

PART I

GREAT PARISHES SHARE LEADERSHIP

BEETHOVEN IN MY BACKYARD

After twenty-five years of Mass at St. Monica's, I can say with confidence that my pastor is amazingly welcoming to all people regardless of background. Msgr. Lloyd Torgerson has a tremendous ability to make people feel at home. He tends his sheep while also forging friendships and collegial ties beyond the Catholic community. I have run into people active in the local Jewish community who have said to me, "That monsignor over there, he's incredible. He goes all over; the guy is unstoppable."

People ask me, "What do you like so much about Mass at St. Monica's?" Now, there are a lot of different answers I could give. Instead, I usually ask them a hypothetical question. "If you knew Beethoven performed down the street, only a few hundred people attended, and every week he played a new piece he composed, do you think you'd go?" People smile and answer, "Of course I'd go." That's how I feel about Msgr. Torgerson; he is Beethoven in my backyard.

Overall, Msgr. Torgerson is a strong leader. Why is this? It's hard to capture leadership in a series of specifics, and as we will discuss below, there are many different leadership styles. One commonality

is that good leaders are skilled communicators—individuals who are not only verbally eloquent but also able to communicate to others on a deeper level. They articulate a compelling vision and arouse strong emotional support in those they lead.

After attending St. Monica's with me for several years, my wife converted to the Catholic faith. At the time she told me, "Honey, I want you to know one thing: it had nothing to do with you."

It surely was God and Msgr. Torgerson—Beethoven in my own backyard.

THE NOT-SO-LONE RANGER

We have unanimity in heart and an ambition in mind of what we should be, how we should be as a parish.

—Fr. John Hynes

St. Catherine of Siena, Wilmington, Delaware

Our people buy into the fact that parish priests can't do everything, and so they step up to the plate.

—Fr. Dan Swift

St. Benedict, Holmdel, New Jersey

President John Quincy Adams once said, “If your actions inspire others to dream more, learn more, do more, and become more, you are a leader.” Although we did not ask pastors to talk to us about Pope Francis, he was brought up spontaneously in roughly one out of every three interviews.¹

Without exception, remarks about the pope were positive, optimistic, and laudatory. It shows just how effective a leader the pope has become for these pastors. My pastor, Msgr. Torgerson, remarked, “We’ve got a pope right now that, if a PR firm spent a billion dollars, they couldn’t create what we’ve got.” Pope Francis models faith and creates a clear direction for the Church that local leaders can communicate and local communities can embrace.

LEADING AS FRANCIS DOES

The pope's unique leadership style influences pastors at these vibrant parishes on a daily basis. Fr. Louis Vallone, who pastors both St. John of God and St. Catherine of Siena parishes in McKees Rocks, Pennsylvania, described the pope's overall impact:

I've been waiting for this guy all my life. And in ten months, he's changed my spiritual life. The first thing I do every morning when I get up is go to the Vatican webpage, and my pastor preaches to me first before I go to Mass to preach to my people. I read his homilies every day. I read everything that he says and is reported. He is pastoring me and pastoring our whole Church. I entered the Church before the Second Vatican Council, became a seminarian under John XXIII, and I've spent forty years saying, "This wasn't the cruise that I signed up for." And now, praise God, I've lived long enough to see a validation of what was in my heart that long ago.

The enthusiastic wave surrounding the pope is, in part, a testament to his exceptional leadership skills.

Indeed, since his papacy began, Pope Francis has led through example and encouraged others to do the same. As Fr. Brian O'Toole of Our Lady of the Holy Rosary and Sacred Heart parishes in Gardner, Massachusetts, explained, "Pope Francis has become such a rock star because he's talking the language of leadership. He's talking the mission of who we are, of who we're supposed to be in the world—not just theologically but practically. He's telling the bishops this. He's telling the cardinals this. And if you didn't get the message, look how he's living himself. He's modeling the mission."

The Holy Father's comment that one must be with the sheep and smell like the sheep caught the imaginations of several pastors in our study. He inspires pastors to get out of the rectory and lead from the middle, with the help of others, including lay staff and volunteers. As

Fr. Jeff McGowan of Queen of Peace parish in Gainesville, Florida, echoed, “If you’re not with the people so much that you smell like them, you’re spending too much time in your office.” The importance of pastors interacting more with parishioners and their communities is something we will examine at greater length in part III, where we examine a pastor’s presence more closely.

