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ARTICLE

Synodal structures in the Roman Catholic parish

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Abstract

The newly coined term 'synodality' has for some years been receiving widespread and close attention, and its potential is difficult to delimit. Synodality is a composite concept, with a range of applications, abstracted from the traditions of the Eastern and Western Churches expressed in varied synodal institutions and events. Synodality might be defined as the process by which Christians gather to dialogue, discern and at times decide. This article examines one of synodality's levels – the parish – in the Roman Catholic Church.[1]

Keywords: parish; Roman Catholic Church; synodical government

Introduction

The parish is now considered much more in its own configuration rather than, as the 1917 *Code of Canon Law* did, indirectly in terms of the position of the parish clergy on the one hand or of benefices on the other hand. Although at the normative level the contrast should not be pushed too far, Juan Calvo makes the perceptive assessment of this former canon law in noting how the rights and obligations of the incumbents obscured the true institutional nature of the parish, whilst in practice the benefice absorbed the office to the detriment of a correct understanding of the parish and of its assets.[2] The *communitas christifidelium* is now generally seen as the fundamental element of the parish. As for the parish priest, in canonical terms he is called to share the diocesan bishop's ministry of Christ so that for this community he may carry out the offices of teaching, sanctifying and ruling with the cooperation of other priests or deacons and with the assistance of lay members of Christ's faithful in accordance with the law.

In 2018 the International Theological Commission, attached to the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, explored synodality from different perspectives, including that of its implementation. It also suggested canonical changes.[3] As for synodality in

[1] F Grazian, 'Sinodalità, Diritto Canonico e Strutture Parrocchiali' (2022) 35 *Quaderni di Diritto Ecclesiale* 421–445; R Billing, 'Cultivating Synodality in the Particular Church' (2023) 57 *Studia Canonica* 263–294.

[2] Juan Calvo, in J Arrieta (ed), *Code of Canon Law Annotated*, 4th edn (Chambly, 2022) 430.

[3] International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church* (2018) numbers 83–84.

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the life of the parish, the Commission took a firmly ecclesiological line and described the parish as the community of the faithful that incarnates the mystery of the Church in a visible, immediate and everyday form.[4] The parish is where we learn to live as disciples of the Lord in a network of fraternal relationships and experience communion in the variety of vocations and generations, charisms, ministries and competencies, forming a genuine community where everyone jointly lives out his or her mission and service, harmonising the specific contributions of them all.

The Commission then goes on to say that in the parish there are two structures which have a synodal character: the parish pastoral council (PPC) and the economic council (PEC), with lay participation in consultation and pastoral planning. In this sense it seems necessary to review the canonical norm which at present only suggests that there should be a parish pastoral council and to make it obligatory, as the last Synod of the diocese of Rome did. Bringing about an effective synodal dynamic in a local Church also requires that the Diocesan Pastoral Council and the PPCs should work in a co-ordinated way and be appropriately upgraded.

Parish pastoral council

The essential canon is canon 536, which provides by §1:

> If, after consulting the presbyteral council, the diocesan Bishop considers it opportune, a pastoral council (*consilium pastorale*) 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.

Canon 536§2 adds that the pastoral council has only a consultative vote, and it is regulated by the norms laid down by the diocesan Bishop.

As we can see, the canon restricts itself to the minimum, it is not explicit about coordination with other relevant structures, and it leaves a good deal to norms made by the diocesan bishop. Vatican II directed that as far as possible there should be councils supporting the apostolic work of the Church, involving the cooperation of clergy and religious with lay people. Such councils should also exist, where possible, in parochial and inter-parochial situations.[5] As with all institutional changes, time and experience are required before all the ecclesiological and canonical repercussions can be assessed. In terms of canon law, one constant consideration is the nature and extent of lay participation in ecclesial structures.

[4] See canon 515§1, '*Paroecia est certa communitas christifidelium…*'. All references to canons are to the *Code of Canon Law* (1983) for the Latin Church, unless stated otherwise.

[5] Vatican II, *Apostolicam Actuositatem* n 26, and also n 10: the laity 'by offering of their own particular skills they make the care of souls and also the administration of the church's goods more effective'; N Tanner (ed), *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils II* (London, 1990) 997 and 988.

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The use of the term 'pastoral' for this parochial Council is significant, a term used five times in the 1917 Code, but 96 times in the 1983 Code.[6] A number of important documents from the Holy See have amplified the 1983 Code's succinct canon. This has tended to be done by 'Instructions', that is the setting out of a law and developing the manner in which it is to be put into effect.

