

Canon 517.2: An Established and an Emerging Leadership Model

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If, because of a shortage of priests, the diocesan Bishop has judged that a deacon, or some other person who is not a priest, or a community of persons, should be entrusted with a share in the exercise of the pastoral care of a parish, he is to appoint some priest who, with the powers and faculties of a parish priest, will direct the pastoral care. Canon 517.2

Participation in the mission of the Church is a right and duty of all believers. It begins with Baptism, is strengthened in Confirmation, and continues to be nourished through the celebration of the Eucharist. The 1983 revised Code of Canon Law affirms this calling in various ministerial areas, including the “care of souls” that takes place within a parish. This is an activity centered on the Church’s responsibility to teach, sanctify, and govern the People of God. “Full care of souls” is entrusted to priests (Canon 150) but partial care is a responsibility that can be shared by many, including laity, deacons, and vowed religious. It is this collaborative model and the baptismal call to service that forms the basis for understanding Canon 517.2.

As part of the Emerging Models of Pastoral Leadership Project, the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate at Georgetown University (CARA) studied the role of parish life coordinators (PLCs) and the parishes they served. This study resulted in the reports *Understanding the Experience: A Profile of Lay Ecclesial Ministers Serving as Parish Life Coordinators* (May 2004), *Understanding the Trends: Parishes Entrusted to Parish Life Coordinators* (July 2004), *Understanding the Ministry: Parish Life Coordinators in the United States* (March 2006), and *Listening to the Spirit: Bishops and Parish Life Coordinators* (October 2005). (All reports are available from the Emerging Models of Pastoral Leadership Project.)

This research has produced valuable data about the implementation of Canon 517.2 throughout the country and how the establishment of the position of parish life coordinator has evolved. In addition, it has sparked some interesting questions about the future implementation of the model and how challenges around it can be addressed. Thus there is much we already know about the implementation of the canon as well as more that needs to be learned as the model continues to evolve.

What We Know About Canon 517.2

In many dioceses, the decision to implement Canon 517.2 is based primarily on the shrinking number of active priests who are available to serve as pastors. While the population of Catholics is increasing in this country, the number of priests to serve them is declining. As of this writing, there are 19,000 diocesan priests serving over 64 million Catholics. Proportionately, this amounts to one priest for every 3000 Catholics. In 1968,

this figure was one priest to 161 Catholics.¹ The decision to utilize Canon 517.2 through the appointment of a PLC provides bishops with an alternative to closing or merging parishes due to this severe shortage of priests.

The “lack of priests” noted in Canon 517.2 is not always about numbers, however. *Serving Shoulder to Shoulder*, a document published by the Archdiocese of Los Angeles in 2006, describes the role of a PLC². It points out that a “lack” encompasses not only the total number of priests available to serve as pastors but also the “suitability and capacity” of a priest for the role. “While ordination is a necessary requirement to be appointed pastor, it does not necessarily confer the abilities, skills, and qualities required for effective pastoral leadership.”³ The Archdiocese of Los Angeles has also published a pastoral letter in 2005 on the subject of lay pastoral leaders, entitled *As One Who Serves*. It notes that the appointment of a PLC to a parish is one of several responses that a bishop may make in order to meet the pastoral needs of the Church.

The role of a **parish life coordinator** is to oversee the work of individuals and groups who serve as staff and parish leaders, and offer pastoral care on a daily basis to the people of the parish. In doing so she or he is supervised by a **priest moderator** and collaborates with one or more priests who serve as **sacramental ministers**. In an article on parish pastoral leaders, James A. Coriden points out the importance of such a role. “Partial [pastoral care] does not imply a small or minor participation, nor does it imply that the sharing is temporary or an emergency situation. Indeed, a partial sharing can be the major share, all except the sacramental roles reserved to priests.”⁴

In the twenty-plus years since Canon 517.2 was first implemented in the United States, the role of a PLC has been clarified, even if a universal title has not. (The Emerging Models studies report over thirty-five different titles currently being used in dioceses around the country.) In 2004, there were 616 PLCs serving in 115 dioceses throughout the country. The data provided in the Emerging Models research names the various responsibilities of parish life coordinators and the different relationships that PLCs maintain as they carry these out. The studies also provide a profile of PLCs’ educational and ministerial background, ecclesial status, average salaries and benefits, age, gender, marital status, and other demographic information. All of this points to a ministry that is well established in many parts of the country.[

What We Need to Know About the Implementation of Canon 517.2

There are also questions about the model being posed by those involved in its implementation. How these are addressed may lay the groundwork for the challenges and

¹ Mark Gray. From a talk given at the PLC/Sacramental Minister/Priest Moderator Symposium. Menlo Park, CA, January 8, 2007.

² The Archdiocese of Los Angeles uses the term “Parish Life Director” for this position.

³ Archdiocese of Los Angeles. *Serving Shoulder to Shoulder: Parish Life Directors in the Archdiocese of Los Angeles*, (Los Angeles: 2006), p. 9.

⁴ James A. Coriden, “Parish Pastoral Leaders: Canonical Structures and Practical Questions”, published on the web site, www.emergingmodels.com.

opportunities of implementing Canon 517.2 now and in the future. Some of these issues include:

- Drawing upon the gifts of both the laity and the clergy to serve in leadership roles within parishes.
- Improving and strengthening the relationship between PLCs and sacramental ministers and priest moderators.
- Examining the preference for deacons that has been expressed by some bishops and looking at how this affects both the role of the PLC and the mission of the diaconate.
- Further clarifying the liturgical responsibilities of a PLC, particularly for those who are non-ordained.
- Examining the stability of the position of the PLC, particularly in dioceses where such appointments are made as temporary solutions to the shortage of priests.
- Creating possibilities for the funding of PLCs in small and/or rural parishes.
- Establishing formation programs for new PLCs along with ongoing formation for those who are currently serving in this role.
- Providing education about Canon 517.2 to the Catholic population at large.
- Developing education on Canon 517.2 for seminaries and diaconate programs that includes training in collaborative models of leadership and in the development of skills for working as part of a team.
- Developing national standards that provide overall coherence to the model and offer help to bishops in writing guidelines for their dioceses.

The Catholic Church faces various challenges as it moves further into the twenty-first century. One of these involves the provision of sound pastoral leadership while simultaneously experiencing a shortage of priests. Canon 517.2 is a positive response to such a challenge, one that affirms the central importance of the ordained priesthood while also utilizing the gifts of lay people, vowed religious, and deacons in the pastoral care of parishes. It makes for intriguing possibilities as this emerging model of leadership continues to develop.