

The Role of the Spiritual Advisor in the Catholic Women's League of Canada

The Catholic Women's League of Canada must be one of the most trusting organizations I have known in its high regard for the office of the Spiritual Advisor. The CWL has voluntarily restricted its definition of the role, limiting the norm to a very brief and terse series of statements that leave almost everything unsaid.

The Handbook for Spiritual Advisors simply repeats what is in the Constitution and Bylaws, which define the role, appointment, and term of services of spiritual advisors. “(i) The spiritual advisor, in cooperation with the chairperson of spiritual development, shall provide advice and guidance for the spiritual program. (Article VI) (ii) The spiritual advisor shall receive due notice of all executive and council meetings and conventions and shall attend and participate in all such meetings and conventions when possible, in an ex officio capacity. (iii) At national level, the spiritual advisor shall receive due notice of the national administrative committee meetings and shall attend and participate when possible.”

As you can see, the intention is to leave all the latitude and freedom possible to both the spiritual advisor and the chairperson of spiritual development; so that together they might rise to the occasion, and work for the spiritual development of all women, the members of the League, and the League as an organization.

Here are some very timely and pertinent questions currently being asked by Diane Lemay, President of the St Jean Longueuil Diocesan Council. What is the role of the spiritual advisor and why is that aspect important for the CWL's functioning? What do you, the spiritual advisor, do to support the CWL members spiritually? Do you have any suggestions how councils can encourage their absent spiritual advisors to be more present? These questions are, I believe, the Holy Spirit's voice stirring us up, and showing us a direction in which we are being invited to walk as “Companions on the Journey.”

I believe that most of what we need to begin with are three articles from the Constitution and Bylaws: articles IV, V, and VI – the Objects, Policy, and Spiritual Program of the League.

“ARTICLE IV – OBJECTS The objects of the League shall be to unite Catholic women of Canada:

1. to achieve individual and collective spiritual development
2. to promote the teachings of the Catholic church
3. to exemplify the Christian ideal in home and family life
4. to protect the sanctity of human life
5. to enhance the role of women in church and society
6. to recognize the human dignity of all people everywhere
7. to uphold and defend Christian education and values in the modern world
8. to contribute to the understanding and growth of religious freedom, social justice, peace, and harmony

ARTICLE V – POLICY The policy of the League shall be:

1. to have membership and operation based on the parish unit, with diocesan, provincial and national representational levels

2. to operate on a system of standing committees and to make the fullest possible use of these committees in the involvement of all members
3. to develop leadership qualities and provide training to enable members to take active roles in the affairs of their faith, community, and society
4. to maintain affiliation with the World Union of Catholic Women's Organizations
5. to cooperate at all levels with other organizations where and in whatever manner the council concerned agrees is necessary or desirable to accomplish the objects of the League
6. to maintain liaison with pastoral councils in accordance with the *Code of Canon Law*
7. politically non-partisan

ARTICLE VI – SPIRITUAL PROGRAM

Under the guidance of the spiritual advisor, in cooperation with the chairperson of spiritual development, the spiritual program shall express the religious renewal of the people of God as envisioned by documents of Vatican II. (Article IX, Section 1(a))

Council meetings shall endeavour through the spiritual development program to foster and advance the spiritual growth of members.

Councils shall honour, in a special way, Our Lady of Good Counsel, patroness of the League.”

So, where does that leave us? What appears most clear is that the founders of the League and those who in convention have defined the Constitution and Bylaws as we now have them fully intended to assure a partnership and collaboration between officers and members of the League and the clergy or other appropriate persons designated and appointed to be spiritual advisors of the League at the parish, diocesan, provincial, and national levels.

Such partnership and collaboration are prominent values of Vatican Council II, when the bishops declared in council that the Lord fully intended that there should be collaboration among all the members of the Church, and that those in Holy Orders are at the service of the whole membership, as Jesus himself insisted He had come to serve.

The objects and policy of the League are clearly Catholic and Christian in conviction, and it stands to reason that the League would want spiritual advice and counsel from the pastors of the Church at all levels, in order to assure that the membership and labors of the League operate in the full light of day, with the sure guidance and approval of the pastors of the Church, and with the benefit of their close collaboration.

In this way, the best insights of the pastors and spiritual advisors can be adapted to the hopes and dreams, anxieties and needs, vocations and aspirations, virtues and sensibilities, and the genius of women, to use the expression of Pope John Paul II in his Letter to Women, where he noted the very particular capacity and desire God has given women to serve and nurture life in themselves and others. Without the genius of women, there would be little or no life in the world or in the Church.

What is the role of the spiritual advisor and why is that aspect important for the CWL's functioning?

