

Build a
LIFE-gIVING
PARISH

**The Gift of Counsel
in the Modern World**

Sister Brenda Hermann, MSBT, ACSW
and Monsignor James T. Gaston, MA, STL



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First edition

To the Missionary Cenacle Family,
especially the Missionary Servants
of the Most Blessed Trinity;
and to the clergy and people
of the Diocese of Greensburg, Pennsylvania.

*And he said to them, "Therefore every scribe who has been trained
for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who
brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old."*

MATTHEW 13:52

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Preface

Sister Brenda Hermann and Monsignor James Gaston draw on their rich pastoral experiences to offer the reader exciting insights into the challenges facing pastoral councils. By drawing a line between the work of the very first church council in the Christian Scriptures to present pastoral councils, the authors raise up the value of local councils in a bold and refreshing way. Their perspective in *Build a Life-Giving Parish: The Gift of Counsel in the Modern World* is that the very mission of the pastoral council is often without consensus. Their solution is that the primary focus of a pastoral council ought to be the daily life concerns of the laity.

Build a Life-Giving Parish is full of creative notions that can prove beneficial to those who, while taking the work of the pastoral council to be a serious enterprise, also find it at times to be tedious, boring, and even unproductive. A careful analysis of the mission field of the laity, as different from that of the ordained, offers an avenue for stimulating conversation and thoughtful consideration.

This book expands the understanding of the virtue of counsel and explains how it can be used within the structure of pastoral councils in the United States. I recommend *Build a Life-Giving Parish: The Gift of Counsel in the Modern World* to clergy and laity who, together in council, seek to create a life-giving parish.

THE MOST REVEREND LAWRENCE E. BRANDT, JCD, PHD
BISHOP OF GREENSBURG
OCTOBER 2009

Introduction

The Parish: A Community for Mission

*The joys and the hopes,
the grief and the anguish
of the people of our time,
especially of those who are poor or afflicted,
are the joys and hopes,
the grief and anguish
of the followers of Christ as well.
Nothing that is genuinely human
fails to find an echo in their hearts.*

GAUDIUM ET SPES 1
PASTORAL CONSTITUTION ON THE CHURCH
IN THE MODERN WORLD

At the turn of the twenty-first century, Roman Catholics are approximately 25 percent of the population of the United States. They live, work, and take leisure in every part of American culture. They are represented in every field of work, in universities, in politics, in the arts and sciences. They labor in the fields and the factories.

Catholic lay men and women design space shuttles and help their children design school projects. They give public speeches on the environment and speak with their neighbors over barbecue. They live next door to the immigrant and write national legislation.

The laity are to be leaven in society. Through their baptism, they are called to make a difference as they bring God's message of love, peace, and justice to the world.

However, their mission to the greater world is obstacle-ridden. It is a pastoral concern that many adult Catholics have not pursued faith formation beyond their earliest years of sacramental preparation. Most would admit that their ongoing faith formation comes primarily (and accidentally) through participation in the Sunday Eucharist, listening to homilies, reading the church bulletin, or searching the Internet.

Some are ambivalent about their relationship with the Church. Some may not bother going to church at all, while maintaining strong opinions about beliefs and practices. Many publicly disagree with the Church, often without having the faith formation needed to make this critique. Most adult Catholics have never read a papal encyclical or any official document on the Church's social mission in society. Where do they go to be formed in the responsibility to be the transformers of society?

The answer most often is "the parish." People shop around for a parish because they are looking for something. This "something" is often identified with good homilies, uplifting music and singing, a welcoming community, intergenerational membership with a focus on youth, and acceptance of diversity. While these needs are real, greater emphasis should be given to the wider mission of the laity when they leave the parish compound.

Today, there are more than nineteen thousand Catholic parishes in the United States. To write about the role of a pastoral council is to take into account the multiple understandings of the purpose of the parish. Parish life is influenced by many different realities. Vatican II decreed that the "whole purpose of the parish is the good of souls."¹ What is the concrete meaning of "the good of souls" today?

Vatican II's *Gaudium et Spes* beautifully articulates what the mission of the Church means to the world. This mission calls for

engagement with the rapidly changing contemporary world by facilitating human interdependence, fostering marriage and family life, bringing faith to bear on culture, serving as leaven in the economic and political orders, and fostering peace and the development of the international community.

To accept *Gaudium et Spes* is to acknowledge that the mission of every parish is also to its world. The parish is to provide its members with the ideas, the practices, the experience, and the structures for participation in public and private life.

It is only a wise leader who can understand the complexity of providing pastoral care in today's reality. Wisdom and prudence are needed to equip the laity spiritually for their engagement in family and work, for taking on the political questions of the times, and for being partners in global change.