Pope Francis’s leadership style is highly collaborative. He commissioned a working group of eight cardinals from outside the Roman Curia to advise him on adopting changes in the structure of the Curia and the global Church. Another example of his collaborative leadership style is his interest in hearing voices of the laity as well as of non-Catholics at the synod he called on family life.

COLLABORATORS, DELEGATORS, CONSULTERS

Most of the pastors we interviewed (80.3 percent) said that the leadership models used in their parishes is one of their greatest strengths. Eighty percent of our pastors also said they had some form of shared leadership structure in place. Although, canonically, pastors are held responsible for all decisions made in a parish,² these pastors were quick to admit that they do not lead their vibrant parishes on their own.

In our dataset, shared leadership always involved laypeople in some way. The benefits are twofold. For one, shared leadership empowers laypeople to participate in parish governance, contributing valuable skills and unique perspectives to the parish. Second, shared leadership takes pressure off of the pastor, allowing him time to devote to essential pastoral duties as well as self-care. Lone rangers are no longer the norm in vibrant parishes.

As leadership expert Jim Collins writes in his book *Good to Great*, “The old adage ‘People are your most important asset’ turns out to be wrong. People are not your most important asset. The *right* people are.”³ Our pastors have a gift for identifying and inviting capable people to share the reins of leadership, and they place these people in positions that make the best use of their strengths. “We’re blessed with very talented and generous people,” said Fr. Kevin Duggan of

Mary, Queen of Peace in Sammamish, Washington. “We’ve made a real, concerted effort to try to attract and keep talented staff members by building a respectful and collaborative atmosphere for the staff.”

We identified three different styles of leadership sharing: the collaborators, the delegators, and the consulters.⁴ Many of the pastors in our study combined these styles, but most reported a dominant tendency toward one of the three (see figure 1.1).

- *52 percent of our pastors said they are collaborators.* Collaborative leaders value teamwork, cooperation, and consensus. The pastor and his staff work together as a cohesive unit.
- *49 percent said they are delegators.* Delegators empower others to lead by delegating responsibilities and offering support, encouragement, and freedom. Pastors who practice this style hire talented people, discern their gifts, and then allow them to lead in their areas of responsibility without micromanaging their work.
- *24 percent said they are consulters.* Consultative leaders emphasize the importance of seeking out perspectives and opinions that can inform their own decision making. These pastors see input, discussion, and deliberation as crucial to clarifying their vision and securing buy-in from the leadership team and the broader parish community.

True shared leadership in ministry does not happen simply because people work together or cooperate with one another in some way. It is a gradual and mutual evolution of new patterns. The shift to shared leadership represents a marked change from the traditional lone-ranger model of pastoring.

Figure 1.1 Three most common leadership styles



COLLABORATIVE LEADERS

Collaborative leaders value teamwork, cooperation, and consensus. The pastor and his staff work together as a cohesive unit. “I’m in the mix of it all, from administration to ministry to schools,” said Msgr. Torgerson of St. Monica’s in Santa Monica, California. “I rely hugely on our lay staff for all the parts, for both schools as well as for the parish. Structurally, we have a pretty collaborative style. We meet regularly once a week with senior staff. We meet every two weeks with the full staff. We have a parish council and a financial council and a whole variety of other ministry councils. I have a parish administrator who does a lot of the actual administration, but I’m still right in the middle of it.”

Consensus comes to the forefront with other pastors who consider themselves collaborators. Fr. Bill Stenzel of St. Mary of Celle parish in Berwyn, Illinois, labeled himself a collaborative consensus builder:

My preferred way of describing pastoring in general is that at any given time with people we’re always founding a local church. My discovery a long time ago was that people tend to think of the people from one hundred years ago that founded the parish, but when you look at the history there are demographic shifts and turnover of populations. The first people that were in the parish under that name were the ones who signed the mortgage for several generations of parishioners. The essence is that people at any given time find themselves at one place, and the task is to discover what it means for those of us who are here now? We know the stories of what people who *were* here did. What [does] it mean for us who are here now?

