

BRIEF: CWL Parish Council Spiritual Advisor – Proper Introduction and Mandate – 090815

Preamble

At the end of this 89th Annual National Convention of the Catholic Women's League of Canada in St. John's, Newfoundland and Labrador – a marvelous, fruitful, hopeful, enjoyable, and encouraging convention – it has occurred to me that something needs to be done, and now is the time to do it, about the lack of quality or harmony in some cases in the relationship between Parish Councils of the CWL and their Pastor in those parishes that are privileged to have a Parish Council of the CWL.

My own introduction to the League was troubled and haphazard, as I landed in a Parish that had some difficult history and issues to be resolved but was not briefed on the CWL nor on my role as their Spiritual Advisor as set down in the protocols of the CWL, which are the fruit of collaboration between the CWL and the hierarchy of our Church in Canada. Not realizing my responsibility to act as Spiritual Advisor of the CWL, I naturally let them down; so that my first experience of the CWL was persistent invitations to attend meetings and then persistent disappointment when I did not meet expectations. This was an unhappy experience for all involved and without resolution until I was asked and accepted to serve as Archdiocesan Spiritual Advisor, attended meetings, went to my first Provincial and National Conventions, and finally discovered the hidden treasure that is the League.

I was surprised to find, sadly, my experience was not unique. As Archdiocesan Spiritual Advisor since October 2003, I found this happens all too often across the country, with some pastors unhappy to have to deal with a League Council in their parish and some Parish Councils of the CWL unhappy over their failed relationship with their Pastor, who according to the League Constitution and By-Laws is by virtue of his mandate as Pastor, the Spiritual Advisor of that CWL Council in his Parish.

This sad state of affairs stands in stark contrast with those Parish Councils of the CWL happy to have a Pastor who understands, appreciates, and stands in solidarity with the CWL and Parish Council Executive Officers and Members. When the League and Clergy collaborate, it is a very blessed, fruitful and mutually beneficial rapport that acts as an example and ferment for good in the Parish and Diocese. The Pastor supports the Council Executive at the service of League members and all Catholic women in their call to be holy and reach out in charity, peace, and hope to all women in the neighborhood and serve the whole society. CWL members become more active parishioners and contribute richly to the vitality and fruitfulness of the faith community and enhance the Parish's effectiveness.

This is true despite the reality of our human nature, which makes us all imperfect human beings, Catholic Christians trying to live a life of conversion and trying to respond together to the call of the Lord to exercise together our respective responsibilities for the mission He has entrusted to us as his Church. Moreover, the collaboration of women and men in the Church is blessed by God, making them ambassadors of reconciliation and peace, listening to Mary's instruction, "Do whatever He tells you."

Background

This is the beginning of my second consecutive mandate as Archdiocesan Spiritual Advisor for the Montreal Archdiocesan Council of the CWL, and in view of the difficulties experienced by some Parish Councils of the CWL in Montreal, I attempted to connect with the pastors of their parishes in order to have a conversation about the League, and I got no response. Of course, I could have followed up with personal calls and visits, but something held me back. It was the realization that in the eyes of these pastors, I have no mandate, and they may feel they have no responsibility to concern themselves with the CWL, and in some cases may simply see it as a burden they might prefer to ignore.

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It is not everywhere in Canada that the League has a high and very positive profile in the Church and in the minds and hearts of clergy and laity alike, and even where this benefit has been enjoyed due to the faith and dedication of those who have gone before us, or in a homogeneous cultural community, it is possible for the shifting sands of time to erode this benefit and bring us back to square one. Unless we realize and understand our situation, we are likely to slip into the trap of recrimination and entrench ourselves in bitterness, which only exacerbates and deepens the pit in which we are caught.

This brings us to reflect on the nature of the Spiritual Advisor's mandate at the various levels of the League, and the protocols that activate each mandate and render it effective both within the League and within the hierarchy of the Church and her normal structures. Here is the League policy as it is found in the "Handbook for Spiritual Advisors" regarding appointments.

