

Politics

Now comes the first obstacle that stands in the way of any group attempting to organize itself and accomplish a goal. It's an obstacle you'll run into whether you're a well-meaning pastor starting a new committee from scratch or a put-upon chairperson trying to get a bad situation moving again. The obstacle is politics. "Politics" encapsulates some nasty but basic questions: Who's got the power? Who can make the decisions that will affect our parish's liturgies? Who hires and fires? Who controls the money? How can we all work together without driving one another mad?

Why Politics Matters

It's probably a fair statement that most liturgy committees have never addressed these issues formally. Yet they are at the heart of why most liturgy committees degenerate so easily into ineffectiveness and stagnation.

What's going on in the examples of terrible meetings we included at the beginning of Chapter 1? In most of them, a struggle for power. People discuss foolishly irrelevant topics, to some extent because those are the only topics they feel empowered to discuss. People attempt agonizing appraisals of individual songs and prayers, largely in a passive-aggressive attempt to exert control by dithering someone into submission. (See "I Forgot..." page 20.) Criticism of liturgies takes the form of sneak attacks or sniping, often because the committee's evaluative role has not been clearly established.

You won't have better meetings, and you certainly won't improve your liturgies, until you figure out why you're meeting, what you can do, and where you can spend your time most productively. Most committees now in existence probably

“I Forgot...”

Eugene Kennedy has called passive-aggressive behavior “the common cold of the emotions.” While we are not psychologists, it doesn’t take much experience working in church settings to see that worship somehow turns this common cold into an epidemic. It may be useful or consoling for you to be able to spot it.

What is it? Merely a way of acting out anger without acting angry. Many people — particularly those in church careers, but even regular laypeople in a church setting — subconsciously feel that really being mad or defensive or saying what they think just isn’t appropriate, or doesn’t fit in well with what they think they should be acting like. Inside, however, they’re still mad and defensive — but they act it out quietly, innocently, passively.

“Passive-aggressives hurt people, not by doing things, but by failing to do them.”¹ If any of these symptoms appear on a regular basis, you may be dealing with a passive-aggressive. Maybe you’ll have someone fail to show up for an important planning session; that’s a good way to put a stop to things without doing something overtly hostile. Or, perhaps you’ll get a seemingly indifferent presider to agree to a particular change in the liturgy; during the liturgy itself, he will somehow manage to omit the change in question. Later he may deny any wrongdoing and say that he just goofed up, and in fact he may not be aware that he blocked your change (which he wasn’t wild about) by playing dumb.

In other words, non-passive-aggressives say “No.” Passive-aggressives say, “I forgot.”

1. Quotations from Eugene Kennedy, *On Becoming a Counselor* (New York: Seabury, 1977), p. 21.

have an inflated notion of what they’re entitled to do and what they’re not — and in both cases, they’re wrong.

You *should*, for example, be entitled to a voice in the way money is spent, in the hiring of staff, and in the general spirit of the parish’s liturgical activities. In many cases, committees are not concerned — or permitted to be concerned — with these questions. On the other hand, you *shouldn’t* be permitted to mess around with music selections, with homilies, or with the work of your professional staff; you shouldn’t be spending inordinate amounts of time on the schedule, the flower arrangements, or the banners. Some of these aren’t off limits because they’re too important — they’re not important *enough*. In the battle for good liturgy, they are insignificant targets that only seem important because the big problems are so hard to address.

Your liturgy committee has an enormous territory to cover, and a huge number of potential trouble spots and opportunities for unproductive conflict and time wasting. Your only hope is to map out your territory right up front — by writing a document that says what your committee is for, what it can do, and what it can’t.

If this sounds unnecessary, think again. Right now you may have a carefully worked out web of unspoken understandings and uncomfortable compromises. That may be all right for now, but the next big decision you face may result in a surprising neglect of

your gentlemen's agreement. And will your setup survive a change in pastors? Of parish staff? Of committee leadership?

No, when the chips are down you'll wish you had something that says exactly where you stand. Your parish needs a task force to write such a document and to set up a system for its approval, modification, and dissemination.

Worth the Paper It's Printed On?

Most parishes, as we've said, don't have such a document. And even if you write one, you'll have to realize if push comes to shove it's going to look less like a charter and a lot more like a piece of paper.