The very question “What does it mean for us who are here now?” is a question that a lone-ranger-style leader cannot answer. To discover new meaning, a leader must be open to many voices and willing to collaborate. Effectively leading a parish today requires communication,

cooperation, consensus building, and teamwork. In our study, half of these effective leaders found collaboration to be the best form of leadership for accomplishing their mission.

DELEGATING LEADERS

If building a consensus is pivotal for collaborative leaders, offering support, encouragement, and freedom is essential for pastors who described themselves as delegators. They empower others by delegating responsibility. Delegator pastors hire talented people, discern their gifts, and then get out of their way.

These pastors avoid getting themselves too involved in certain areas when they can serve better elsewhere. “I don’t run the parish; I lead the parish. My staff and volunteers run the parish,” said Fr. Andrew Kemberling of St. Thomas More parish in Centennial, Colorado. “I’m trained to be a principal. That’s how principals run a high school. I don’t teach chemistry.” Similarly, other delegator pastors we spoke to consider their tendency to rely on others a personal strength that makes for a healthy parish.

These pastors avoid micromanaging and enable their staffs by listening to and supporting their decisions. Delegators appreciate that some of the people they work with will have their own way of doing things. They support staff members as they work through difficult situations, stepping in only when necessary.

Msgr. Pablo Navarro from St. John Neumann parish in Miami, Florida, described his delegative leadership this way: “I try to lead primarily through others. I try to pastor pastors. If it were not for the very involved laity that we have taking responsibility in their ministries, there would be no way that we could do what we do. I basically do the bulk of leadership and pastoring, by example but definitely by collegiality and delegation, through the parish council, finance council, and coordinators of ministries. It sounds so bookish, but that’s what it is.” Councils and colleagues exist for a reason. Delegative leaders remember that and rely on others accordingly.

The councils described by Msgr. Navarro exemplify resources that a delegator pastor understands and empowers for the good of the

parish. The delegator pastor manages time and his personal ministry more effectively by making way for competent staff and volunteers.

CONSULTATIVE LEADERS

Nearly a quarter of pastors considered themselves consultative leaders. Whereas the delegators lead through others, consultative leaders gather many perspectives and opinions to inform their own decision making. Essentially, their leadership is a living mosaic of those who counsel them. These pastors see input, discussion, and deliberation as crucial to clarifying the parish's vision and securing buy-in from the leadership team as well as the broader parish community.

These pastors consider themselves decisive leaders who confer with others at serious length and depth to be more discerning. "I get as much information as I can, as quickly as I can. I mull it over, listen to lots of people, and decide," said Fr. Charles Bober, pastor of St. Killian parish in Cranberry Township, Pennsylvania. He recognizes that decision making must be a daily occurrence because tomorrow will bring a new set of problems and decisions. Consultative pastors are confident about making decisions themselves but rely heavily on drawing laity into the decision-making process.

Fr. Volney DeRosia of St. Patrick's parish in Pelham, New Hampshire, described his consultative leadership this way: "I typically try to get as much information as I can about what's going on from different people, asking for a lot of different perspectives. And very often, I won't make a decision that could possibly be questionable without getting the input of the staff and pastoral council or school board and principal." This approach not only allows the pastor to make the best decision for the parish but it helps maintain a good rapport with parishioners.

A full 80 percent of pastors interviewed used one or more of the three shared leadership styles indicated above. Many used different versions of shared leadership depending on the situation at hand. Whether collaborative, delegative, or consultative, pastors said that their own leadership style was most effective when parish leadership positions were staffed with strong professional people. When pastors

have strong professional staffs, they can rely on them to make major decisions and get things done.

Used effectively, all three shared leadership styles enable the whole community to demonstrate a sense of ownership and stewardship for the parish, allowing the community to grow organically. More members of the community become committed and engaged. Talented staff and parishioners are provided a path to leadership of their parish. It is akin to the experience employees have when they are offered stock options in a business: belonging brings more tangible rewards. Shared leadership gives the talented people already in the pews a means to participate more fully.

LISTENING TO LAY VOICES

Lay leadership is fundamental to the success of vibrant parishes. It came up as a topic in the vast majority of interviews because these parishes are sustained in part by competent, dedicated, and generous laypeople. Sixty-seven percent of the pastors specifically named their lay leaders as a major asset of their parishes and emphasized how integral they are to advancing their parishes' missions.

