



The Diocesan Pastoral Council as an Instrument of Synodality: From Conciliar Vision to Canonical Norm

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Abstract: *This article presents a comprehensive historical-juridical analysis of the institutionalization of the Diocesan Pastoral Council. It traces the complex evolution of this body from the nascent and fragmented ideas that emerged during the preparations for the Second Vatican Council, through its significant conceptual and theological development during the conciliar sessions, to its normative crystallization in post-conciliar documents and its final, definitive codification in the 1983 Code of Canon Law. The analysis demonstrates that the Diocesan Pastoral Council was not a preconceived structure but the fruit of a gradual evolutionary process, representing an embryonic form of pastoral synodality, conceived to structurally foster the key elements of Communion, Participation, and Mission. This journey reflects the Council's move away from a predominantly clerical and hierarchical model of the Church toward a richer vision of the Church as a Communion (Communio), emphasizing the shared dignity and co-responsibility of the entire People of God - clergy, religious, and laity - in the one mission of Christ. By meticulously examining the key documents, debates, and legislative formulations that shaped its identity, this paper argues that the Diocesan Pastoral Council stands as a primary and essential institutional expression of pastoral synodality at the diocesan level. It represents the successful translation of the highest theological principles of Vatican II into a concrete canonical structure designed to foster participation, dialogue, and collaborative discernment in the life of the particular Church.*

Keywords: *Diocesan Pastoral Council, Vatican II, Synodality, Code of Canon Law, Communio.*

Introduction

The Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), announced by Pope John XXIII on January 25, 1959,¹ represents the most significant ecclesial event of the 20th century. It sought to open the windows of the Church to the modern world, initiating a profound *aggiornamento* (updating) of its self-understanding, pastoral mission, and internal structures. This was not merely a cosmetic change but a deep theological re-evaluation driven by the dual movement of *aggiornamento* and *ressourcement*, a return to the foundational sources of Scripture and the Church Fathers.² At the heart of this renewal was a deep theological reflection on the nature of the Church itself. For centuries beforehand, the dominant ecclesiological model was that

¹ Primus Oecumenici Concilii nuntius, vide Acta et Documenta Concilio Oecumenico Vaticano Apparando Series I (Antepreparatoria), Vol. I, *Acta Summi Pontificis Ioannis XXIII* (AD Ant. I) Civitas Vaticana.

² Declan Marmion, "Karl Rahner, Vatican II, and the Shape of the Church," *Theological Studies* 78, no. 1 (2017): 25-48, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0040563916681992>

of a *societas perfecta* (perfect society),³ an image emphasizing the Church's institutional, juridical, and hierarchical structure. While effective in defending the Church's identity and independence, this model often inadvertently portrayed the Church as a pyramid, with the hierarchy at the apex actively teaching, sanctifying, and governing, while the laity occupied the broad base as passive recipients of this ministry.

The Council's dogmatic constitution *Lumen Gentium* fundamentally shifted this perspective. It moved beyond the juridical model to articulate a more biblical and patristic vision of the Church as the People of God and the Body of Christ, animated by the Holy Spirit.⁴ This recovery of the ecclesiology of *Communio* - a deep, organic fellowship rooted in the Trinitarian life and shared through baptism - fundamentally re-contextualized the roles of all members of the Church. It emphasized that all the baptized, by virtue of their shared dignity, participate in the threefold office (*tria munera*) of Christ as priest, prophet, and king.⁵ The laity were no longer to be seen as the "arms" of the hierarchy, but as active subjects, endowed with the Holy Spirit and possessing a *sensus fidelium* (sense of the faithful) that is crucial for the life and mission of the Church.⁶ This renewed theological vision demanded corresponding structural changes to facilitate genuine participation and co-responsibility.⁷ The pre-conciliar Church, while rich in apostolic works, was often characterized by a highly centralized and clerical structure. The Council Fathers recognized that for the Church to be a credible sign and instrument of communion in the world, its own internal life must reflect this reality. This recognition sparked a search for new institutional forms that could embody and foster dialogue, shared discernment, and collaboration between pastors and the faithful.⁸

It is within this dynamic context of theological renewal and the search for structural reform that the idea of the Diocesan Pastoral Council (DPC) was born. The Diocesan Pastoral Council was conceived as a diocesan-level forum to assist the bishop in his pastoral governance, not by usurping his authority, but by providing him with the collective wisdom, experience, and concerns of the entire diocesan community. The Diocesan Pastoral Council is, therefore, a prime example of the synodal practice of "walking together" (*syn-hodos*) as a Church, listening to the Holy Spirit through mutual dialogue between the pastors and the faithful.⁹ It is an organ designed to give institutional voice to the *sensus fidei* of the entire People of God.

This paper aims to trace the complete institutional evolution of the Diocesan Pastoral Council, offering a detailed historical-juridical narrative of its conception and development. It will begin by unearthing the "pre-history" of the Diocesan Pastoral Council in the faint seeds of ideas found in the pre-conciliar preparatory documents. It will then follow its more explicit formulation and theological maturation during the intense debates of the Council itself, culminating in its foundational description in

³ Joseph A. Komonchak, "Vatican II and the New Code," *Archives de Sciences Sociales des Religions* 31, no. 62.1 (1986): 107-117.