Face it: Most parishes don't even have effective parish councils, much less a council whose decisions are to any degree binding on a pastor who chooses to ignore them. Take a look at the "constitution" of any parish that has been thoughtful enough to provide a firm foundation for its parish council system. You'll more than likely find a sentence in there somewhere that boils down to the following: Parish councils are great, but they are advisory. They can inform the pastor of their opinions. He can take their opinion or leave it. In many cases, where there's a healthy adult relationship between committee and pastor, the council's opinion will be a strong factor in the pastor's decisions. In other cases, if the pastor consistently doesn't like the answers he's getting from the council — well, from the standpoint of their charter and canon law, there's not very much they can do about it, other than resign, stop giving money, or cause some other sort of problem. None of this is good for anyone concerned.

What's true for parish councils is just as true for liturgy committees: You are very unlikely to build any role for your committee that is, ultimately, anything more than strictly advisory. In canon law, parish groups exist at the pleasure of the pastor. His decisions in the parish are binding, and he is encouraged but not by any means required (except in the case of parish finances) to seek counsel from the laity or his staff.

So, if you are a layperson in a parish that doesn't want a liturgy committee, or where the depressing liturgies are directly traceable to the tastes and preferences of the pastor, you are in a tough spot. You have two choices. You can, of course, do some serious parish shopping. Or you can tough it out and spend a great deal of time improving things where you can. But if you are, for whatever reason, committed to working in a parish like this, we hope you will still find the rest of this book useful, as you attempt to find ways to improve your parish's liturgies while still maintaining your sanity and good will. We wish you all the best, and please remember that making even small improvements can help relieve some of the pressure such a situation engenders.

But let's hope you have a pastor who is at least interested in forming a liturgy

committee and hearing what it has to say, or exploring how it can make his job easier. Its effectiveness, and his ultimate satisfaction as well, both depend on working out a clear understanding of everyone's role. Even without what we are accustomed to think of as any "power" on paper, the committee's position in the parish can still be a powerful one. It may not improve the pastor's work as a homilist — but it may be able to give him supportive and honest feedback, or encourage him to bring in other presiders on occasion. It may not get the ultimate say in who gets hired as music director — but it may be included somewhere strategic enough in the interviewing process to eliminate the clearly undesirable candidates.

But it will accomplish these things only if its role — whatever it is — has been clearly defined from the outset. A committee's greatest victories will be won not by blazing a trail through new territory in sensitive situations everyone finds threatening, but by routinely exercising influence in a framework that has come to be accepted as the norm. First lay out a system that calls for committee participation; that system will work far better than a setting where your role needs to be re-debated whenever a tough decision comes up.

Producing a Document

We hope this book encourages your parish to produce a charter for your liturgy committee — and in a way, it doesn't matter exactly what sort of document you write, or how you go about doing it.

What you come up with does not have to be a once-and-for-all Magna Carta. In some cases, it may be something the pastor works out privately with his liturgy committee members, or even with the committee chairperson alone over a few dinners out. The forum for arriving at such a document will be decided by the history and personalities of your parish. Its legitimacy will be determined only by how willing those concerned with the project are to accept it, not by how well it conforms to any theory of parish government or how many people were involved in conceiving it. Democracy need not be your model for ratification — the process itself is far less important than how people feel about what the document says, and how good a system you have built in for changing the document later.

If you find yourself in the position of commissioning or working on such a document, you will find the field wide open. You can define the liturgical responsibilities of your committee, your music director, your staff, or your pastor in any way that the parties involved see fit to do so. Your charter does not need to be some outrageous bill of rights for the laity. But neither should it be bland praise of parish and community that fails to deal with the very practical issues you'll be dealing with. (If you want to see one of many ways that a charter document might look, we've drafted a very simple one that appears as Appendix B in the back of the book.)

Our overall message: Be realistic, and write a simple, user-friendly document that will actually be helpful to you. You may decide to write an expressly temporary document and use it for a year or two, with the option of reviewing it later and evaluating how successful it was. The theory behind your decisions is not nearly as important as how many future situations they wind up resolving to your satisfaction — just as the American Constitution is remarkable not so much for its political theorizing but for how flexible and comprehensive it has proven to be. So have some serious discussion right up front when you're writing your charter; later, your discussions can revolve around what decision is the proper one, not around who's in charge.