I first examined lay leadership in my book *Living the Call*. In my lifetime, the responsibilities resting on lay shoulders in the Church have increased considerably, and they will likely continue to increase as the number of Catholics in the country rises while the number of priests and pastors decreases. The old model of parish leadership—the model pervasive during my father and mother's generation and even part of my young adulthood—was “pray, pay, and obey.” The layperson's script had been written and handed down. There was little more one could offer than its recitation.

The Second Vatican Council (October 1962–December 1965) prepared the way for change. One of the first issues considered by the council concerned laypeople and the greater role they could play in parish life. Ultimately, many of the roles that had been exclusively performed by priests before the council became the pastoral work of the laity: parish administration, sacramental preparation, liturgical planning, spiritual direction, faith formation, catechesis, and even

limited preaching. In most parishes today, it is a layperson who is the first point of contact for anyone who comes to a church with a pastoral need. The importance of this is hard to understate in describing the changing reality of the American Catholic parish. In 2005—fifty years after the Second Vatican Council—the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) reported that 39,651 lay ecclesial ministers were working in Catholic parishes.⁵

Lay leadership matters in the American Catholic parish. Teamwork and communication have become essential to decision-making processes. Listening to advice from lay leaders means opening up a lane for dialogue—making communication a two-way street. “I have very talented people in the parish and they run the meetings,” explained Fr. Michael Woods of All Saints parish in Knoxville, Tennessee. “That’s their gift. I’m available; I’m there to listen and to guide.”

Pastors work toward making collaboration with their staffs intentional. They are mindful of advice and counsel given by leadership committees, which helps them maintain a balanced vision of the parish’s hopes and dreams alongside their own. Following through, they look for wisdom within the group and discuss an issue until a solution is found. Fr. Dennis Carver, who rectors Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary Cathedral in Biloxi, Mississippi, put it plainly: “The pastoral council is very strong. I take their advice and learn from them. They’re advisory and very helpful in attending to the needs of the parish. They give me advice on what the parish’s needs are.”

Sometimes the advice is more prescriptive, coming in an area in which a pastor might recognize he is lacking. No pastor is good at everything. Pastors who are strong on providing pastoral care but are weak administrators can rise or fall with their leadership team. If a weak administrator can delegate to someone else who is better, the parish can remain healthy. If a weak administrator cannot find anyone to take on that responsibility, problems will pile up quickly. In healthy parishes, the strengths of the team members complement each other. Just having good people around is not enough. It is necessary to have people with the right skills in the right roles.

Fr. Carl Schlichte, O.P., pastor of St. Catherine of Siena Newman Center in Salt Lake City, Utah, described himself as administratively weak but good at interacting with parishioners. After some major reorganizing at his parish, he learned that parishioners forgave his administrative shortcomings because they trusted him. “A number of parishioners came forward and said, ‘Let us help you.’ So I have a kitchen cabinet that’s made up of a retired accountant, a semiretired human resources professional, and a semiretired organizational management professional,” he said. “[I say] to these folks, ‘Okay, this is what I want. This is how I would like it to run.’ And they’re like, ‘Okay, you need to do this, this, and this.’ By myself, I’d be beating my head against the wall for a year to come up with half this stuff that they know professionally.” Like all of us who employ a mechanic to fix our cars or a doctor to diagnose our illnesses, this pastor relies on the wisdom of professionals in carrying out the work of his parish.

Working through their strengths, lay leaders help a parish redefine itself. Fr. Daniel White, S.J., at St. Francis Xavier College Church in St. Louis, Missouri, said, “Allowing the lay folks in the congregation to challenge people where they need to be challenged and encourage them when they need encouragement allows them to have ownership of the place. Nourishing that sense of ownership is something we’ve always seen as a great strength.”

Just as exercising strengthens a muscle, when parishioners and staff use their natural leadership abilities and personal faith to further the mission of the parish, they become more engaged in both leadership and their own faith development. Being open to outside advice, using a shared leadership style, and introducing lay leadership opportunities, our pastors have paved the way for individuals to engage their faith and leadership potential simultaneously.

THE DOMINO EFFECT

Lay involvement has had a domino effect in some parishes. Pastors have watched staff members empower volunteers to become leaders themselves, eventually taking on special projects and programs in the parish. Over time, parishes form a tradition of lay involvement.