

The Role of the Parish Council in the Governance of the Church

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You have accepted to serve on your parish's council and I am sure you eagerly await the opportunity to impact positively on the life of your community. Good! At the outset, however, dispel any idea that one serves on the Council to govern and affect just one community. The parish is just one integral part of the One Church and one mission to be fulfilled—from the Ecumenical Patriarchate, through the Archdiocese, down to the Diocese and finally to the parish. Council members participate in the governance of the whole Church. Your decisions, manner of work and attitude affect not only your own community but your neighboring parish, the Church in America and subsequently the whole Church. Know this now: parochialism severely lessens your effectiveness and the use of your gifts and talents in the service of Orthodoxy.

Being the Church, the parish has the responsibility to fulfill the total mission Christ gave it. Simply said, the parish is to: worship God; guide the spiritual life of its flock; marry, baptize, bury, bless, sanctify; teach spiritual values, priorities, the way of life, morality and ethics; and be Christ in the world.

To achieve this, the effort demands a solid and strong foundation of: evangelism, outreach, education through our schools and adult study groups, stewardship and fund-raising efforts, youth work, philanthropy, music, communications and community relations. It also requires administration. That means the preparation and adherence to a budget, the protection and maintenance of financial and physical assets, the concern for personnel (paid and volunteer), the keeping of records, right on down to intra-parish communications and appropriate scheduling.

At this point you are probably wondering if when you accepted the call to serve you assumed all this responsibility. Yes, you did.

Don't be too relieved when I tell you it is a shared responsibility. "Shared" still means all are responsible—all the people of God, clergy and laity alike. "Shared" does not mean there is a division of duties into "religious" and "secular" spheres, for example. Such concepts are foreign to Orthodoxy. Christ did not call us to religiosity and/or secularism. He called us to Himself, so all that the Church is and does is holy indeed. Shared responsibility means we are all responsible for the whole Church and all she says and does in her holy mission.

Can we say there are different emphases in carrying out our work? Of course, we can.

The priest has unique emphases. He is ordained to lead and exercise the worship and sacramental function of the Church. He is given the duty to provide leadership to the Christian community and is ultimately responsible for the souls of the flock. In preparation he has been trained and educated in theology, administration and other disciplines. We must respond to him not only on the basis of his education but on that of his cumulative experience, knowledge of and sensitivity to the conscience of the community.

The laity has unique emphases. Again, we all have to respond to its initiative and efforts precisely because of its training, education, and experience. We expect you all to bring your corporate, business, and professional experience into the council. We expect the techniques and

management and dialogical processes that were fine-tuned in the project staff meetings to be utilized for the good of the Church. The parish today justifiably expects professionalism in its budgetary process, accounting, computerization, legal work, maintenance of resources, group and committee work, human relations, etc. That's what is expected of council members.

Shared Responsibility

Shared responsibility means that priest and council share each other's concerns. I don't hesitate to review with the council members my plans for adult education or special worship arrangements, for example. The decision is ultimately theirs, but I know they appreciate my comments, too. On many occasions we've all changed our minds after hearing from each other. Shared responsibility does not position priest and council at opposite poles but places them on the same track heading in the same direction to the same goal.

Can I offer some specific suggestions that makes for a better council member, and thus a more successful council, and thus a more fruitful church? First and foremost, worship God in Liturgy and participate regularly in the Sacraments of the Church. This should never have to be mentioned but unfortunately some need reminding and we all need encouragement. He calls us to worship and certainly we who do His work should be the first to respond. A praying council member is certainly a caring council member.

Second, involve people in church life. Isn't this one of your most important jobs, to bring and welcome people into the Body of Christ? This is not only the priest's work. This is your work as a church leader. And through your leadership role (that's right, you're a leader now), assure their continued participation in the life of the Church. Similarly, you should consciously be preparing your successor on the council. That was the thoughtful proposal of one of my parish's past presidents. Doing so would certainly help assure a good council.

Since you share in the leadership of the whole church it is important that you keep yourself informed as to the work and life of the whole church. Read *The Observer, Loghia*, the many publications produced by our national ministries. And read good books of and about the faith and make sure to attend study groups for your own benefit and to set an example for those who elected you. Speak up to assure the parish's participation at the national and regional clergy-laity congresses by insisting on representation and being willing to go yourself. Unfortunately some parishes attempt to avoid the expense of sending delegates to these important congresses. Consequently, the parish and the Church all suffer. Delegates return home and share their experience and knowledge. Over the years a parish is enriched and parochialism is weakened.

Attend council member seminars, educational opportunities, regional meetings, etc. Aim to grow in faith, evangelism, educational concern, and philanthropy.

Courtesy and Respect

Within the council, treat each other with the same courtesy and respect you show others in the business world. I am amazed when hearing of the immature, egotistical attitudes, and verbiage occasionally expressed in some council meetings. I know the same people would never behave similarly in the "outside world". Report to each other regularly, and very important, accept your assignments and tasks willingly. Don't sit back! The Lord does not need servants in an advisory capacity. He needs servants that labor and toil in the vineyard. Be prepared to lead others, do your work diligently and then use the council meeting only to report on what was done and what happened, not to ask how and what to do.

Guidelines exist to help us in our mission and to define responsibility and relationships. Human society needs guidelines and parameters to avoid chaos and the Church too must utilize with them for good order. From the first decades the church was defining the manner of governance and relationships. The canons are the best and central example of giving direction to the whole Church throughout the whole time. More focused both in time and place are the guidelines of our own Archdiocese. Our Archdiocese has a charter from the Ecumenical Patriarchate and commissions us to do the Church's work in America. We have our Uniform Parish Regulations. The UPR conveys how the Church is to be governed from the Archbishop on down, defines the relationship between the Archdiocese, Diocese, parishes, priest, general assembly, council, plus how all of us are elected, selected, imposed and deposed, and we share our awesome responsibilities. Parishes must also have their own by-laws to fill in for their own unique situations.

It's simple. Rules need to be referred to and followed for the efficient operation of any body, especially its governing group. When there are questions, go to your by-laws and UPR.

Finally, the ultimate, and comprehensive and most concise guide to the role of a parish council member is the oath of office he/she takes upon election. The member affirms adherence to the dogma, teaching, traditions, canons, worship and moral principles of the Church, as well as to the discipline and regulations of the Archdiocese. Most important, one not only adheres to them, but pledges "to fulfill duties and obligations required." In other words, one is to follow through on what he/she adheres to. One is to be a defender of dogma, promoter of education, participant in worship and so on. The oath is not a simple recitation of principles but a call to action—and that's Christ-centered Orthodox Christian action at that.

That's what a parish council member is. Not a silent observer but someone eager to respond, act on and fulfill the mission given by Christ. The success of that individual effort marks the success of the group and the parish.

The oath closes with "So help me God." A colleague suggested that we should think of these words not so much as a confirmation for what was affirmed, but, having made this awesome commitment, more as a prayer for success. More like, "So...help me, God!" Good start for a council member.