John Paul II's Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Christifideles laici* (1988) gave detailed attention to the parish. The Pope stated that Vatican II's mention of examining and solving pastoral problems by general discussion ought to find its adequate and structured development through a more convinced, extensive and decided appreciation for 'parish pastoral councils' on which the Synod Fathers have rightly insisted (n. 27). An important document in this respect, and unusually it is an interdicasterial Instruction, is *Ecclesiae de mysterio* (1997) on the collaboration of the non-ordained faithful in the sacred ministry of priests. It includes practical provisions, Article 5§2 stressing that diocesan and parochial parish councils, of which non-ordained faithful are members, enjoy a consultative vote only and cannot in any way become deliberative structures. Only those faithful who possess the qualities prescribed by the canonical norms may be elected to such responsibilities. Article 5§3 states that it is for the parish priest to preside at parochial councils, and they are to be considered invalid, and hence null and void, any deliberations entered into, or decisions taken, by a parochial council which has not been presided over by the parish priest or which has assembled contrary to his wishes. Moreover, although Ordinaries may avail themselves of special study groups or of groups of experts to examine particular questions, such groups cannot be constituted as structures parallel to structures regulated in canons 536 and 537. Neither may such a group deprive these structures of their lawful authority. Where structures of this kind have arisen in the past because of local custom or through special circumstances, Article 5§5 requires that those measures deemed necessary to conform such structures to the current universal law of the Church must be taken.

The PPC was furthered considered in *The Priest, Pastor and Leader of the Parish Community* (2002), an Instruction from the Congregation for the Clergy (note 26).[7] The Congregation considered that the basic task of the PPC is to serve, at institutional level, the orderly collaboration of the faithful in the development of pastoral activity which is proper to priests. It is thus a consultative organ, in which the faithful, expressing their baptismal responsibility, can assist the parish priest, who presides at the council, by offering their advice on pastoral matters. John Paul II (*Christifideles laici*, 1988) is then quoted as saying that the lay faithful ought to be even more convinced of the special meaning that their commitment to the apostolate takes on in their parish. The Pope continued by giving reasons for this. In the present

[6] J Campbell, 'The Use of the term 'Pastoral' in the 1983 Code of Canon Law with Reference to the 1917 Code' (2018) 20 Ecc LJ 173–184.

[7] This 2002 Instruction was cited by the Signatura in its 2003 sentence *coram* Cacciavillan concerning the removal of a parish priest. As the bishop cited the failure to establish a PPC as an illustration of the parish priest's persistent negligence, the Signatura made observations regarding the importance of canon 536§1. Where there is the obligation to set up a PPC, the obligation is first of all that of the parish priest himself: W Daniel, *Ministerium Iustitiae: Jurisprudence of the Supreme Tribunal of the Apostolic Signatura* (Montréal, 2011) 389–413.

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circumstances the laity have the ability to do very much and therefore ought to do very much towards the growth of an authentic ecclesial communion in their parishes in order to reawaken missionary zeal towards non-believers and believers themselves who have abandoned the faith or grown lax in the Christian life.[8]

The Congregation then quotes from its 1973 Circular Letter, *Omnes christifideles*, that all the faithful have the right, sometimes even the duty, to make their opinions known on matters concerning the good of the Church.[9] This can happen through institutions which have been established to facilitate that purpose. The PPC can be a most useful aid, providing proposals and suggestions on missionary, catechetical and apostolic initiatives, as well as on the promotion of doctrinal formation and the sacramental life of the faithful; on the assistance to be given to the pastoral work of priests in various social and territorial situations; on how better to influence public opinion, etc. The Instruction continues by saying that the pastoral council is to be seen in the context of the relationship of mutual service that exists between a parish priest and his faithful. It would therefore be senseless to consider the pastoral council as an organ replacing the parish priest in his government of the parish, or as one which, on the basis of a majority vote, materially constrains the parish priest in his direction of the parish.

