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# **A NATIONAL PASTORAL COUNCIL**

**Yes,  
No,  
and  
Maybe**

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A NATIONAL PASTORAL  
COUNCIL:

YES, NO, AND MAYBE

1970

STEERING COMMITTEE, ADVISORY COUNCIL,  
UNITED STATES CATHOLIC CONFERENCE

1312 Massachusetts Avenue, N.W.

Washington, D.C. 20005

## INTRODUCTION

This booklet is intended to stimulate opinion—pro and con—on a topic of concern to American Catholics: a National Pastoral Council.

Should the Catholic Church in the U.S. have a National Pastoral Council? If so, why is a council desirable? If not, why not?

These are some of the key questions we ask you to ponder as you read and discuss the material in this booklet.

As you will readily see, this booklet is not the last word on the subject. It is not meant to be. It is merely a springboard for your opinions, your insights and your suggestions.

In your study, you may come up with good reasons why a National Pastoral Council might be so much excess baggage for a pilgrim Church to struggle with on its journey to God. We want to know those reasons. Or, you may conclude that the needs of the times are so pressing and so complex that only the whole Church, bishops, priests, religious, and laity, meeting together, can hope to tackle them. We want to know those reasons too. And perhaps you have ideas about structure—proportional representation of bishops, priests, sisters, brothers and laity, their manner of selection and/or election, the council's relationship to national Catholic organizations, and its function in relation to U.S. bishops. After you iron out all those structural details, you may want to suggest major issues on which a council should focus its attention.

Or you may wish to consider a third possibility—a series of national pastoral consultations. Like the U.S. government, which often relies on White House Conferences and Presidential Commissions to examine national problems, the Church also could possibly call consultations on crucial concerns.

After you separate the wheat from the chaff, pass on your ideas to your diocesan or organizational representative. His task will be to summarize all the opinions and proposals from your diocese or organization. If you don't know your representative, send your suggestions directly to us: The Steering Committee, Feasibility Study of a National Pastoral Council, USCC, 1312 Massachusetts Ave., N.W., Washington, D.C. 20005.

The Steering Committee, incidentally, is not steering this issue in any preconceived direction. Our job is to make a recommendation to the 50-member United States Catholic Conference Advisory Council, which in turn will report its findings and recommendation to the U.S. bishops.

Our bishops ultimately will have to decide whether or not we need a National Pastoral Council. This is your opportunity to make an important contribution toward that decision. We hope to hear from you.

Msgr. J. Paul O'Connor  
Chairman, Steering Committee

## A NATIONAL PASTORAL COUNCIL: YES, NO, AND MAYBE

Would a National Pastoral Council be good or bad for the Catholic Church in the United States?

What *is* a National Pastoral Council?

Who would be its members?

What would it do?

What sort of authority would it have?

These questions are being asked today because the bishops of the United States are seriously considering the advisability of a National Pastoral Council. The idea of a National Pastoral Council is considered by many people to be an important factor in the general renewal of the Church, in harmony with the spirit of Vatican II—even though the documents of the ecumenical council make no specific reference to a National Pastoral Council. In view of the growing interest in the idea, it becomes important to evaluate its potential.

Early in 1970, acting at the request of the U.S. bishops, the United States Catholic Conference's Advisory Council—a 50-member group of bishops, priests, religious and lay people drawn from all over the country—set up a Steering Committee to investigate the "feasibility" of a National Pastoral Council. The Steering Committee, 10 of whose 15 members are lay people, was asked to investigate all the pros and cons of a National Pastoral Council and report back to the USCC Advisory Council.

As part of its study the Steering Committee sponsored a conference on the feasibility of a National Pastoral Council from August 28 to 30, 1970, in Chicago. Participating were specialists in a number of different fields—theology, history, canon law, sociology, and so on—together with representatives of 97 dioceses and 45 national Catholic organizations.

The conferees reached no decisions. They were not supposed to. They did, however, air many arguments for and against establishing a National Pastoral Council. They agreed, too, that much more discussion, involving as many American Catholics as possible, is needed before any final recommendation can be made on the subject of a National Pastoral Council.

The purpose of this booklet is to encourage such discussion by presenting many of the arguments raised on both sides of the question. It

is not the purpose of the booklet to come to a conclusion. Conclusions may be a long time in the future—or they may be very near at hand. In either case, many more opinions must be heard, many more voices must join in the dialogue, before a final decision is reached.