Key Issues to Address

As we've said, your charter can take any form, and be as long or short as you see fit. We'd encourage brevity — not only because it will make for a document people will actually use, but because forcing yourself to be concise will help you avoid over-complicated or vague procedures and responsibilities.

But don't let the goal of brevity deter you from writing a document that addresses the real issues of who is going to have the liturgical power in your parish, and what role your committee will play in whatever political process there is in place. Even if, in your situation, it's painfully clear that your committee doesn't even need to be consulted about anything, much less consent to it or decide on it, *write it down*. Force people to put their expectations and unspoken rules on paper. It may be discouraging for a committee's members to see how little "turf" it actually has, but on the other hand the process of change is unlikely to begin until everyone involved sees reality clearly.

So, however you choose to write it, make sure your charter covers the following points:

1. Purpose of the committee

Is your committee an advisory body to the pastor? Is its goal to articulate overall guidelines for parish liturgy, or to provide some advice to the pastor on only those questions he chooses to delegate to it? What sorts of issues can it make decisions on? What sorts of questions and decisions need to be brought before the committee for comment (at least) and which don't?

As we said earlier, it's unlikely that your charter will wind up giving your committee authority over the pastor, even though this is the way things may work out in practice on some issues, or though you may feel this is the way things should ultimately be. In the meantime, we think that in the process of creating this charter you should be leaning as much in the direction of autonomy, or at least of normal adult responsibility, as your circumstances permit.

Define as clear and as specific a role for your committee as possible. State exactly which topics the committee can decide on, either by vote or by consensus, and which topics the committee is entitled to prepare recommendations or comments on, either in advance of a decision or looking back over a specific period. The very least your committee can do in areas in which it should have a lot to say (staff hiring and evaluation, the church environment and its arrangement, resources needed, general comments on the parish's liturgies and goals) is to stir things up, and the best way to do that is to write things down and circulate them. There should be no area of the parish's liturgical life on which a committee should not at least be entitled to submit annual recommendations and evaluations, and in many areas you should seek to have your committee involved somewhere in the decision-making process, if not in actual decision-making authority.

In the remainder of this book, as we discuss meetings and liturgy evaluation, we hope to give you some ideas that will make such reports and committee deliberations more than just prejudiced opinionizing or bland approval of the status quo. In the meantime, just keep this in mind: The opinions of your committee will be far more difficult to ignore regularly — and less likely to be seen as unusual, *ad hominem* attacks — if regular reports are officially demanded by the charter of your committee.

2. Money

Who will establish how much of the parish's money is spent on its liturgies? How binding will a recommendation of the liturgy committee be in this regard? Who will allocate this liturgy budget among the various possibilities? Who approves this decision? How public will all this information be, and how frequently will it be discussed?

It will be rare to find a parish where there aren't particular numbers that are, for some reason, considered confidential. Even a large parish that undertakes an M.B.A.-level analysis of votive-light profitability can be reluctant to reveal the salary of its music director, even to its liturgy committee members.

At the very least, ask for disclosure. This is your money you're dealing with, after all, and in the parish setting as in so many others, money means power. If the liturgies in your parish are terrible, it will undoubtedly take money to improve them — money for music, for renovations, for new hymnals. You have to know how much these things cost, and how much your parish has to pay for them, to judge whether the parish is genuinely able to reallocate some resources in a new and desirable direction.

A simple example: If someone is arguing against a particular liturgical change, one argument may well emerge — Parishioners will be alienated, and a drop in collections is sure to follow. To discuss this intelligently (if that's possible) you may need to know what the collection at each of your liturgies is week by week; you

should be able to defuse such money-based liturgical arguments, not by saying that money should have nothing to do with such things, but by having the facts at your fingertips. (You can also deflect them, as one committee member we know did, by tossing a \$20 bill on the table whenever such a discussion came up, facetiously offering to pay for the change in question. This was always good for laughs, but probably not the best way to deal with the issue.)