⁴ Ormond Rush, "Inverting the Pyramid: The Sensus Fidelium in a Synodal Church," *Theological Studies* 78, no. 2 (2017): 299-325, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0040563917698561>

⁵ Ormond Rush, "The Offices of Christ, Lumen Gentium and the People's Sense of the Faith," *Pacifica* 16, no. 2 (2003): 137-152, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1030570X0301600202>

⁶ Ormond Rush, "Inverting the Pyramid: The Sensus Fidelium in a Synodal Church," 304-310.

⁷ Bradford E. Hinze, *Practices of Dialogue in the Roman Catholic Church: Aims and Obstacles, Lessons and Laments* (New York: Continuum, 2006), 115-132.

⁸ Christophe Pierre, "Synodality and Pope Francis: The Church that Walks Together," *The Jurist* 77, no. 1 (2021): 3-23.

⁹ Varghese Poothavelithara, "Encouraging and Developing the Participative Bodies for a Synodal Church," *Asian Horizons* 14, no. 1 (2020): 181-208.

the decree *Christus Dominus*. Finally, it will analyze its practical implementation in post-conciliar legislation and its ultimate, precise definition in the 1983 Code of Canon Law. This analysis seeks to demonstrate that the Diocesan Pastoral Council is not merely an administrative option or a bureaucratic committee, but a theologically rich institution that juridically embodies the Council's core ecclesiological principles of communion and participation. Its history is a compelling case study in the dynamic interplay between theology, pastoral reality, and canon law, showing how a profound theological vision can be translated into a concrete, normative structure.¹⁰

Method

The methodology employed in this study is a qualitative historical-juridical analysis based on a meticulous review of primary source documents.¹¹ This approach allows for a chronological and thematic reconstruction¹² of the development of the Diocesan Pastoral Council, tracing the evolution of key concepts and legal norms from their initial proposal to their final codification. The analysis focuses not only on the final texts but also on the debates, proposed amendments (*modi*), and official responses (*relationes*) that reveal the underlying theological tensions and resolutions. The primary sources for this research consist of four categories. First, the study examines the ante-preparatory and preparatory documents of the Second Vatican Council, particularly the *Acta et Documenta Concilio Oecumenico Vaticano II Apparando* (AD), which contain the foundational *vota* submitted by bishops, Roman Curia dicasteries, and pontifical universities, providing insight into the pastoral concerns and emerging proposals that preceded the Council. Second, it analyzes the conciliar documents preserved in the *Acta Synodalia Sacrosancti Concilii Oecumenici Vaticani II* (AS), whose official records of the general congregations illuminate the debates, amendments, and theological reasoning that shaped the conciliar texts, especially *Christus Dominus*. Third, the study investigates key post-conciliar magisterial documents that guided the implementation of the Council's decrees, including Pope Paul VI's *Motu Proprio Ecclesiae Sanctae*, documents of the Synod of Bishops such as *Ultimis Temporibus*, and the instructions *Omnes Christifideles* and *Ecclesiae Imago* issued by the relevant Roman congregations. Fourth, it examines both the revision process and the final promulgation of the 1983 Code of Canon Law through the journal *Communicationes*, which records the discussions and decisions of the study groups (*coetus*) responsible for drafting the new canons, together with the final codified text itself. By systematically analyzing these sources in chronological order, this study traces the juridical and conceptual lineage of the Diocesan Pastoral Council while identifying the theological principles that shaped each stage of its institutional development.

Findings and Discussion

The institutional maturation of the Diocesan Pastoral Council unfolded through three distinct yet interconnected phases. Examining these stages reveals how the fundamental dimensions of synodality,

¹⁰ John Beal, "The Reception of Vatican II in Canon Law," in *The Oxford Handbook of Vatican II* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023), 640-655.

¹¹ Thomas J. Green, "The Revision of Canon Law: Theological Implications," *Theological Studies* 40, no. 4 (1979): 593-679

¹² Joseph A. Komonchak, "Vatican II and the New Code," 113.

namely communion, participation, and mission,¹³ progressively shaped the development of the council from its earliest conceptual origins to its definitive canonical formulation. This evolution represents more than a historical process of institutional development. It reflects the Church's effort to translate its renewed ecclesiological vision into concrete structures capable of fostering consultation, discernment, and shared responsibility within the life of the particular Church.

The Genesis and Conception within the Second Vatican Council (1959–1965)

The Diocesan Pastoral Council was not born fully formed from a single proposal. Instead, it emerged gradually from a convergence of pastoral concerns and theological insights that gained momentum throughout the conciliar process.

The Ante-Preparatory Phase (1959-1960): The Emergence of a Felt Need

During the initial phase of worldwide consultation,¹⁴ while no document explicitly proposed a "Diocesan Pastoral Council" by that name,¹⁵ the collected proposals (*vota*) from bishops and Catholic universities reveal a widespread and deeply felt need for new structures of pastoral coordination. The Church was facing the challenges of a rapidly changing modern world, and the existing structures were often seen as inadequate for fostering a unified and effective pastoral response. A recurring theme was the problem of pastoral fragmentation. Dioceses were witnessing a proliferation of apostolic works, lay associations, and specialized ministries, yet these often operated in isolation, sometimes leading to duplication of effort or even competing initiatives.