If there is to be a National Pastoral Council, it should represent the needs and desires of the great mass of American Catholics. If there is not to be such a body, this too should represent the considered opinion of the American Catholic community. This is a matter of great importance for the Catholic Church, and it deserves the best thought of as many Catholics as possible.

A National Pastoral Council has been described, in very general terms, as a “national-level body representing many segments of U.S. Catholicism and dealing with a broad range of issues of concern to the Church.” More specifically, it has been said that such a body would be a concrete expression of “shared responsibility” in the Church—the responsibility that all Catholics share to work together for the well being of the Church and its more effective presence in the world. It would bring together a relatively small number of persons from all segments of the Church in the U.S.—bishops, priests, laymen and lay women, religious men and women—who would deliberate on how to make the Church more responsive to the needs of the hour.

But these general ideas are not very helpful when it comes down to specific questions. How would a National Pastoral Council be set up? How could it be made truly representative of American Catholics? What would be its assignment? Its responsibility? Where would it fit into the decision-making process in the Church?

Most fundamental of all—is a National Pastoral Council really desirable? It is hard to be against a notion like “shared responsibility.” But what guarantee is there that a National Pastoral Council would be an effective instrument for bringing about real shared responsibility in the Church?

### **A NATIONAL PASTORAL COUNCIL: IS IT DESIRABLE?**

The question of whether a National Pastoral Council is desirable is undoubtedly the most basic of all. There is no easy answer. But certain things can be said with some assurance.

It seems beyond question that, up to the recent past at least, U.S. Catholics tended to over-emphasize the role of the clergy and the bishops. To a great extent this was a result of the history of the Catholic Church in this country. The Catholic immigrants who flocked here in the 19th century and the early years of the 20th century were often poorly educated, simple people who brought with them a tradition of

looking to their priests and bishops for direction in all areas of life, both temporal and spiritual.

Those who support the concept of a National Pastoral Council argue that it would help correct this imbalance by giving a stronger voice and a more effective role in the life of the Church to *all* the People of God. And this, they add, is an urgent matter today because of present conditions in the Church.

Many young people, they say, are “turned off” by institutional religion and no longer find in existing Church structures adequate means for expressing their own sense of what it means to be a Christian; something new is needed to re-ignite their interest—and a National Pastoral Council would help accomplish this by providing a channel for the continued renewal of the Church.

Many members of minority groups—blacks and the Spanish-speaking, for example—also find little in current Church institutions that speaks directly to their needs; for them, too, it is said, a National Pastoral Council in which they would share in the decision-making process would be a sign of hope.

Many other Catholics, both “conservative” and “liberal,” are disturbed by what they regard as evidence that the Church is moving too rapidly or too slowly in one direction or the other, and as a result they withdraw into warring ideological camps; a National Pastoral Council would help to reduce this “polarization” by enabling all the People of God to work together for the well being of the Church.

And still more Catholics, it is said, are simply sunk in apathy, unconcerned about the future course of the Church and lacking any sense of personal responsibility for it; a National Pastoral Council would be a visible reminder of the fact that they should and must be involved and a means to make such involvement possible.

One of the strongest practical arguments for creation of a National Pastoral Council is the need people feel today to participate in decision making—in the Church as in any other group. Decisions made by a small group, acting more or less in private, are neither understood nor easily accepted. Furthermore, people have a right to participate in making decisions that directly affect themselves.

For all these reasons, supporters of a National Pastoral Council say, such a body is a “must” for the Church.

But the arguments go deeper than that. They touch on the basic questions—what is the Church and what does it mean to be a member of the Church?

Theologians point to the fact that the Second Vatican Council has given us a new vision of the Church as the “People of God.” Of course

the fact that the Church is a "people"—a community—does not imply that every member of the community should play the same role in the community. But the communal nature of the Church should be reflected in the institutions of the Church. This implies a far greater degree of participation by all members of the community in all facets of the life of the Church—including decision making—than we have known up to now. Even the diversity of roles of the different members of the Church argues for new ways of doing things and new institutions for getting them done. The Holy Spirit does not work exclusively through the bishops and priests and other commonly accepted leaders of the Church; the Spirit can and does speak and act through every member of the Church, and this fact too must be reflected in Church institutions, making them open to the voice of the Spirit from whatever direction it comes.

These are indeed strong arguments for the creation of some sort of body at the national level in which diverse needs and interests and abilities of all members of the People of God would be represented. But the question is whether a National Pastoral Council would really be able to accomplish what is hoped for it.

Many arguments can be presented to show that it would not.