Do remember one thing when dealing with money issues: You cannot divorce decision-making power from the power of the purse. There are vital liturgical communities that can't get \$35 a week to pay a musician, and the liturgy founders; the liturgy committee, it turns out, has nothing to say about who gets paid and who doesn't. There are parishes that pay a music director \$20,000 a year to take care of one extravagant weekly liturgy; who decides that a much-needed \$15,000 chapel renovation is too expensive?

Unfortunately, even if you succeed in obtaining a detailed breakdown of your parish's expenditures on liturgy, and can see how they compare to other areas of expense and the parish's total income, there is no clear rule of thumb that would enable you to argue for a particular level that represents the norm. Parishes differ widely in how they see liturgical spending. Some parishes somehow find it possible to devote large percentages of their financial resources to professional soloists, singers, and musicians (none of whom may be making significant improvements in the quality of the parish's liturgies) while other parishes resist allowing communion under both species, lest the altar-wine bill double or triple in one fell swoop.

Your committee's turf should include, at the very least, a review of the parish liturgy budget on an annual basis, with the opportunity to make recommendations on both the total amount and the budget's allocation. If you're lucky, your committee will have a few people with the financial savvy to formulate that budget and look at it every year from the ground up. Find the middle ground between, on the one hand, reducing every new liturgical idea to its economic impact and, on the other, pretending it's OK that your committee has no say about how money is spent. If your group has no real power in the budgeting process, it may find that its chains to the liturgical status quo are heavy indeed.

3. Clergy

Will a regular evaluation of clergy be a part of the committee's discussions? Will this information be public? Will a recommendation be binding? Or will all these issues be handled informally?

Here again, committees will never have an official, enforceable voice. If your parish staff happens to be hostile, or indifferent, or poor preachers, you will have very little immediate recourse when it comes to fixing all the problems this will cause.

Nevertheless, we think your committee should be putting its feelings on paper.

The reason is simple: The work of your presiders is a prime determinant of how well your liturgy works. A strong presider and a moving homily have saved many a bad-news liturgy; on the other hand, enthusiastic music and careful planning have rarely made up for a presider who offended through ignorance or inappropriateness.

We think a committee should have the right to comment officially and regularly on those who preside at your liturgies. Don't rely too much on subtle hints to get your message across. Build a system where your committee at least submits some notes once a year on the presiders they've experienced. A regular evaluation will, in the long run, actually be *less* threatening, since the report is a matter of regular business and is less likely to be mistaken for a vendetta. Without this, the only comments your pastor will hear about his own work, or the guest presiders he invites, may be the random comments he hears after Sunday Mass. That's not fair to you, to your pastor, or to the priests involved.

This is a sensitive area, and you may feel that your reports and evaluations are unheard. But don't underestimate the long-term effects of steady and subtle pressure for change. The next time your parish is going to be assigned a new associate, your pastor may find himself, to his surprise, asking the personnel director to make sure to send him someone who can preach.

4. Personnel and Staff

How many positions can the parish create for the employment of professional liturgists or musicians? How much will they be paid, and who decides? How will the search process be conducted, and whose decision is binding? How regularly will these people receive a formal evaluation, and from whom? Who will write a job description for these positions? What is the relationship of such professionals (especially a liturgy director or coordinator) to the liturgy committee?

First, the question of job descriptions. We don't think a parish has any business hiring someone without a clear description of responsibilities, accountability, and reporting relationships. Oh, but we're only a little parish, you may say. What could possibly be a major issue?

Plenty. As soon as you or your parish hires anyone, you have, in effect, taken responsibility for someone's professional life for however long that person is employed by you. What's more, church musicians and liturgy directors are working in an area where job performance is often difficult to evaluate, and where the positions themselves are still so new that clear reporting relationships have not had a chance to become "standard." As a consequence, liturgy professionals quickly find that they are either (a) accountable to no one for their style of leadership, their skill at performance, or their ability to work with anyone; or (b)

scapegoats, immediately blamed for anything about a liturgy that someone doesn't like, evaluated far more on their ability to avoid trouble than on liturgical talent, and whipsawed by conflicting judgments and evaluations.

Please give your employees a break. Have someone write up a description of what the person is supposed to do, and whose evaluation and opinion counts. Preferably, this document will grow out of the needs of a particular liturgy or group of liturgies; someone on the parish committee could draft a document describing in some detail what you expect in terms of musical ability, working style, professionalism, and personal flexibility.

