

From Fr. Joe's Desk...

What is Pastoral Council All About?

This weekend we are announcing candidates for Our Lady of the Lake Pastoral Council. Initially, twenty-nine candidates were nominated by the wider parish community. Of these twenty-nine, nine declined the nomination. The remaining eighteen then participated in an evening of prayer and reflection last Tuesday evening to arrive at the number published in today's bulletin. Four of them will be elected by the wider parish to fill vacancies by other members who are rotating off of the Council.

As we approach the election of Council members, it is important that everyone make themselves familiar with them by reading and reflecting upon the material we are providing today. But this is only part of what is required to prepare for this election. It is also important to consider just what a Pastoral Council is all about, so that the candidates best suited to our Council in this place and time can be selected.

A Pastoral Council is one of two consultative groups that the Diocese mandates every parish must have. The other is the Finance Council. In theory these Councils work together to advise the pastor about the overall mission and work of the parish. (In practice it is a more difficult matter to coordinate the work of the two Councils.)

What is important to understand is that as consultative bodies, neither of these Councils has the authority to make decisions. According to Canon Law, that authority rests solely with the pastor. Pastoral Council can make recommendations to the pastor, and normally if appropriate process is followed, the pastor would accept its recommendations, but he is not required to do so.

However, it is just as important to understand that although the Pastoral Council is consultative and not decision making, its place in the life of the parish is critical. I personally could not imagine being able to effectively minister in a parish without the advice and consultation of a Pastoral Council. There are a number of reasons for this.

First of all, although not strictly speaking a representative body of the parish, the Council does help the pastor keep his finger on the pulse of the parish. Second, good and creative ideas for parish ministry are certainly not the sole preserve of the pastor or pastoral staff. There is tremendous wisdom and insight in every

parish that remains untapped without a Pastoral Council. Third, a pastor and pastoral staff cannot carry out the work of the parish alone. Ownership is required of as many people in the parish as possible. Having an effective Pastoral Council helps to make that ownership broader and more solid.

I've referred to the pastoral staff a couple of times already, so you might be wondering about the relationship between the Pastoral Council and the pastoral staff. To understand that, it is important to say a little more about just what the Pastoral Council is supposed to do.

The Pastoral Council is not charged with running the day to day ministry of the parish. Nor is it responsible for the actual development of parish programs. Its charge is broader than that. The Council looks at the "big picture" and then helps to formulate pastoral strategies and policies to help the parish function effectively. For this reason, Pastoral Council members cannot be exclusively concerned only about their own special interests, but must consider the needs of the entire parish.

Elements of the "big picture" include neighborhood and parish demographics, diocesan policies, financial resources, trends in participation of parishioners, unique challenges particular to a given parish and much more. Ideally what a Pastoral Council does is help the Pastor to look several years down the road and envision a mission and strategy that is appropriate given the "big picture" considerations.

The Council does this not only on its own, but by enlisting the participation of other parishioners in a number of standing and ad hoc committees. These committees look at the "big picture" with different lenses. They make recommendations to the larger Council to help shape parish strategy and policy.

If the Pastoral Council is functioning effectively, over time it will help to create strategies and policies that require execution. Of course, all parishioners need to be involved in carrying these out, but a qualified pastoral staff is increasingly necessary in parishes in our time. Of course, because of their training and competencies, a qualified pastoral staff also serves in a consultative role to the Pastoral Council itself. Although individual staff members do not have a vote when such occurs in Council meetings, their knowledge of the day to day operations of the parish and its programs is an invaluable aid to the Council.

Please consider carefully in the next few days just which candidates can best serve on such a Council.