

Church Governance – Best Practices

The *Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity* from the Second Vatican Council speaks of the laity as sharers in the role of Christ as Priest, Prophet and King (#26). It is a call for understanding of Renewal and Rebirth – a process of personal and community revitalization. The Constitution on the Church emphasizes community, shared responsibility and mission. The existence and effective functioning of Pastoral Councils are central to these ends – with each person possessing unique roles and responsibilities, each sharing in the communal responsibility, as members of the People of God, to achieve the mission of the Church.

VOTF Principles of Church Governance

VOTF is motivated by the conviction that the whole Church should respect the dignity and intelligence of all its members (clerical and lay), and acknowledge the right and responsibility of the laity, flowing from their baptism, to use their God-given gifts for the good of the Church.

We respect the teaching authority of the Church and recognize the role that the hierarchy should exercise in discernment. It is essential, however, that all the people of God be involved in this process of discernment. We, therefore, devote ourselves to advancing meaningful and active engagement of the laity in the life of the Church. We seek to achieve this goal through prayer, dialogue, and education involving clergy and laity, both on the parish and diocesan level. If we can make our local faith communities models of consultation and openness, we look for analogous involvement of laity in the decision making process at all levels.

In order to move toward the vision of the Second Vatican Council, we believe that it is vitally important that the faithful engage in, and enthusiastically support, the formation and actions of Pastoral and Finance Councils and Safety Committees. We must empower the laity to protect our children and all the people of God.

Best Practices

Since Pastoral Councils (diocesan and parish; financial, liturgical, educational, child protection, service, etc.) are the primary vehicles for lay participation in decision making, we support the following best practices on the diocesan as well as parish level:

1. Credible representative pastoral councils working within the spirit of Vatican II
 - A. Majority of members should be elected and represent parish constituents
 - B. Majority of members should be lay
 - C. There should be term limits
 - D. Meetings should be open with agendas and minutes published
 - E. Councils should have authentic influence and power and not just be a rubber stamp for the bishop or pastor.

2. Decisions impacting a parish require authentic consultation with parish members. This applies to all aspects of parish life but especially applies to decisions of appointing (or removing) a pastor or closing a parish.
3. In addition to meaningful involvement of laity through pastoral councils, a bishop honors the spirit of Vatican II by:
 - A. Consulting with laity competent in their fields,
 - B. Creating an open and transparent diocesan environment through the diocesan newspaper, website, staff, and policies. Respectful dissenting voices should be allowed presuming they do not conflict with the mission of the church.
 - C. Supporting efforts for the common good of society through charity, justice, education, and spiritual growth.

For further reading see: www.votf.org and click on “Structural Change.”