But even if it's only a piece of paper that a pastor writes up solo, we hope he remembers to define how much the liturgy committee — or any committee — will have to say about that person's performance.

We think they should say whatever they want, restricted by only one rule: Evaluate that person based on long-term results compared to the goals you established at the outset. Don't let the feeling that you have power over staff people become a license to ride herd on them. If you don't like the job they're doing, the chances are about even that it's because you didn't really articulate what you wanted them to do in the first place.

In general, take the opportunity this charter process gives you to make the organizational structure related to your liturgies as clear as possible. If you have a liturgy director as well as a music director, does that person report to the committee or vice versa? Does the music director report to the committee, the liturgy director, or the pastor? How about other groups, such as Environment and Art? It's somewhat ironic that in parishes where a great deal of time, attention and money are dedicated to liturgy, and with not one but several full-time liturgy staff members, it can be even more difficult to figure out exactly who's in charge and what the liturgy committee's role is. You may think organizational charts belong in the boardroom rather than the parish, but confusion over roles can waste people's time and lower their motivation levels in any organization, yours included.

5. Relationship with Ministries

What relationship will the liturgy committee have with the various other parish organizations that make up its ministries: eucharistic ministers, ushers, lectors? Will representatives of those ministries be included on the parish committee? How are membership and leadership in those ministries determined?

As we've mentioned already, the "basics" of hospitality, liturgy of the Word, and liturgy of the Eucharist should be a regular and central part of your committee's discussions. Inevitably, talking about these issues will bring up the people most engaged in making those basics happen: your parish's volunteer ministers.

If you have active, interested leaders for each of those ministries, that's great. You've probably already decided that those people should be regular members of your parish committee. If so, we'll bet most of your meetings on these topics will be complete pleasures, and that you'll find enthusiastic interest in exploring all those ministries' possibilities. In cases like that, you'll be tempted to feel that the matter doesn't deserve much attention in the charter.

But maybe others aren't so lucky. Perhaps your lectors have never been adequately trained, or your eucharistic ministers rarely invite newer members of the parish to participate. Perhaps your ushers have evolved into a group unto themselves — it's not unknown for this ministry in particular to run as rather a renegade operation, taking direction or suggestions only from the pastor (and sometimes, not even from him). These are not just liturgical problems, they're political ones: You've got an important ministry in need of some direction from people (your committee) that they may not feel much like listening to.

In Chapter 5, we'll discuss some ways that your committee's agendas can reflect some regular attention to these ministries' performance and potential. The leadership issue, though, is important enough to be dealt with in the charter. We think your goal should be to have a strong leader for each of those ministries, and for that person to feel involved and interested in the work of the parish committee. Many systems can accomplish this. You could, for example, ask that a coordinator for each of those ministries be chosen or reappointed every few years by your committee's chairperson, with the approval of the pastor. We also think it's a good idea to invite those coordinators to be members of the committee itself. That accomplishes two things: It can regularly bring some fresh blood into both those ministries and your committee, and it establishes the sense that those ministries in turn take guidance and direction from your group.

6. The Liturgical Schedule

What authority will the committee have with respect to how many liturgies the parish has, and when they take place? How often will such a decision be subject to revision?

As we've already said, we think talking about the schedule *as schedule* is one of the most boring possibilities for any committee, and that it's usually a red herring for a deeper conflict or a lack of ideas. Nevertheless, we hope your parish committee's charter calls for an annual comment on the schedule — not so much from the point of view of parking convenience or sacristy traffic, but from that of variety and fullness.

Step back, once a year, and ask yourselves if the projects and liturgies you're working on so hard are actually the right ones for your community. Are all our parish's liturgies working equally well? Are some neglected in terms of resources?

Are we exploring morning and evening prayer in addition to the Eucharist? Are there liturgies or occasions we could explore celebrating ecumenically with our neighboring Lutheran or Episcopal parishes? Could we use a midnight Mass on Saturdays, or a Sunday evening Mass, to attract younger people?