Several proposals pointed toward a solution. The call from some German-speaking bishops for a "pastoral assembly" (*pastorale Tagung*)¹⁶ aimed to bring together clergy and lay experts to discuss pressing pastoral issues. Other bishops suggested the appointment of expert advisors, or "*consilarii*", to assist the bishop in specific fields.¹⁷ A proposal from a group of French bishops was particularly prescient, calling for a "coordination council" (*consilium ad coordinationem*) in every diocese, composed of priests who were heads of various apostolic works, to ensure "unity in the apostolate."¹⁸ These nascent ideas reflect an intuitive grasp of a key synodal principle: that the mission of the Church is a shared task requiring

¹³ Pierre, "Synodality and Pope Francis," 7-10.

¹⁴ *Acta et Documenta Concilio Oecumenico Vaticano Apparando Series I* (Antepreparatoria), Vol. I, *Acta Summi Pontificis Ioannis XXIII* (AD Ant. I) Civitas Vaticana 1960, 22-23.

¹⁵ There is a helpful study done by MIRAGOLI E., *Il Consiglio Pastorale Diocesano secondo il Concilio e la Sua Attuazione nelle Diocesi Lombardie*, Roma 2000, who also studied the topic of diocesan pastoral councils, specifying how the ante-preparatory documents, especially the *vota* which arrived at the ante-preparation commission, were organized during the ante-preparatory phase.

¹⁶ *Acta et Documenta Concilio Oecumenico Vaticano Apparando Series I* (Antepreparatoria), Vol. II, *Consilia et Vota Episcoporum ac Praelatorum* (AD Ant. II, Pars 5) Civitas Vaticana 1960, 298.

¹⁷ *Acta et Documenta Concilio Oecumenico Vaticano Apparando Series I* (Antepreparatoria), Vol. II, *Consilia et Vota Episcoporum ac Praelatorum* (AD Ant. II, Pars 5) Civitas Vaticana 1960, 469.

¹⁸ "*Consilium ad coordinationem operum apostolicorum sit in unamquamque dioecesi, in quo et praesides, sive assistentes ecclesiastici omnium operum sedeant et alii prudentes et docti sacerdotes. Consilium ex officio Episcopo proponere debet quae necessaria iudicet ad assequendam unitatem apostolatus.*" 361

collaboration and mutual listening among all pastoral agents.¹⁹ They represented a move away from a model where the bishop alone plans and directs, toward a more collaborative approach.

Perhaps the most theologically significant proposal came from Cardinal Achille Liénart of Lille, France. He advocated for a “council of vigilance” (*consilium vigilantiae*) which would not only coordinate pastoral action but also engage in deep theological reflection.²⁰ Its purpose was to analyze “the signs of the times” in the light of the Gospel. This introduced another vital synodal element: discernment.²¹ Pastoral action, Liénart implied, must be the fruit of a prayerful and theologically informed consideration of reality, not just a matter of efficient administration.²² The Ante-Preparatory Commission synthesized these various ideas into a proposal for a diocesan *consulta*, a body to coordinate the different apostolic activities within a diocese.²³ This was a first, tentative step toward institutionalizing this new collaborative spirit.

The Preparatory Phase (1960–1962): Giving the Idea a Name and Form

The preparatory phase, under the guidance of Pope John XXIII²⁴ and the Central Preparatory Commission, saw these vague desires for collaboration take on a more concrete shape. It was in the draft schema *De animarum cura* (On the Care of Souls) that the body was given its official name: “*Consilium Pastorale Dioecesanum*.”²⁵ The very choice of name was significant. The word *Consilium* indicates that it is a council, a forum intended for providing advice and counsel, which distinguishes it from a body with decision-making power. Furthermore, the term *Pastorale* clarifies its explicitly pastoral focus on the mission and life of the Church, setting it in clear contrast to the administrative and juridical orientation of the diocesan curia. Finally, *Dioecesanum* establishes that its scope encompasses the entire particular Church, operating under the authority of the bishop. The appearance of this specific term in an official draft schema, described as an “effective instrument of the apostolate,”²⁶ marked a significant step. It moved the idea from a collection of disparate suggestions to a single, identifiable proposed institution.

However, the initial formulation revealed that the full implications of the emerging *Communio* ecclesiology had not yet been realized. The draft proposed that the council be composed of priests and religious who were principally engaged in the apostolate. The laity were mentioned only as an afterthought: “Religious women and lay people, both men and women, *can be convoked* by the

¹⁹ Hinze, *Practices of Dialogue*, 118-123.

²⁰ *Acta et Documenta Concilio Oecumenico Vaticano Apparando Series I* (Antepreparatoria), Vol. II, *Consilia et Vota Episcoporum ac Praelatorum* (AD Ant. II, Pars 1) Civitas Vaticana 1960, 305: “*In sua dioecesi tenetur Episcopus ad consilium vigilantiae constituendum. Quod consilium efficacius et utilius operaretur si quasi centrum quoddam coordinationis conciperetur actionis pastoralis cum reflexione theologica*”.