More has been forthcoming. The Congregation for the Clergy issued in 2020 the Instruction entitled *The Pastoral Conversion of the Parish Community in the Service of the Evangelising Mission of the Church* (especially numbers 108–114). Whilst not denying canon 536, the Congregation states that PPCs may ordinarily be considered as highly recommended and quotes Pope Francis saying, 'How necessary pastoral councils are! … A Parish Priest cannot guide without pastoral councils'. The flexibility of the norm permits adaptations: for example, in the case of multiple parishes entrusted to a single parish priest or those within pastoral units, it is possible to establish a single pastoral council for several parishes. There follow some theological considerations on PPCs so that far from being simply a bureaucratic organ, the PPC highlights and realises the centrality of the People of God as the subject and active protagonist of the evangelising mission. With explicit reference to canon 536§2, although going well beyond its literal wording, it is said that the PPC is governed by the norms established by the diocesan bishop to define the criteria of its composition, the method of election of its members, its objectives and manner of functioning. In any case, in order not to distort the nature of this council, it is best to avoid defining it as a 'team' or 'équipe', that is to say in terms that are not suitable to express concretely the ecclesial and canonical relationship between the parish priest and the rest of the faithful. With respect to the relative diocesan norms, it is necessary that the PPC effectively represent the community of which it is an expression in its membership (priests, deacons, religious and laity).

The parish priest is bound to consider the indications of the PPC attentively, especially if they express themselves unanimously, in a process of common discernment.[10] Two extremes are to be avoided. On one hand, that of the parish

[8] See canon 211.

[9] See canon 212.

[10] A Giraudo, 'I Processi Consultivi e Deliberativi nella Chiesa' (2021) 34 *Quaderni di Diritto Ecclesiale* 161–180; cf. canon 127.

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priest presenting to the PPC decisions already made or without the required information beforehand or convoking it seldom only *pro forma*; on the other hand, that of the PPC in which the parish priest is only one of the members, deprived *de facto* of his role as pastor and leader of the community. Finally, it is considered fitting that as far as possible the PPC should consist for the most part of those who have effective responsibility in the pastoral life of the parish or who are concretely engaged in it in order to avoid meetings becoming an exchange of abstract ideas that do not take into account the real life of the community, with its resources and problems.

Parish economic council

The title of this council is sometimes translated into English as 'finance committee', which obliterates the complementarity with the PPC, and narrows its scope; 'council for economic matters' or even 'economic council' would be more accurate. The Council has roots in the *Consilium fabricae ecclesiae*, the 1917 Code's council for the correct administration of the goods of the church.[11] Canon 537 provides: in each parish there is to be an economic council (*consilium a rebus oeconomicis*) to help the parish priest in the administration of the goods of the parish, without prejudice to canon 532. It is ruled by the universal law and by the norms laid down by the diocesan bishop, and it consists of members of Christ's faithful selected according to these norms.

The PEC is obligatory in every parish. Canon 532 states that in all juridical matters, the parish priest acts in the person of the parish,[12] in accordance with the law. He is to ensure that the parish goods are administered in accordance with canons 1281–8.

As with PPCs, a number of authoritative Instructions complement the canon law. We can begin with the interdicasterial Instruction *Ecclesiae de mysterio* (1997). Article 5§2 states that the parochial EC enjoys a consultative vote only and cannot in any way become deliberative structures. Also, as with PPCs and with the same references, only those faithful who possess the qualities prescribed by the canonical norms may be selected to such responsibilities. Other provisions are as for PPCs.

The Congregation for the Clergy's Instruction, *The Priest, Pastor and Leader of the Parish Community* (2002) has a brief but telling paragraph (n. 26). It says that in accordance with the norms of law on just and honest administration, organs that have been established to consider economic questions in a parish, may not constrain the pastoral role of the parish priest, who is the legal representative and administrator of the goods of the parish. Reference is made to canons 532 and 1279§1.

The matter was considered more fully by the Congregation for the Clergy in its Instruction *The Pastoral Conversion of the Parish Community in the Service of the*

[11] *Code of Canon Law* (1917) canons 1183–4. The Council of Trent spoke in its canon 9 of Session 22 (1562) of administrators both ecclesiastical and lay *fabricae cuiusvis ecclesiae* being bound to give an account of their administration annually to the diocesan bishop: N Tanner (ed), *op cit* 740.

[12] According to canon 515§3 a lawfully established parish has juridical personality by virtue of the law itself.