One strong and frequently expressed fear is that a National Pastoral Council would not really represent all the People of God. Minority groups tend to be skeptical about whether their voices would really be heard there. But others warn that a National Pastoral Council might easily be "captured" by minorities—by special interest groups, by representatives of the "conservative" or "liberal" camps, by the "professional" Catholics, or by ecclesiastical bureaucrats. If this happened, the National Pastoral Council would be "representative" on paper only. In fact, it would be the tool of whichever special interest group happened to be in control.

Those who believe this would happen point to serious dangers that would result. In these circumstances, they say, the National Pastoral Council might become an instrument for forcing changes in the Church which the majority of Catholics did not want. Under the guise of "democracy," the National Pastoral Council would become an instrument by which the special interest groups could exercise a form of tyranny over the People of God.

Another fear expressed about a National Pastoral Council is that it might become just one more bureaucratic "structure" which spoke for—and to—nothing and no one. Considering the fact that many people are already disenchanted with religious institutions, is it really going to solve anything to add one more institution to the pyramid?

There are other problems, too. Some believe that by providing a national forum for expressions of discontent and divergence, a National

Pastoral Council would increase the existing polarization in the Church instead of lessening it. Some think a National Pastoral Council would be a step in the direction of a “national” Church, potentially at odds with—and even separated from—the Holy See. Some think that a National Pastoral Council, acting in tacit alliance with the news media, would seek to influence public opinion in support of its views, even when these differed from those of the bishops and the pope.

None of these objections can be dismissed easily. On the other hand, none of these outcomes of establishing a National Pastoral Council seems inevitable. Ways could be found to guard against them. But this does not mean that they are not real dangers; they need to be given serious consideration as discussion of a National Pastoral Council proceeds.

One thing is obvious: a National Pastoral Council would not be a panacea. It would not solve all the problems—polarization, apathy, the alienation of youth and minorities, and so forth—now facing the Church and society. Protestant participants in the conference in Chicago cautioned their Roman Catholic brethren against entertaining exaggerated expectations about what a council could accomplish. Speaking from their experience of similar bodies in their own religious traditions, they pointed out that—however desirable a National Pastoral Council might seem to be in its own right—its creation would bring with it problems of its own. They urged Catholics, too, to learn from the experience of other religious groups and, instead of creating a council modeled too closely on existing bodies, to be creative in approaching the challenges presented by the question of whether or not to have a Catholic National Pastoral Council.

### **A NATIONAL PASTORAL COUNCIL: IS IT FEASIBLE?**

It would not be difficult at all to establish some new kind of national body in the Catholic Church and give it the name “National Pastoral Council.” People familiar with the work of the already existing Advisory Council of the United States Catholic Conference suggest that it forms a sort of working model of a pastoral council. But simply setting up some kind of new structure is not enough. A National Pastoral Council, to be effective and meaningful, would have to speak to the needs and aspirations of people.

It seems clear that a Pastoral Council, whether on the diocesan or the national level, should have two values: 1) it should be representative; 2) it should be prophetic. Of these two values, one must have priority, since the priority value will determine the structure, the agenda, and the method of arriving at answers. If representativeness is the prime value, the danger arises that a council may be very slow in reaching conclusions on issues. Emphasis on representativeness does help ensure acceptance

of the National Pastoral Council, but at the same time it might tend to weaken its capacity for effective leadership. On the other hand, if the priority value is to be prophetic, then the National Pastoral Council might be strongly criticized as not representative of the Catholics of America. Many people might reject the council. But the advantage of such a council would perhaps be that it could be truly prophetic in serving the Church.

Thus the question of how representatives to a National Pastoral Council should be selected is of crucial importance. These are several possibilities: they could be appointed by some existing group; they could be chosen in a popular, nationwide election; they could be designated by organizations; they could be chosen through a graduated series of elections—diocesan, regional and national; or, last, they could be selected by some combination of these methods.

Some who have studied the matter in depth argue that it is the last approach—a combination of methods—that offers the best hope. *Appointment* of some members of a National Pastoral Council would make it possible to guarantee that many groups in the American Catholic community would have representation. *National election* of other members would help ward off the danger that the Pastoral Council would be dominated by special interest groups—regional, ethnic, or ideological. *Designation by existing organizations* would ensure that special areas of concern and expertise in the apostolate would have a voice on the council. Selection of other members through a *graduated series of elections* would make it possible for the great mass of individual Catholics to feel that they, too, were truly represented on the body. Even in this approach, important questions remain. Who would designate the groups which would appoint members of the council? How long would the term of council members be?