²¹ Pierre, “Synodality and Pope Francis,” 11-13.

²² *Acta et Documenta Concilio Oecumenico Vaticano Apparando Series I* (Antepreparatoria), Vol. II, *Consilia et Vota Episcoporum ac Praelatorum* (AD Ant. II, Pars 1) Civitas Vaticana 1960, 159 et 385.

²³ *Acta et Documenta Concilio Oecumenico Vaticano Apparando Series I* (Antepreparatoria), Vol. II, *Consilia et Vota Episcoporum ac Praelatorum* (AD Ant. II, Pars 3) Civitas Vaticana 1960, 212: “*Efformaretur praeterae, vocatis quodque membris uniuscuiusque Associationis quae Episcopo se obtulit coetus vel Commissio dioecesana - Consulta dioecesana quae coordinationem instituat inter diversas apostolicas activitates illius dioecesis*”.

²⁴ Ioannes XXIII, Litt. Ap. motu proprio datae, *Superno Dei nutu*, 5 iunii, AAS 52 (1960), 433-437.

²⁵ *Acta et Documenta Concilio Oecumenico Vaticano Apparando, Series II* (Praeparatoria), Vol. II, *Acta Pontificae Commissionis Centralis Praeparatoriae Concilii Oecumenis Vaticani II*, Pars III, Sessio quinta (AD. Pr II 3), Vatican City 1960, 300-339.

²⁶ “*Efficax apostolatus instrumentum est ‘Consilium Pastorale Dioecesanum,’*,” 698

bishop to discuss special matters.”²⁷ In this early vision, the laity were still occasional guests, not stable members. The council was conceived primarily as a tool for collaboration *among the clergy*. Despite this limitation, the positive reception of the idea by the Central Preparatory Commission²⁸ indicated a readiness within the Church to move toward more collaborative structures, setting the stage for the crucial debates that would take place during the Council sessions themselves.

The Council Phase (1962–1965): Theological Maturation and Synodal Formulation

The Council sessions²⁹ were the true crucible where the Diocesan Pastoral Council was forged into a genuine synodal instrument. The discussion on the schema concerning bishops (which would become *Christus Dominus*) provided the context for a profound theological maturation of the concept. The revised schema, *De pastorali Episcoporum munere in Ecclesia*,³⁰ introduced a revolutionary proposal: that the Diocesan Pastoral Council should include not only clergy and religious, but also laity, as stable members.³¹

This was a profound act of synodality in practice. It was a direct structural application of the theology of *Lumen Gentium*.³² By legislating for the stable presence of the laity, the Council Fathers institutionalized the principle of participation for the entire People of God. It created a formal structure for reciprocal listening, where the bishop could hear the voice of his flock—including their experiences in the family, the workplace, and society—and where the faithful could contribute their wisdom and charisms to the pastoral governance of the diocese. This structure was designed to give concrete life to the *sensus fidelium*.³³

The debates on the council floor further refined the synodal character of the Diocesan Pastoral Council in several respects. First, a significant discussion concerned Cardinal Paul-Émile Léger’s proposal to merge the Diocesan Pastoral Council with the administrative diocesan curia. Although the proposal appeared to promote administrative efficiency, it was ultimately rejected. The Council Fathers recognized the fundamental distinction between the two bodies. Whereas the curia functions primarily as an administrative instrument for the exercise of episcopal governance, the Diocesan Pastoral Council was envisioned as a forum for pastoral reflection, planning, and discernment. Integrating the two structures

²⁷ Schema decreti Praecipuae de animarum cura quaestiones, 689-690, no. 11: “*Valde exoptandum est ut constituat et frequenter conveniat Episcopus Consilium Pastorale Dioecesanum...*”, no. 13: “*In Consilium Pastorale Dioecesanum cooptentur ad Episcopo sacerdotes et religiosi qui apostolatus praecipue se dedunt. Religiosae et laici sive viri sive mulieres, ab Episcopo convocari poterunt ad specialia negotia disceptanda*”.

²⁸ “Schema decreti Praecipuae de animarum cura quaestiones,” 712-723.

²⁹ Ioannes XXIII, Cost. Apost. *Humanae salutis*, 25 dec. 1961, AAS 54 (1962), 5-13; EV/1, 2-20.

³⁰ *Acta Synodalia Sacrosancti Concilii Oecumenici Vaticani II*, Vo. III, Periodus Tertia, Pars II, *Congregationes Generales LXXXIII-LXXXIX* (AS III 2), Civitas Vaticana 1974, p. 22.

³¹ Relatio circa rationem qua schema elaboratum est: “*Valde optandum est ut in unaquaque dioecesi peculiare instituat consilium pastorale, cui Episcopus dioecesanus ipse praesit et in quo clerici, religiosi specialiter delecti, partes habeant. Huius consilii erit ea quae ad pastoralia opera spectant investigare, perpendere atque de eis practicas expromere conclusiones.*” 45

³² Rush, “The Offices of Christ,” 140-145.