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Evangelising Mission of the Church (2020) at nn. 101–7. It opens with the statement that the administration of goods which every parish has to some extent is an important area of evangelisation and evangelical witness, both in the Church and in civil society, as all the goods that we have, the Lord gives them to go to the world, to go to humanity, to help others. Referring to canons 537 and 1280 (every juridical person is to have its own economic council), the Instruction says that therefore the parish priest cannot and must not remain alone at this task, and it is necessary that he be assisted by collaborators to administer the goods of the Church above all with evangelising zeal and a missionary spirit.[13]

Based on this premise, the Instruction goes on to say that in every parish an EC must be constituted as a consultative body, presided over by the parish priest and formed of at least three other faithful; the footnote mentions canon 115§2 and by analogy canon 492§1. The minimum number of three is necessary so that this council may be considered 'collegial'. It bears recalling that the parish priest is not counted among the members of the PEC but he presides over it. Absent specific norms issued by the diocesan bishop, it will be for the parish priest to determine the number of members of this council, relative to the size of the parish, and whether these should be appointed by him or elected somehow by the parish community. The members, not necessarily belonging to the parish itself, must be of proven good reputation and expert in financial and legal questions, so as to render an effective and competent service in such a way that the council is not established as a mere formality.[14] Unless the diocesan bishop has decided otherwise, observing the necessary prudence and any pertinent norms of civil law, nothing prevents the same person from being a member of the PEC of multiple parishes, whenever circumstances require. Any eventual norms issued by the diocesan bishop in these matters must take account of the specific situations of parishes, such as, for example, those of particularly modest means or those forming part of a pastoral unit (cf. canons 517 and 529).

The Instruction concludes with some general reflections on the underlying purpose of the norms. The PEC fulfils a role of particular importance in the growth, at the level of community, of a culture of co-responsibility, of administrative transparency, and of service to the needs of the Church. In a particular way, transparency should not be understood as a mere formal presentation of statistics but more as information that is the community's due and an advantageous opportunity for its formative involvement. Transparency refers to a *modus agendi*,

[13] Catholic Social Teaching has much of relevance to this dimension of Church life and mission; D O'Brien and T Shannon (eds), *Catholic Social Thought: Encyclicals and Documents from Pope Leo XIII to Pope Francis*, 3rd edn (New York, 2016). The 1971 Synod of Bishops' *Justice in the World* reiterated the recommendations that lay people should exercise more important functions with regard to church property and should share in its administration (III).

[14] It would take a separate study to present the relevant canonical penal law and of course there are applicable State laws, both civil and criminal; J Renken, 'Organs of Synodality and the Revised Penal Law: Effective Means to Safeguard Church Property' (2023) 57 *Studia Canonica* 551–594.

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indispensable for the credibility of the Church, especially where there are significant goods to administer. Ordinarily, the goal of transparency may be attained by publishing the annual financial report that must first be presented to the local Ordinary (canon 1287§1), with detailed indications of income and expenditure. From the annual report, the community as a whole may be aware that these goods belong to the parish, not the parish priest; that he is the steward of them; how they are administered; what the financial situation of the parish is and what resources are effectively at its disposal.

Conclusion

Both of the parish structures examined fit well into a synodal perspective, and they have received authoritative attention from the Holy See since the promulgation of the 1983 *Code of Canon Law*. This is likely to continue. As well as theological and canonical reflection, there need to be empirical surveys in different settings round the world to see in detail how the canons and other norms are being understood and implemented.[16] The *Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches* (1990) canon 295 is the equivalent of canons 536 and 537 of the Latin Code and states: 'In the parish there are to be (*habeantur*) appropriate councils dealing with pastoral and economic matters according to the norms of the particular law of its own *sui iuris* Church'.

The existing canonical framework should also be studied in terms of the relationship between the two parochial councils. Edison Yohannan has published a full analysis of this relationship, including a valuable list of similarities and differences, too lengthy to reproduce here. I have, however, selected one of the differences he lists because it also draws on the lived ecclesial experience in India where PPCs are mandated in most dioceses:

> The PPC helps the pastor in preparing various programmes and activities to be included in the plan and budgets, and in the implementation of the annual plan, monthly evaluation of the parish activities, making future plans, maintaining peace in the parish and good relations with neighbours and other religions, planning and implementing social development projects with aids from church and the government. The PFC advises the pastor on extraordinary acts of administration, alienations, contracts, constructions innovative plans, long-term deposits and loans, investing in share markets or fixed deposits, etc. besides the daily and monthly financial administration of the parish based on the approved plan and budget.

His conclusion is that both the PPC and the PEC are necessary for the effective functioning of a parish, but is realistic about the difficulties and tensions that may

[16] C Glendinning, 'Structures of Accountability in the Parish and Diocese: Lessons Learned in North America and Possibilities for Reform' (2022) 56 *Studia Canonica* 645–669.

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arise in practice. Two of his suggestions are the proper training of the PPC and PEC members, and that the statutes of the councils be read.[16]

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[16] E Yohannan, 'Parish Pastoral Council and Parish Finance Council: Similarities and Differences from a Canonical Perspective' (2021) 85 *Vidyajyoti* 461–471.

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