These are far more interesting “scheduling” issues than the ones oriented around scheduling logistics or just plain fiddling — and making them your committee’s business right in the charter will, we hope, place it squarely in your committee’s territory.

7. Leadership and Membership

The final two topics for your charter — membership and leadership — are where the real “people” issues of your committee come to the forefront. They’re so important that they deserve their own chapters, and you’ll read plenty about them in Chapters 3 and 4. For now, let’s take a brief detour from talk about charters and structures into the real flesh-and-blood realities of how to make it all work.

With Your Charter, A Bill of Rights

Charters are great for establishing a solid political and organizational structure for your group. But they’re only the beginning. You may well have already had the experience of working out a charter, or at least what you thought was a reasonable direction, for your committee, but you still spend too much of your time trying to get adult respect from your pastor and a clear mandate within the parish. That’s frequently an issue, not of politics per se, but of trust. Trust and mutual respect are the oil that makes political systems work well.

Why There’s No Substitute for Trust

If you think the issue of trust isn’t important, take a brief look at your parish’s liturgies, and your committee’s potential role, from an average pastor’s point of view.

First, he knows he is in charge of your parish and held responsible by the bishop for everything going on there, period. Canon law, and time-honored practice, have singled him out as the ultimate decision-maker, and holder-of-the-bag, for anything that happens or fails to happen. That alone may keep him in a constant state of either quiet fury or low-grade fear.

Together with that, concede that your parish, with no liturgy committee at all, could still have a schedule of Sunday liturgies take place. A priest, without consultation, could pay a couple of musicians, set up a minimal rotation of lectors and altar servers, kick on the lights, and pull the whole thing off with really not very much trouble at all. Aside from the convenience of delegating some of the administrative work to some parish diehards, many clergy (perhaps justifiably) feel little need to gum up the works. This is a tough thing to swallow, but unfortunately

Your Secret Admirers

There is nothing more offensive — or, unfortunately, common — than the anonymous note to the pastor, the bishop, or the apostolic delegate. You will be faced with such a confrontation someday, and your pastor may even be inclined to view it with some seriousness.

Your charter may want to raise the issue of how you deal with complaints from parishioners. We raise the issue here only to make one plea: Build into whatever system you have some way of screening out those complaints that don't even have a name signed to them. In doing so, you will be doing your part to raise the level of church life. Your pastor may feel that passing on anonymous comments to you is "discreet." It isn't. It's a way of manipulating you into his own point of view, or helping him avoid a conflict he shouldn't be avoiding.

Anonymous notes belong in only one place: the wastebasket. Don't be afraid to say so publicly. Do, however, make sure that legitimate, signed complaints concerning liturgies are discussed by the parish committee regularly, and answered by either the pastor or a committee member to whom this has been delegated.

it's true — and there are, it hurts to admit, parishes that work just like this and have pretty acceptable liturgies.

Treating liturgy like this has the attractions of *convenience*, and also the advantage of *control*. By limiting the number of people who contribute to the process, a priest can prevent certain sorts of mistakes: liturgical embarrassments, letters to the apostolic delegate (see "Your Secret Admirers," at left), music he hates. Great liturgy you may not have, but the pastor's worst nightmares can be easily avoided.

Now, introduce a group of relatively untrained, (usually) inexperienced laypeople. Can you tell a priest why it's necessary for this group to get involved in the process, and for him to come to your meetings and listen to your suggestions? To act on some of them even when he may not really like them? To spend time helping guide your group since you don't really know what you're doing yet?

That's an extreme picture of priests' perception of liturgy committees. Yet all we are asking is for your committee to recognize how difficult it is to find reasons why priests should give up any of the power they have over the liturgy. Is it any wonder that there are occasional problems sharing responsibility?

The trouble is, though, that priests who don't want to work with liturgy committees are wrong. Liturgy committees, at their best, provide the week-after-week thinking and careful attention to detail that help people feel

they actually celebrated by attending Sunday worship. Just as important, a good planning process can insure that your liturgies aren't just your priests' and musicians' idea of celebration, but respond to a parish's diverse groups and needs. Last but not least, it's his pastoral duty to form a group of leaders in your parish, in the liturgy and everywhere else — not just helpers, but people who know they're exercising adult responsibility as parish ministers.