³³ *Lumen Gentium* art. 12 (Vatican II) is the primary source of modern understanding concerning *Sensus Fidelium*. It is stated that: “The whole faithful people who have been anointed by the Holy Spirit (cf. 1 John 2:20.27), cannot err in faith, and expresses the special characteristic of this through the supernatural sense of faith which they possess collectively, when they ‘from the Bishops to the last of the lay faithful’ show their universal agreement in matters of faith and morals.”

would have risked subordinating the council's pastoral and synodal mission to administrative concerns. The rejection of the proposal therefore preserved the council's distinctive identity as a space for ecclesial dialogue and shared discernment regarding the broader pastoral mission of the diocese.³⁴

Second, an important debate focused on whether the Diocesan Pastoral Council should be established as a mandatory institution in every diocese. The Council ultimately decided to describe it as *valde optandum* (strongly recommended) rather than legally obligatory. This formulation reflected respect for the diversity of local ecclesial contexts and confidence in the pastoral judgment of diocesan bishops. The Council Fathers recognized that the circumstances of large urban dioceses differed considerably from those of smaller missionary dioceses, making a universal obligation potentially impractical in some situations. By adopting the *valde optandum* formula, the Council sought to balance universal ecclesial principles with local pastoral realities,³⁵ allowing bishops, in dialogue with the faithful, to determine the most appropriate circumstances for establishing such a council.

Furthermore, a proposal to explicitly limit the laity's role to a consultative vote (*votum consultivum*) was rejected at this stage.³⁶ The Fathers chose to leave the precise nature of the internal dynamics to local statutes determined by the bishop, thus underscoring a deep trust in the collaborative process and avoiding a premature juridical straitjacketing of this new synodal body. The final text of the Decree on the Pastoral Office of Bishops, *Christus Dominus*, promulgated in 1965,³⁷ became the foundational charter for diocesan synodality. Article 27 states:

It is greatly desired (*Valde optandum est*) that in each diocese a special pastoral council be established, over which the diocesan bishop himself will preside and in which specially chosen clergy, religious and lay people will have a part. The function of this council will be to investigate, to weigh and to propose practical conclusions about those things which pertain to pastoral works in the diocese.³⁸

This formulation provides a concise framework for understanding communal discernment within the Diocesan Pastoral Council.³⁹ The process begins with *investigare* (to investigate), which entails attentive listening, the study of pastoral realities, the collection of relevant information, and a careful understanding of the concrete circumstances of the People of God within the diocese. Such investigation establishes the empirical and pastoral foundation necessary for responsible discernment. Building upon this foundation, *perpendere* (to weigh or consider) represents the central moment of discernment, during which

³⁴ Hinze, *Practices of Dialogue*, 126-129.

³⁵ Komonchak, "Vatican II and the New Code," 111

³⁶ *Acta Synodalia Sacrosancti Concilii Oecumenici Vaticani II*, Vo. IV, Periodus quarta, Pars II, *Congregationes generales CXXXIII-CXXXVII* (AS IV 2) P. 577: "... partes laicorum in consilio pastorali sint consultive.... R. Iuxta textum schematis, hoc Episcopi diocesani determinationi relinquatur...."

³⁷ *Acta Synodalia Sacrosancti Concilii Oecumenici Vaticani II*, Vo. IV, Periodus quarta, Pars V, *Congregationes generales* (AS IV 5), p. 575. The document then officially published as Vatican II document: Concilium Oecumenicum Vaticanum II, Decret. *Christus Dominus*, 28 oct. 1965, AAS 58 (1966) 673-696.

³⁸ Sacrosanctum Concilium Oecumenicum Vaticanum II, Decret., *Christus Dominus*, 28 Oct. 1965, AAS 58 (1966) art. 27: "Valde optandum est ut in unaquaque dioecesi peculiare instituatur Consilium pastorale, cui Episcopus dioecesanus ipse praesit et in quo clerici, religiosi et laici, specialiter delecti, partes habeant. Huius consilii erit, ea quae ad pastoralia opera spectant investigare, perpendere atque de eis practicas expromere conclusiones."

³⁹ Pierre, "Synodality and Pope Francis," 14

pastoral issues are evaluated prayerfully and critically in the light of the Gospel and the teaching of the Church. This stage moves beyond technical analysis by integrating faith, reflection, and ecclesial wisdom. The process reaches its culmination in *conclusiones practicas proponere* (to propose practical conclusions), through which the council formulates concrete recommendations to assist the diocesan bishop in addressing pastoral challenges and advancing the mission of the local Church. The council's work is therefore directed toward pastoral action and ecclesial service rather than mere discussion or deliberation.

Crucially, the Diocesan Pastoral Council is not a parliament that makes decisions by majority vote. It is a consultative community that collaborates in discerning the path forward, a path which the bishop, as the visible principle and foundation of unity in his particular Church, will ultimately confirm and promulgate. *Christus Dominus* thus laid the essential theological and pastoral groundwork for the Diocesan Pastoral Council as a prime instrument of synodality.

Post-Conciliar Implementation and Clarification (1966–1973)

The vision of *Christus Dominus* required translation into concrete norms. The years immediately following the Council were a fertile period of reception and implementation, where the Holy See provided more specific guidance on the nature and function of the Diocesan Pastoral Council, further deepening its synodal identity.