Appointment

1. The spiritual advisor of the parish council shall be the pastor of the parish. Where this is not possible, the pastor, in consultation with the council executive and the ordinary of the diocese, shall appoint a spiritual advisor.
2. At other levels, the spiritual advisor shall be named by the appropriate level of the hierarchy.

Statement of the Problem

In hesitating to pursue the consultation of pastors on their role as Spiritual Advisor of the CWL Parish Council in their Parish, I intuitively picked up the irregularity of my situation as Archdiocesan Spiritual Advisor in the eyes of my brother priests and a defect at the parish level in the collaborative process between the League and the Church hierarchy in place in practice and in policy until now.

As I understand it, the National Spiritual Advisor is searched, consulted, briefed, and appointed by the CCCB; the Provincial Spiritual Advisor is searched, consulted, briefed, and appointed by the Metropolitan Archbishop of the Province – or in the case of the Military Ordinariate by the Military Ordinary; and the Diocesan Spiritual Advisor is searched, consulted, briefed, and appointed by the Ordinary or his delegate; while the Parish Spiritual Advisor is not searched, consulted, briefed, or appointed as Spiritual Advisor for the CWL but is simply appointed Spiritual Advisor of the Parish CWL Council accidentally, ***ex officio*** by virtue of his regular appointment as Pastor of that Parish.

There is, evidently, a disparity at the parish level in the implementation of the happy complicity between the RC hierarchy in Canada and the CWL. At the national, provincial, and diocesan levels, this complicity is received, respected, understood, handed on, and enacted in the ways in which the potential candidates for Spiritual Advisor are sought out, consulted, briefed, and appointed. The only level at which this deliberate collaboration is not carried out is the parish level.

If the ordinary does seek out, consult, brief, and appoint a priest as pastor so that he may serve as a good Spiritual Advisor of the CWL Parish Council in that Parish; then it is only because of that ordinary's initiative or due to the long established practice of doing so in that particular diocese, or else because of the homogeneous nature of the culture and society which constitutes that particular local Church. There is nothing in CCCB policy that I know of that requires ordinaries to do it this way, and if there is, such policy is not necessarily followed. I was in no way prepared to become the Spiritual Advisor for the CWL in my first appointment to a Parish with a League Parish Council in it.

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Therein, I believe, lies the crux of this problem. It does no good whatever to charge pastors with the responsibility of failing to serve as good and active Spiritual Advisors if they merely fell into the role by accident without deliberate choice, consultation, and briefing, and without their willingness to accept the mandate. It does no good to burden those CWL Parish Councils with the unspoken task of trying to persuade reluctant pastors to serve as Spiritual Advisor. The defect is structural, procedural.

Remedies

In light of the above observations and reflection, I would like to propose to our National Spiritual Advisor and National League President the following actions in order to bring about the changes necessary to remedy this structural defect in the search, consultation, briefing, and mandating of Parish Spiritual Advisors in the course of their appointment as Pastor of a Parish with a Parish Council of the CWL.

For the Ordinary – to the candidate for new pastor of a Parish with a CWL Parish Council

- 1) Keep in mind the role of CWL Parish Council Spiritual Advisor in searching for a pastor.
- 2) Brief the candidate about the CWL as a national organization of Catholic women present at provincial, diocesan, and parish levels and rooted in gospel values, calling its members to holiness through service to the people of God.
- 3) Consult the candidate concerning the role of CWL Spiritual Advisor and apprise him of its high potential for enriching his ministry as pastor and his life as a priest.
- 4) Ask of him his willingness to welcome the League as a national organization and to support its presence and activity in the Parish, to seek a collaborative relationship with its officers and members, and to support the promotion of the League within the Parish as something in perfect harmony with his role as Pastor and as beneficial to the Parish.
- 5) Advise the new Pastor to expect a package on the CWL from the appropriate CWL officer and ask him to familiarize himself with the League so as to understand its presence in the Parish, its national vision, mission, and objects, and the ministries of its members.
- 6) Clarify with the new Pastor that the CWL President and Executive have jurisdiction over the activity of the CWL Parish Council and that he has jurisdiction over the Parish, requiring them to cultivate a collaborative relationship for the good of all in accord with the joint will of the CCCB and of the CWL National Executive.
- 7) Include in the letter of appointment to the new Pastor a mandate to attend the next diocesan, provincial, and national conventions, with the usual financial assistance of the diocese and the help of the League where necessary and possible, as the basic formation for his new role as Spiritual Advisor to the Parish Council of the CWL. This should be done in a manner that imposes no extra burden on the new Pastor but in fact endows him with new benefits.