Premises

The purpose of this book is to advance theological and pastoral thinking and practice. How are we to prepare the people of God for their mission in the community and world? We begin with these premises:

- ~ The parish must consciously and intentionally come to see itself as THE primary formator of the laity for their role in society.
- ~ This way of thinking enables the parish to evaluate everything it does out of the lens of its potential to prepare the laity more effectively for their place in the world, not primarily for the parish.
- ~ Great (versus good) parish programs enable participants to make the necessary connections between their faith and their daily living.

Chapter 1

Why This BOOK?



Pastoral Councils: A New Beginning

Pastoral councils across the United States are a magnificent testimony to the centuries-old Catholic tradition of “holding council,” which began with the first-century Council of Jerusalem and continues into our own time. The tradition of council is ever ancient and ever new! In the half-century following Vatican II, much energy has been given to the implementation of councils at every level of church life. However, at the grassroots level—where the so-called “rubber hits the road”—it is no secret that we are still struggling to get it right.

The authors have experienced and pondered the struggles of councils from the perspective of both the ordained and the laity for many years. We have come to a fundamental conclusion. There is still a need for a clearer and deeper understanding of the nature and purpose of pastoral councils for both the ordained and the laity. Hence, we ask the fundamental question of when is a pastoral council really a “council”?

Veteran pastoral practitioners will remember the very first parish

council meetings that were governed by Robert's Rules of Order. Discussions focused on what it meant to be a consultative group with the inevitable reminder that all decisions were to be left to the pastor. A friend once described his leadership role on the parish council then as "chairing the bored."

In the 1980s, the word "pastoral" was added to parish councils to reflect a change in canon law. This change in terminology also reflected a deepening awareness of councils as different in nature from other parish-based groups. The laity were now expected to share in the "pastoral work of the ordained," and the pastoral council was to plan for how this was to occur.

The former parish council model clearly was not working. Something else was needed. Parish planning soon became the focus of pastoral councils. This can be seen in one of the documents that was created in the Diocese of Greensburg, Pennsylvania, and which emerged within that period, entitled, "New Wine, New Wineskins." This document supported the paradigm for councils as pastoral planning bodies across the United States.

Is planning the fundamental purpose of a council? Our experiences suggest that it is not.

We believe that over the centuries, inherent in the tradition of council is a deep and abiding belief in the Holy Spirit's guidance of the people of God. This guidance is manifest when laity and the ordained reflect together on the signs of the times and respond to these signs within any given culture.

Christ's mission given to the Church is to bring God's love into the world. Through this evangelizing action, there is an element of transformation both within one's culture and within oneself. Transformation occurs as we go deeper into understanding God's Word as it is to be lived in the circumstances before us.

Where is our world in need of God's love today? Who is respon-

sible to bring this love into society? Of course, we know the answer: We all are responsible! This answer begs another question: How are we to do this? The answer to this question leads to the basic premise of our book. What is the purpose of a pastoral council? We will answer with these words: “taking counsel in council.”

We begin by defining two basic concepts: the mission field of the laity and the mission field of the ordained.

Field of Mission: The Laity

In a meeting with a parish council in the mid 1980s, a discussion took place about “helping Father in the parish.” The laity was very animated about trying to develop a plan for the parish building project. They were very involved in evaluating parish programs, thinking about the new school year, and anticipating the parish school’s expansion.

During council members’ conversations at lunch, there was little discussion of the parish’s concerns. Rather the parents present were focused on the concerns of their children. Some families were confronted with serious financial problems. There were a myriad of other issues as well, including aging and ill parents, marital breakups, and unemployed family members. None of these daily life concerns were considered “pastoral” and brought to the table of council. Council conversations focused on internal parish programs, facilities, and activities.

In the intervening twenty-five years, some things have not changed in the vision and work of councils despite new theories, processes, and structures that have been developed.

We came to an insight that has only grown over these twenty-five years. The daily life concerns of the laity are indeed the primary pastoral concerns of the Church. As such, these concerns must be the subject of the work of pastoral councils.

We use the phrase “taking counsel in council” to describe the deliberate process of listening, dialogue, deciding, and implementing pastoral responses for God’s people.

These everyday issues constitute the “mission field” of the laity. It is within these daily circumstances that the baptized are called to receive and bring God’s love. Indeed, this is where the laity are to be pastored and helped to become missionaries to others.

Field of Mission: The Ordained

In 2002, a pastor related feeling overwhelmed by the complex pastoral needs and issues of the people. Because of numerous parish closings within the diocese, he was now the sole priest in a congregation of more than two thousand families. He was able to hire a sufficient number of staff members to assure that programs and volunteers were supervised. At the same time, many things affected the community in which the parish was located. He stated that expectations of him from the diocese had increased, mostly due to the ever changing nature of diocesan priorities.

He began to question himself and his pastoral effectiveness, especially in preaching. “I just feel so disconnected from peoples’ lives,” he stated. When pressed further on this, it was clear that he really did have a sense of the issues in peoples’ lives through his pastoral visits, through stopping to chat with people in a variety of settings, and through the stories of the staff. “But,” he said, “there is no place