Ecclesiae Sanctae: The First Normative Framework

The first and most important implementing document was Pope Paul VI's *Motu Proprio Ecclesiae Sanctae* (1966).⁴⁰ This document provided the first universal juridical framework for the Diocesan Pastoral Council, transforming it from a conciliar aspiration into a regulated ecclesial institution. It clarified the council's relationship with the diocesan bishop by reaffirming that the bishop presides over the council, convenes its meetings, establishes its agenda, and determines the publication of its conclusions. In this way, the document emphasized that the council does not diminish episcopal authority but rather supports its exercise through an organized process of consultation and shared pastoral reflection.

At the same time, *Ecclesiae Sanctae* definitively established the consultative nature of the Diocesan Pastoral Council, resolving an issue that had remained open in *Christus Dominus*. By specifying that the council possesses only a consultative vote, the document preserved the distinction between a pastoral council and a deliberative legislative body, thereby safeguarding the bishop's unique responsibility for governance within the diocesan Church.

The document also reaffirmed the council's mixed composition, consisting of clergy, religious, and lay faithful. Particular emphasis was placed on ensuring that membership reflected the diversity of the People of God and the variety of pastoral experiences present within the diocese. Moreover, *Ecclesiae Sanctae* recommended that the council meet at least annually, thereby establishing regular consultation as a normal feature of diocesan life rather than an occasional or extraordinary practice.

⁴⁰ Paulus VI, Litt. Apost. M.P., *Ecclesiae Sanctae*, 6 aug. 1966, AAS 58 (1966), no. 578-787.

Through these provisions, *Ecclesiae Sanctae* supplied the essential juridical framework for the implementation of the Diocesan Pastoral Council. It ensured that the council would develop in a manner consistent with the conciliar vision while maintaining an appropriate balance between ecclesial participation and episcopal responsibility.

Ecclesiae Imago: The Council as “Image of the Diocese”

A more developed theological understanding of the Diocesan Pastoral Council emerged in the 1973 Directory of the Congregation for Bishops, *Ecclesiae Imago (Image of the Church)*.⁴¹ Although primarily concerned with the pastoral ministry of bishops, the document offered an important interpretation of the council by describing it as an *imago dioecesis* (image of the diocese). This concept emphasizes that the council should represent the diversity of the particular Church and serve as a microcosm of the diocesan community.⁴² Consequently, membership should reflect the variety of geographical regions within the diocese, including urban, suburban, and rural communities, as well as differing social and economic conditions. It should also include individuals from diverse professions, apostolic activities, and states of life, encompassing clergy, deacons, consecrated men and women, married and single faithful, and members of different age groups. Through such representation, the council becomes a visible expression of the communion of charisms, vocations, and experiences that constitute the local Church.

The principle of *imago dioecesis* also carries significant pastoral implications. A council that fails to include the perspectives of the poor, migrants, persons with disabilities, and those situated on the social or ecclesial peripheries cannot adequately reflect the reality of the diocesan community. In this sense, the representative character of the council extends beyond demographic diversity and becomes an expression of ecclesial communion rooted in attentive listening to all members of the People of God. The vision articulated in *Ecclesiae Imago* therefore challenges dioceses to ensure that their pastoral councils provide a forum in which the “joys and hopes, griefs and anxieties” (*Gaudium et Spes*, 1) of the faithful can be heard and discerned. Such representation constitutes an essential dimension of authentic synodal practice.

Omnes Christifideles: Championing Lay Co-responsibility

In 1973, the Congregation for the Clergy issued a circular letter, *Omnes Christifideles*, concerning pastoral councils.⁴³ This document made another critical contribution by explicitly calling for a majority of lay members in the Diocesan Pastoral Council. This was a landmark statement. It went beyond simply including the laity to actively prioritizing their presence. The reasoning was deeply theological. Since the laity constitute the vast majority of the People of God and have a unique, firsthand experience of living out the faith in the secular world (the “leaven in the dough”), their contribution is not just helpful but essential for a realistic and effective pastoral plan. The call for a lay majority was a powerful affirmation of the laity’s co-responsibility for the Church’s shared mission.⁴⁴ It was a concrete structural safeguard to ensure that the

⁴¹ Sacra Congregatio Pro Episcopis, Direct., *Ecclesiae Imago*, 22 febr. 1973, Enchiridion Vaticanum 4, pp. 1225-1468.

⁴² Poothavelithara, “Participative Bodies,” 194-198.

⁴³ Sacra Congregatio Pro Clericis, Litt. Circ. *Omnes Christifideles*, 25 ian. 1973, Enchiridion Vaticanum 4, 1902-1923.

⁴⁴ Rush, “The Offices of Christ,” 145-148.

Diocesan Pastoral Council would not become overly clericalized, and that the specific insights of the lay faithful concerning family life, work, culture, politics, and the economy would be central to its discernment.

Together, these post-conciliar documents built upon the foundation of *Christus Dominus*, providing the normative and theological clarifications necessary to guide the establishment of Diocesan Pastoral Councils around the world as authentic schools of communion and participation. They fleshed out the conciliar vision, preparing the way for its final and definitive codification in the new Code of Canon Law.