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- 8) Make the necessary arrangements for the new Pastor to obtain from the diocese whatever financial assistance he will need – in collaboration with the CWL Diocesan President – in order to attend those three first conventions.

For the Ordinary – to the CWL Diocesan President

- 9) Inform the Diocesan President in a timely fashion of the appointment of a new Pastor and Parish Spiritual Advisor; so that she may make contact with him on behalf of the League.
- 10) Request that she welcome the new Spiritual Advisor by letter and assure that he receives personally from a delegated CWL Officer a package acquainting him with the CWL and with information on formation opportunities in the near future, and in particular the place, dates, and times of the upcoming diocesan, provincial, and national conventions, with all the appropriate registration forms.

For the New Pastor

- 11) Welcome contact from League presidents and other officers at the various levels, and make a point of establishing a rapport with the Parish and Diocesan CWL Council Presidents.
- 12) Make arrangements to attend the upcoming diocesan, provincial, and national conventions, and submit all the appropriate registration forms.

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For the Diocesan Council Spiritual Advisor

- 13) Make a point of welcoming the new Pastor as a new Spiritual Advisor by way of a letter and in addition where possible through an informal personal contact, in order to begin mentoring the new Spiritual Advisor and acquaint him with the mission, membership, and functioning of the League and its rapport with the local Church.
- 14) Assist the new Pastor where possible with his arrangements to attend CWL conventions and anticipate meeting him at the upcoming diocesan convention.

For the Provincial Council Spiritual Advisor

- 15) Send the new Spiritual Advisor a letter of welcome and any pertinent information, and anticipating meeting him at the upcoming provincial convention.

For the National Council Spiritual Advisor

- 16) Arrange for a signed letter (form letter where necessary) to be sent welcoming the new Spiritual Advisor and anticipating meeting him at the upcoming national convention.

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For the Parish Council President

- 17) Welcome the new Pastor as Spiritual Advisor formally by letter and informally in person, and share with him pertinent information and be open to establish with him a rapport that will be the foundation for a collaborative relationship.

For the Diocesan Council President

- 18) Welcome the new Pastor as Spiritual Advisor formally by letter, assure that he receives in person from an appropriate Diocesan Officer an informative package on the League, and anticipate meeting him at the upcoming diocesan convention.

For the Provincial Council President

- 19) Welcome the new Pastor as Spiritual Advisor formally by letter, send him any pertinent information, and anticipate meeting him at the upcoming provincial convention.

For the National Council President

- 20) Arrange for a signed letter (form letter where necessary) to be sent welcoming the new Spiritual Advisor and anticipating meeting him at the upcoming national convention.

Conclusion

The Catholic Women's League of Canada is a grass roots membership organization and the gifts and dedication of its members rise to the occasion and at the diocesan, provincial, and national levels intensify the effectiveness of the League in accomplishing its mission and in networking with the rest of society. It makes perfect sense that until now at those three higher levels the candidates for Spiritual Advisor have been given the opportunity to take on the mandate more deliberately and generously.

It makes even greater sense to allow the opportunity for freedom, deliberation, and generosity in candidates for Spiritual Advisor at the Parish level, the first and natural setting where members belong to the League. It is so vital for the mission, growth, and fruitfulness of the League and its complicity with the local Church to take much greater care to nurture and develop the collaborative nature of the relationship between Catholic women and their pastors.

May this brief help us all take positive steps forward in this direction in the very near future, so that the joyful, loving, and kind collaboration of Pastors and League Executive Officers and Members may attract more Catholic women of all ages and especially the younger generations to membership in the League and personal holiness and happiness, for the glory of God, the growth of the Church and the League, and for the good of Canada.

Thursday, August 13th, 2009

St. John's, Newfoundland and Labrador

Brief submitted by

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