of the parish community. If the pastoral council does not reflect the ethnic diversity of its parish, it will, at best, lose credibility with many of its parishioners and, at worse, become a symbol of exclusion, a source of anger.’<sup>21</sup>

The revised Code of Canon Law speaks of representation only with regard to the Diocesan Pastoral Council (DPC) but we can apply it to the PPC. It says:

#### **Can. 512**

**§1** A pastoral council is composed of members of Christ’s faithful who are in full communion with the catholic Church: clerics, members of institutes of consecrated life, and especially lay people. They are designated in the manner determined by the diocesan Bishop.

**§2** The members of Christ’s faithful assigned to the pastoral council are to be selected in such a way that the council truly reflects the entire portion of the people of God which

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<sup>15</sup>*Christifideles Laici*, paragraph 32.4.

<sup>16</sup>*FABC papers* (1986), paragraph 4.5.2.

<sup>17</sup>Coleman, p. 7.

<sup>18</sup>*Redemptoris Missio*, paragraph 51.

<sup>19</sup>Pastoral Letter of AMECEA, *AFER*, Vol 21, pp 265-266.

<sup>20</sup>Fischer, M. F., ‘Competing Visions of Pastoral Councils’ in Deegan, p 38.

<sup>21</sup>Pineda N.A., ‘Parish Pastoral Councils: Responding to Cultural Diversity’ in Deegan, p 113.

constitutes the diocese, taking account of the different regions of the diocese, of social conditions and professions, and of the part played in the apostolate by the members, whether individually or in association with others.

There is great care in stating the need to have as wide a representation as possible of councillors and this should apply to a parish situation too.

The PPC constitution which has been distributed for use in the archdiocese of Singapore since the end of 2004 for a two year period, after which there will be a call for review, should be carefully studied by all concerned in the running of the PPCs.

***‘Only a consultative vote’***

With regard to PPCs the revised code of canon law says:

**Canon 536**

§1 If, after consulting the council of priests, the diocesan Bishop considers it opportune, a pastoral council is to be established in each parish. In this council, which is presided over by the parish priest, Christ’s faithful, together with those who by virtue of their office are engaged in pastoral care in the parish, give their help in fostering pastoral action.

§2 The pastoral council has only a consultative vote, and it is regulated by the norms laid down by the diocesan Bishop.

One of the thorniest issues raised in the preparation for PPCs is the ‘consultative’ status given to the DPCs and PPCs. This needs careful reflection by the councilors and priests so that it can be a fruitful directive rather than a source of confrontation and power play. Canon 536.2 seems to contradict the vision of a participatory church where all exercise co-responsibility. This canon needs to be seen in the light of *Christifideles Laici* which speaks strongly of coresponsibility for mission. Rather than seeking to block the involvement of laity, pastoral leaders need to foster collaboration.

The limit to the power of the PPC can also be seen as a blessing since it provides an ‘emergency brake’ for very rare, extreme situations. However, let us consider the question of voting and see if it is the way for a council to proceed. Bearing in mind the call to communion in mission, we are challenged to work towards consensus rather than have a majority who wins as in voting. Voting is divisive. Can one vote on the will of God for the parish? It would seem to be much more a case of prayerful discernment and building consensus. Decision making by consensus means to:

- integrate prayer and spirituality into the process of making decisions;
- assume that the Spirit is at work at the heart of the community...
- allows all group members to grow into the experience of community... (this is a selection from a long list in *Parish Project* page 87).

The kinds of questions that PPC members would reflect on would be ‘How is the Gospel lived in this parish? how can we help people know Christ better? how can we enable more people to participate in our common mission? Of course there are many other types of questions too but the ‘mind of Christ’ cannot be voted on. The PPC is an exercise in collegiality and communion at the service of the community. ‘This is not a delegation of power but rather a mode of acting with a spirit and set of principles related to the pursuit of the mission of the Church.’<sup>22</sup> There is a distinction between consultative authority and jurisdictional authority. ‘Jurisdictional authority rests on the mandate from Christ to teach, to guide and to govern. It is related to the sacrament of orders. Consultative authority is rooted in the responsibility of all the baptized to pursue the common good of the church.’<sup>23</sup>

The presiding role of the pastor has to be seen in the context of the whole process of decision making. A process which involves many stages... producing creative ideas, gathering factual data, making a choice among alternative options, implementing and evaluating the choice made. Integral to the whole process is

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<sup>22</sup>Office of Pastoral Planning, ‘*Guidelines for Parish Pastoral Councils*’, Archdiocese of Saint Paul and Minneapolis, Revised Edition, USA 1985, p 3.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, p 3.

the collaboration of the pastor and the PPC.<sup>24</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The parish council was transformed by the Second Vatican Council and reaffirmed in the Code of Canon Law as a *pastoral* council. It is co-responsible with the pastor for the pastoral concerns and questions of the parish. The fulfilling of the mission of the church depends on the participation of the laity in Christ's mission. Perhaps we could say that it is the 'mission' of parish clergy and pastoral leaders to enable the laity to fulfil their mission in the church and in the world so that we can say with St Paul that we are, 'co-workers in Christ' (Rom 16:9).

Written by Wendy Louis  
1996

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid, p 5.

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**Some abbreviations used:**

AMECEA - Associate Member Episcopal Conferences of Eastern Africa

CL - Christifideles Laici - The Lay Faithful of Christ

DPC - Diocesan Pastoral Council

FABC - Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences

GS - Gaudium et Spes - Dogmatic Constitution of the Church in the Modern World.

LG - Lumen Gentium - Dogmatic Constitution of the Church

PPC - Parish Pastoral Council

SCC - Small Christian Communities