So there's no way around it: While your liturgy committee may not have a *right* to exist, it *deserves* to. The “pro” (the priest) has to share power with the amateurs. The teacher has to share power with the students. The full-time minister has to share power with laypeople who can only give part of their time to the church.

The issue here is not one of law, or rights, but trust. Trust (on the part of the pastor or presider) that the liturgy committee is actually helping the parish, not making life worse. Trust (on the part of the committee) that they are not simply wasting their time week after week trying to make a difference in the parish. With this trust, any system can work. Without it, even your carefully written charter will be no more than a quickly forgotten piece of paper.

How do you develop this trust? Unfortunately, only by fulfilling the responsibilities that the other party, in this complex process of power-sharing, has a right to expect of you. Let's end this chapter by taking a look at these “rights,” beginning with some responsibilities that committees have to the clergy with whom they work.

A Bill of Rights for the Clergy

1. The Right to Fewer Dumb Ideas

Liturgy committees have a big responsibility to learn their job. Priests need to feel that any liturgy group is helping, not just fiddling. To be effective partners, committees need to raise their level of professionalism well above what we harshly call the usual “dumb ideas,” of which there are three basic types.

The first kind of dumb idea is the one that could be avoided by some basic knowledge of liturgy and liturgical tradition. (“Hey, Monsignor, listen to this great Gloria we picked out for Advent.”) Perhaps you have a relationship with your priests that sets *them* up as the quality-control people, where *they* are supposed to tell *you* what's right and wrong. With some priests, this can be a mistake. If they're insecure about what you're likely to plan if they don't get a look at it beforehand, your group will never get beyond the role of planning the lector rotations. Liturgy groups often don't realize their responsibility to learn the rules, the liturgy documents, the available resources; the first checkpoint for whether something you want to do is reasonable or legal should ultimately be a layperson on your committee. Otherwise, the model of cooperation will always be (at best) teacher and students.

A second type of dumb idea is the unnecessary idea, and with inexperienced

committees forcing themselves to “plan,” it’s another common mistake. We know of one amateur planner who cross-examined his pastor about what the “theme” was going to be for Christmas. Too much time at planning meetings can be spent on such Clouseau-like hunts for a theme, or providing unnecessary input for a good homilist who doesn’t need it. A good committee can often get itself out of the “he won’t approve our ideas” bind by spending less time proposing variations on the ritual or complex seasonal spectaculars, and more time doing the basic ritual better.

The third type of dumb idea is the one brought on by a lack of realism. After you’ve worked together for a while, your committee ought to have a pretty good sense of what simply won’t fly in your parish at this point in its life. You have a duty to make your top priority, not those things, but other improvements that are perhaps more subtle but just as important. Ten unthreatening ideas that turn out to work well (or at least cause no offense) do a lot to help grease through an idea that a year earlier might have sounded pretty radical. To accomplish change in your liturgies, or in your relationship with your priests, turn your want list not into the bare minimum, but into a long-term campaign plan that has a beginning, middle, and end.

2. The Right Not To Have his Time Wasted

This is a simple one. Priests are busy, both during the day and almost every evening. If your liturgy meetings go on forever, or fixate on nonessentials, or consist of your committee’s floundering around still trying to define itself, it’s unreasonable for you to expect a pastor or associate to look forward to them, to take you seriously, or even to show up. (You may think it’s his job to show up — it isn’t, any more than it was your job to join the committee.) We’ll talk in later chapters about running a good meeting for your members’ benefit; for now, just note that it’s equally important for your priests. Make the liturgy committee meeting the one your pastor looks forward to, in a week filled with meetings he probably dreads.

3. The Right to Pastoral Care

Though we hope this isn’t controversial, it is still worth noting that priests are human, too. This means that they, along with the rest of us, have bad weeks, and sometimes have to work for people they don’t like, or at tasks they don’t enjoy. Priests too wonder if they are in the right line of work, worry about aging parents, and agonize over friends in crisis. Whatever you may think of priests in general, a foundation of trust requires that you begin thinking of them as individuals.

As important as the work of your committee is, you cannot do it at anyone’s expense, priests included. They are entitled not only to thanks when a job is well done but to pastoral care from your group. We aren’t proposing that you excuse every excess, or that you play amateur psychotherapist, but simply that you avoid a constantly adversarial setting in which Christian compassion has no role.