Supposing that the members of a National Pastoral Council could be chosen by some combination of methods guaranteeing its “representative” character, there would still remain the question of what “representation” meant in this case. Would the members of a National Pastoral Council be “instructed delegates,” reflecting exclusively the viewpoints of their particular “constituents,” or would they be free to act on their own initiative according to their own sense of what should be done?

There are strong arguments against both positions. If members of a National Pastoral Council simply represented the views of their “constituents,” the council might be divided into feuding groups, reflecting—and probably exaggerating—the polarization within the Church. If, on the other hand, the members had no responsibility to reflect the attitudes of those whom they supposedly represented, the council might be in danger of becoming an ivory tower body with no ties to the grassroots.

The problem of representativeness also raises another serious practical question. How large should a National Pastoral Council be? If, for example, the council included no more than one representative of each diocese in the country and each national Catholic organization, it would have well over 200 members. Add bishops, representatives of priests, religious men and women—and the figure is even higher. Could such a large group—which presumably would not meet more often than once or twice a year or for longer periods than a few days at a time—really get down to serious work? If, on the other hand, the number of members were limited to a small total—say, 50—would there be enough places on the council to represent all the interests and viewpoints that presumably deserve to have a voice there? And—a problem of special concern these days—what system would assure fair representation for women on the council?

It is taken for granted that a National Pastoral Council, if it came to be, should represent the reality of the Catholic Church in the United States. But the reality is that many Catholics take a limited view of the Church, feel little sense of involvement in its affairs on the national level, and have little immediate concern with the sort of “big” issues a council would presumably tackle.

In view of this, some people say that a massive effort to educate Catholics—to create in them a broader vision of the Church and a deepened sense of their responsibility for it—must come before any attempt to set up a National Pastoral Council. But others contend the establishment of a National Pastoral Council would itself be an essential part of this process of education. The argument is a bit like the perennial debate over the chicken and the egg—and not a great deal easier to settle.

### **A NATIONAL PASTORAL COUNCIL: WHAT WOULD IT DO?**

Supposing that there were a National Pastoral Council, what sort of issues would it grapple with? And what kind of authority—if any—would it have to resolve them?

One view of the “issues” question holds that a council would deal mainly, if not exclusively, with the great social problems that vex American society and toward whose solution the Church seeks to contribute. These would include such things as poverty, racism, youth, drugs, and so forth.

However, there is a possible danger here—that a National Pastoral Council might fall into the trap of considering only “bandwagon” issues on which it could be expected to take safe, predictably “liberal” positions. It would be far more useful, it is said, for the council to make a serious effort to avoid the safe and popular issues and deal instead with more difficult matters that rarely get the attention they deserve—the

obligations of rich nations toward poor nations, for example, or the morality of U.S. nuclear deterrent strategy or respect for human life.

Beyond this, there is the question of whether the National Pastoral Council should also be concerned with internal Church affairs. Would it be appropriate, for instance, for such a body to examine the matter of sex education in Catholic schools, or obligatory celibacy for priests, or the process by which bishops and other office-holders in the Church are selected?

Some people see serious problems if the council were to get into such matters. One is that by becoming involved with such controversial issues, the council might add to the polarization within the Church. Another is that the council might become in effect an in-house debating society, with no real relevance to the larger American society.

A third is that by dealing with issues that involve Church teaching, the National Pastoral Council would be infringing on the right of the bishops and the Pope to decide such matters.

This last problem raises the whole difficult question of the relationship of a National Pastoral Council to the bishops of the United States. Would the council be merely advisory—offering its opinions to the bishops but no more—or would it have some real deliberative role in the decision-making process in the Church?

It is possible, though, that this entire question rests on a false assumption—namely, that the only way of really taking part in decision making is by actually making the decisions. Some people believe that the authority of a National Pastoral Council could and should be exercised in a very different way: through the power of “moral suasion” rather than through the issuing of orders and binding directives.

It is possible, too, that the entire discussion rests on a second false assumption—that a National Pastoral Council would necessarily be involved in some sort of power struggle, tacit or open, with the bishops. It is at least equally possible to assume—and hope—that a National Pastoral Council, however its authority was spelled out, would work in close collaboration with the bishops. One useful function of such a body, it is said, would be to place the power of its “moral suasion” in support of the bishops when they take stands on controversial issues, which may be unpopular but which in fact represent the sort of “hard saying” of which the Gospel speaks.