Final Formulation in the Code of Canon Law (1983)

The final phase in the institutionalization of the Diocesan Pastoral Council was its inclusion in the 1983 Code of Canon Law.⁴⁵ The process of codification was not a mere rubber-stamping of previous documents but involved intense debate and careful juridical formulation to legally enshrine the synodal principles that had matured over the preceding two decades. The canons on the Diocesan Pastoral Council (cc. 511-514) represent a concise and potent legal summary of a rich theological and pastoral journey.

The Legislative Debate: The Significance of Praesertim

The records of the Code's revision commission, published in the journal *Communicationes*, reveal a fascinating and highly significant debate concerning the composition of the Diocesan Pastoral Council. The draft canon corresponding to what would become c. 512 described the members as "clerics, members of institutes of consecrated life, and laity." A proposal was made to insert the word "*praesertim*" (especially) before "*laicis*" (laity), so the text would read "*tum praesertim laicis*" (and especially the laity).

The study group was perfectly divided on this issue, with a 4-4 vote.⁴⁶ This was not a minor grammatical quibble; it was a debate about the very nature of participation in the Church. Those who opposed the inclusion of *praesertim* argued that it could be misinterpreted as diminishing the importance of clergy and religious. Those who favored it argued that it was necessary to legislatively safeguard and emphasize the novel and crucial contribution of the laity, which was the great theological breakthrough of Vatican II. They argued that without this emphasis, there was a risk of the Diocesan Pastoral Council reverting to a more clerical model in practice.

Ultimately, the position in favor of including *praesertim* won the day and was incorporated into the final text. This was a definitive legislative victory for the synodal vision of the Council.⁴⁷ The inclusion of this single word gives legal weight to the principle of lay co-responsibility. It serves as a permanent canonical reminder that the voice of the laity is not just one voice among many, but a voice that deserves special attention and prominence in the pastoral discernment of the diocese.

⁴⁵ Ioannes Paulus II, Const. Ap., *Sacrae Disciplinae Leges*, 25 ianuarii 1983, AAS 75 (1983), 7-17.

⁴⁶ *Communicationes* 13 (1981) 139: "*Suffragiis quattuor contra quattuor, altera consultorum pars momentum laicorum extollere recusat, altera autem contrarium vellet*" (With a 4-4 vote, one part of the advisors is against emphasizing the importance of the laity, while the other would like the opposite). This indicates the tension and the eventual resolution to emphasize the role of the laity.

⁴⁷ Beal, "Reception of Vatican II," 646-649.

The Canons Themselves: A Synodal Structure in Law

The final four canons (511-514) must be read together as a single, coherent juridical package that creates a balanced synodal structure. Canon 511, concerning Purpose and Mission, reads:

In each diocese, to the extent that pastoral circumstances recommend it, a pastoral council is to be established. Its function, under the authority of the bishop, is to study and weigh those matters which concern the pastoral works in the diocese, and to propose practical conclusions concerning them.⁴⁸

This canon directly codifies the purpose articulated in *Christus Dominus* 27. It defines the Diocesan Pastoral Council's mission as a collaborative process of investigation, pondering, and proposing—the very acts of communal discernment. It also retains the *valde optandum* principle (“to the extent that pastoral circumstances recommend it”), respecting local discernment. The phrase “under the authority of the bishop” immediately sets the hierarchical context within which this synodal body operates.

Canon 512, which concerns Composition and the Imago Dioecesis, states:

§1. A pastoral council is composed of members of Christ's faithful who are in full communion with the Catholic Church clerics, members of institutes of consecrated life, and especially lay people. They are designated in a manner determined by the diocesan Bishop. §2. The members of Christ's faithful assigned to the pastoral council are to be selected in such a way that the entire portion of the people of God which constitutes the diocese is truly reflected, taking account of the different regions of the diocese, of social conditions and professions, and of the part which the members have in the apostolate, whether individually or in association with others. §3. No one but members of Christ's faithful outstanding in firm faith, good morals and prudence is to be assigned to the pastoral council.⁴⁹

This canon embodies the principles of participation and communion within the Diocesan Pastoral Council. §1 establishes its tripartite composition of clerics, members of institutes of consecrated life, and especially the laity (*praesertim laicis*), thereby emphasizing the distinctive contribution of the lay faithful to the pastoral discernment of the diocesan Church.⁵⁰ §2 translates into juridical norms the principle of *imago dioecesis* articulated in *Ecclesiae Imago*. By requiring that membership reflect the different regions, social conditions, professions, and forms of apostolic involvement present within the diocese, the canon ensures that the council serves as a representative expression of the People of God. In this way, inclusivity becomes a juridical requirement rather than merely a pastoral aspiration. §3 complements these representational criteria by establishing the personal qualities expected of members, namely firm faith, good

⁴⁸ Canon 511: *In singulis dioecesibus, quatenus pastoralia adiuncta id suadeant, constituatur consilium pastorale, cuius est sub auctoritate Episcopi ea quae opera pastoralia in diocesi spectant investigare, perpendere atque de eis conclusiones practicas proponere.*

⁴⁹ Canon 512: §1- *Consilium pastorale constat christifidelibus qui in plena communione sint cum Ecclesia catholica, tum clericis, tum membris institutorum vitae consecratae, tum praesertim laicis, quique designantur modo ad Episcopum dioecesano determinato.* §2 - *Christifideles, qui deputantur ad consilium pastorale, ita seligantur ut per eos universa populi Dei portio, quae dioecesim constituat, revera configuretur ratione habita diversarum dioecesis regionum, condicionum socialium et professionum, necnon partis quam sive singuli sive cum aliis coniuncti in apostolatu habent.* §3 - *Ad consilium pastorale ne deputentur nisi christifideles certa fide, bonis moribus et prudentia praestantes.*

⁵⁰ Poothavelithara, “Participative Bodies,” 199-202.

morals, and prudence. The canon thus affirms that effective ecclesial discernment requires not only representative membership but also the spiritual and human qualities necessary for responsible participation.