And, Your Committee's Bill of Rights

Pastors, this section is addressed to you. If your parish committee delivers on its responsibilities outlined in the section above, they're at least entitled to your best efforts at the following.

1. The Right To Work without Prior Restraint

At its most common, "prior restraint" in the parish setting works as follows. A pastor says: Go ahead and have a meeting. I might come, or maybe I won't. But even if I don't, I have to see anything you decide before you do it, and I might just reject it, and I might reject it at some future point even if I agreed to it at the meeting, and I might throw it out too late for you to do anything about it.

There are variations on this, but what it boils down to is what we referred to earlier: control, and an unwillingness to give it up. Sometimes this may be symptomatic of the way a pastor or priest acts in every situation; or, it may be particularly evident in the area of liturgy, due to either a strong interest in the area or some past disaster caused by bumbling planners.

If you're a priest or a pastor, there is no way around recognizing that if you establish a liturgy committee or planning group, *you must ultimately give up some control* to a group you trust (and in doing so, risk some liturgy you don't like) or you do a disservice to the group. You don't need to give them a blank check, and certainly not early on in a committee's life; a new committee needs time to talk and learn before they try dangerous experiments on real parishioners. But liturgy groups do need to learn, and they learn not just from studying about and seeing good liturgies, but from their own plans that don't quite work. State your personal preferences, but make sure that they occasionally take a back seat to a committee's genuine desire to try something they think will make for more effective liturgy. Retain veto power if you want to, but try to do your vetoing a bit more after something's tried unsuccessfully. Give new ideas a few weeks before you force the group to ask itself if the ideas are "working," whether they are accomplishing what they are supposed to.

2. The Right To Be Heard

Every committee, we hope, has some comments on the way liturgy is celebrated in a parish — on how the environment in your church is arranged, on the schedule, on the musicians, on ushers, and yes, even the presiders and the homilies. In our discussion of committee charters, we've listed all these as areas where liturgy committees should at the very least be able to put their two cents in. Yet they'll stop doing it, and be mad about it, if they get the sense that you (the pastor) have no use for those opinions. They'll get that sense if you either fail to acknowledge that you've even received the opinions, or decide that those opinions aren't worth more of a response than the usual "no."

Sometimes, this reluctance to listen to opinions, much less solicit them, stems from a pastor's fear that the expression of criticism or suggestions can easily erupt into dangerous revolution. The more common situation, we think, is simpler. Most priests, like most people, want to be liked, and they avoid situations in which they have to be the bad guy. That means they'd rather avoid hearing suggestions and feedback than have to disagree with them.

But that inevitably backfires. Avoiding issues and conflicts erodes your position as a leader instead of generating affection. If you want respect in the parish, you'll gain it by asking for feedback and discussing it promptly and intelligently — even when you disagree with it. You may still make the decisions you would have made without the feedback, but you'll at least have won more trust from the people involved.

3. The Right to Common Courtesy

Sometimes what rankles committees most is a sense from the pastor that the committee isn't even worth dealing with in the first place. Would you miss a meeting with the bishop, or ignore an urgent request for information from the chancery, or "forget" an agreement with the building contractor? That kind of thing sounds familiar to many liturgy committees, who interpret such neglect as a not-so-subtle form of hostility.

To remedy such a relationship, a little ordinary adult respect will do just fine. If you can't make a meeting, let them know beforehand, and tell them what came up. If they've asked respectfully for a quick yes or no on a decision, try to give them one. If they worked hard on the Easter Triduum, write them all brief handwritten thank-yous. Sometimes clergy are so unused to receiving these little tokens of respect from *their* superiors that they fall into the habit of forgetting about them generally. Please do your part, and try not to.

Politics Isn't a Dirty Word

Before we proceed with an up-close examination of who should be on your committee, and who should lead it, allow us to reiterate how important this chapter you just finished actually is. Liturgy committees have a strong tendency to focus conflicts on people, personalities, and what purport to be questions of liturgical judgment. What is often *actually* dominating the group from week to week is something else: a fight for turf. Think about the politics of your group before anything else. The groundwork for a successful committee begins right here.