One specific suggestion made concerning the relationship of a National Pastoral Council to the bishops is that the bishops should have the right to approve the council’s agenda and, where they judge it necessary, veto its decisions and recommendations. Such an arrangement does not sit well with groups which want to see a radical change in the way Church policies and programs are established. To many others, however,

it seems a necessary precaution in defining the role of a new and untried body like a National Pastoral Council, as well as an essential protection of the inherent right of the bishops and the Pope to make the final decisions about many crucial matters in the life of the Church.

Two special problems deserve mention with regard to the relationship of a National Pastoral Council to matters of doctrine. The first has to do with the fact that such a council, precisely as "national," could not speak for the whole Catholic Church. And if it does not speak for the whole Church, it could hardly give binding expression to what American Catholics must believe—for none of us is bound to believe different doctrines because he is American rather than Italian or Chinese.

The second problem has to do with the authority of a National Pastoral Council to speak, in a definitive way, on behalf of the Church in the United States. According to Catholic belief, the highest doctrinal authority rests with the bishops, who, together with the Pope as their head, are charged with the task of preaching and teaching in the Church. If only some American bishops were members of the council, or if the bishops in the council were not in agreement with the majority of the council, it is hard to see how the majority vote of the council could be able to commit the Church, even in the United States, to a particular position.

Thus a National Pastoral Council could evidently have only very limited authority and competence in regard to doctrinal matters. Some would feel that for these reasons the Pastoral Council should avoid all doctrinal questions. Others, however, maintain that it could properly seek to give a persuasive and meaningful expression to the deep convictions of the council itself, as a representative body of American Catholics. Such a statement of faith might have value in helping others to formulate their faith in a clearer and more relevant way. Perhaps, too, such a statement might prepare the way for official pronouncements coming later from the highest doctrinal authority.

This is a very hasty discussion of a very important matter. Much more needs to be said on the subject. (For instance, the authority of a National Pastoral Council could hardly extend *beyond* the authority of the body of bishops—and few Catholics now seem to understand the extent, and the limitations, of the authority of the national episcopal conference.) At the very least, however, it is obvious that this is one of the fundamental questions that must be considered at length before any decisions can be made about the role that would be played by a National Pastoral Council.

### **PASTORAL COUNCIL OR PASTORAL CONSULTATIONS?**

Up to now, most discussion of a National Pastoral Council has focused on a hypothetical body which would be both permanent and "all-

purpose"—that is, a council which would have a continuing membership and would deal with a broad range of issues of concern to the Church and society.

There is much to be said for such a council. Over a period of time its members could be expected to develop a depth and breadth of vision which would give special weight to their deliberations and conclusions. Viewing many issues at the same time, they would be able to set matters in perspective with more assurance and align priorities more expertly.

At the same time, though, the breadth of concern of such a body is an argument against its effectiveness. The danger may exist that a National Pastoral Council which, in the nature of things, would meet rather infrequently and consider a large number of issues would be tempted to make superficial judgments and facile pronouncements. Furthermore, the power of "moral suasion" exercised by such a body might be diluted by the fact that it would deal with many subjects instead of focusing on a small number of areas of urgent concern.

In view of this, another approach has been suggested—a series of Pastoral Consultations, each of them zeroing in on a single topic of urgent concern in order to develop in-depth insights and proposals.

Such Pastoral Consultations would be preceded by careful research and would involve the best thinking of experts in the area under consideration. Conceivably, there might be an "all-purpose" National Pastoral Council which would plan and sponsor these Pastoral Consultations. But the Consultations would be separate, once-only events, in which representatives of the People of God would come together to examine a single issue thoughtfully and at length.

Whether or not the idea of Pastoral Consultations has merit, it seems obvious that a number of different "models" for a National Pastoral Council must be developed and examined. And, supposing some such body does eventually come into existence, it will be necessary that it retain a good deal of flexibility, so that its structures and procedures can be changed, if necessary, on the basis of experience.

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The list of theoretical and practical pros and cons on the subject of a National Pastoral Council could go on indefinitely. But even this brief treatment should indicate that the subject is a serious one that deserves the best thought of all Catholics. The Church of Jesus Christ is the New People of God—all those saints and sinners, who are one in the Holy Spirit. It is this people—and that means every member of the Church in the U.S.A.—who must help decide these important questions: Would a National Pastoral Council benefit the Catholic Church in the United States? Should we or should we not work to establish a National Pastoral Council?