Meanwhile, Canon 513, concerning Nature and Duration, states the following. §1 The pastoral council is established for a fixed period, in accordance with the statutes laid down by the bishop. §2 When the see is vacant, the pastoral council ceases to exist. This canon highlights the close relationship between the Diocesan Pastoral Council and the personal ministry of the diocesan bishop. §1 provides that the council is established *ad tempus* (for a fixed period), thereby allowing for the periodic renewal of membership and creating opportunities for new voices, experiences, and charisms to contribute to the council's work. §2 stipulates that the council ceases to exist during a *sede vacante*. This provision demonstrates that the Diocesan Pastoral Council is not an autonomous or permanent bureaucratic institution of the diocese but a body intrinsically linked to the pastoral governance of the diocesan bishop. Its existence and function are therefore understood within the framework of assisting the bishop in the exercise of his pastoral responsibility for the particular Church.

Finally, Canon 514, on Authority and Function, reads:

§1 The pastoral council has a consultative vote only. It is for the diocesan Bishop alone to convene it, according to the needs of the apostolate, and to preside over it. He alone has the right to make public the matters dealt with in the council. §2. The pastoral council is to be convened at least once a year.⁵¹

This final canon clarifies the relationship between synodal participation and episcopal authority within the diocesan Church. §1 explicitly states that the Diocesan Pastoral Council possesses only a consultative vote (*voto gaudet tantum consultivo*), thereby safeguarding the bishop's unique sacramental office and personal responsibility for governance. At the same time, the canon situates episcopal authority within a process of listening, consultation, and communal discernment. The bishop convenes the council, presides over its meetings, and receives the fruits of its deliberations. While the final decision remains his responsibility, that decision is informed by the insights, experience, and pastoral concerns expressed through the council's consultative process. In this way, the canon presents episcopal governance and synodal participation not as competing realities but as complementary dimensions of ecclesial life.⁵² §2 further reinforces this dynamic by requiring that the council be convened at least once each year, thereby ensuring that consultation and discernment remain regular features of diocesan pastoral practice.

Read as a whole, canons 511–514 provide a coherent juridical framework for the Diocesan Pastoral Council as an institutional expression of communion, participation, and mission within the particular Church. Together, these canons define its purpose, composition, duration, and consultative function while establishing the normative conditions through which the faithful may contribute to the pastoral discernment of the diocese under the leadership of the bishop.

⁵¹ Canon 514 - §1. *Consilium pastorale, quod voto gaudet tantum consultivo, iuxta necessitates apostolatus convocare eique praeesse ad solum Episcopum dioecesanum pertinet; ad quem etiam unice spectat, quae in consilio pertractata sunt publici iuris facere.* §2. *Saltem semel in anno convocetur.*

⁵² Rafael Luciani, *Synodality: A New Way of Proceeding in the Church* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2022), 15–29.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that the Diocesan Pastoral Council emerged through a gradual historical and juridical process extending from the ante-preparatory phase of the Second Vatican Council to its definitive codification in the 1983 Code of Canon Law. The analysis of ante-preparatory, conciliar, post-conciliar, and canonical sources reveals that the council was not conceived as a fully developed institution from the outset but evolved in response to the Church's renewed ecclesiology of *Communio*. Its development reflects an increasing recognition of the shared responsibility of clergy, religious, and laity in the life and mission of the Church, as articulated throughout the conciliar and post-conciliar period.

The canonical structure of the Diocesan Pastoral Council embodies several key dimensions of synodal ecclesiology. The principle of *imago dioecesis* (c. 512 §2) ensures that the diversity of the People of God is represented within the council and thereby expresses ecclesial communion. The inclusion of clergy, religious, and especially the laity (*praesertim laicis*) (c. 512 §1) establishes an institutional framework for participation in pastoral discernment. At the same time, the council's mandate to investigate, evaluate, and propose practical conclusions (c. 511) directs its activity toward the pastoral mission of the Church and the ongoing work of evangelization within the particular Church.

The study further demonstrates that synodal participation and episcopal authority are presented in complementary rather than competing terms. Canon 514 situates the Diocesan Pastoral Council within a process of consultation and communal discernment while preserving the bishop's personal responsibility for governance. The council's consultative character ensures that pastoral decisions are informed by attentive listening to the experiences and needs of the faithful. Consequently, the historical development of the Diocesan Pastoral Council illustrates how theological principles were translated into canonical structures capable of fostering communion, participation, mission, and discernment within the life of the particular Church, providing an enduring model of synodal practice at the diocesan level.

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