In light of the above, then, the role of the spiritual advisor is to be a catalyst, to stimulate by his presence, interest, love, support, and active and enthusiastic participation, the motivation and creativity of the chairpersons of spiritual development in the various League councils at all levels. Together, the spiritual advisor and chairperson of spiritual development can pray, research, discuss, consult the members, and develop together – under the guidance and inspiration of the Holy Spirit – ways and very practical means of pursuing the objects and policies of the League, one at a time, for the spiritual development of the members of the League, all women in general, and the League as a whole.

What do you, the spiritual advisor, do to support the CWL members spiritually?

That is a question that I find personally very challenging and humbling. To begin with, from the first moment of my appointment, after I was consulted and asked if I would like to accept, I realized as by a special grace, how little I had done to spiritually support the CWL members of my parish, other than what I did for everyone as pastor.

That was an embarrassing realization, and I repent of my lack of initiative. I did support the parish League Council, but not as much as they desired or the Lord would have wanted I think. Under the circumstances, it was understandable, because I did not know the League well enough.

Also, the “litany of woes” – which can be found everywhere in society that people share work and living space – reminding me of all that I was not doing, filled me with guilt and tended to crush my motivation. In light of this experience, I shall make some suggestions in answer to the next question.

Still, there were some things that I did, and others that I now do, to support the CWL members spiritually, as follows:

1. I tried then and try now to listen to League members and be available to them.
2. I collaborated and still do with the chairperson of spiritual development and the council president for the holding of the installation ceremony.
3. We collaborate together to hold the “crowning of Mary” in May each year.
4. We collaborate in planning and celebrating the Mass for deceased members each year in November.
5. As often as possible then, and regularly now, either I or the assistant pastor celebrate Mass on the Tuesday evening before the Parish League Council meetings.
6. I go to the League dinner for members held twice a year.
7. Right at the beginning when I arrived, I encouraged the recruitment of a few younger women, and encouraged one of them to take on spiritual development. It was she who with other women parishioner friends conceived the “Women’s Power Breakfast” testimonial breakfast/brunch celebration, and recruited other younger women to join the parish League Council.
8. Since my appointment as Diocesan Spiritual Advisor, in my Parish I have been putting in the bulletin an attractive piece to recruit women to the Parish League Council, with a fill in and cut off portion to join or ask for further information. Already some new members have joined because of it.

Do you have any suggestions how councils can encourage their absent spiritual advisors to be more present?

In light of the League objects and policy, it would be good for spiritual advisors to invite the chairpersons of spiritual development to meet together and consider those articles and their points as so many avenues for activity that would be potentially very beneficial for the spiritual development of members and women at large.

All spiritual advisors and chairpersons of spiritual development and other League officers and chairpersons at various levels should be very wary of engaging in the “litany of woes” by focusing on all that is not happening or that each other isn’t doing but should be doing, and so on. Guilt is not a very good motivator. With compassion for those who feel discouraged let’s lead and not dwell there.

Instead, since this is a new millennium of evangelization, why not take delight in being called by the Lord to collaborate in designing activities for the purpose of advancing the Gospel, that is, of finding ways in which League members and women at large today are in need of Good News?

Now that is something much more motivating and might actually be fun, not to mention beneficial to so many women, who would be eternally grateful for having their lives enriched and made fertile again by the vitality of the Blessed Trinity!

1. Where pastors are showing no interest or even resistance towards the parish League council or its members, may I suggest some brave, kind, loving, gentle, and positive members get together, pray for the pastor for a novena of days or weeks – depending on how hard the case is – develop a strategy for approaching him when it won’t be inconvenient for him, approach him and simply say something like, “Father, we know you are busy, etc... and we’d just like to help you. Is there anything you’d like us to do for you and for the parish?”
2. “No! Leave me alone!” should not be taken as a definitive refusal. The next step is to fast, do penance out of love for him, pray longer and with more people in the prayer chain – all praying out of love for the pastor – and repeat step one. Keep intensifying step two and going back to step one until the Lord reveals his will for the parish and the parish League Council and that pastor. I remember too well my own resistance.
3. You, my brother pastor and spiritual director, try to listen to League members and be available to them. Try to accept to be loved and supported by them; as it is life-giving to CWL members to love their pastor and spiritual advisor. It is out of the love we receive from God through these remarkable women that we can be moved to love them in return and gladly serve them and collaborate with them.
4. By collaborating with the chairperson of spiritual development and the council president the holding of the installation ceremony can be very meaningful and also beautiful. If it is held during a major Sunday Mass, it will also reveal something of the League to the congregation for the good of all the women there who would benefit so much from joining the League.
5. League members love to give expression to their love, devotion, and affection to Our Lady of Good Counsel by holding the “crowning of Mary” in May each year. This cannot happen without the enthusiastic support of the pastor and spiritual advisor.
6. The same is true for the Mass for deceased members each year in November.

7. Whatever effort the pastor or his assistant expend to celebrate Mass on the Tuesday evening before the Parish League Council meetings will be richly returned in the spiritual development of the members and the ways they will then be a blessing for the parish and for women at large in the community.
8. It is gracious for the pastor and spiritual advisor to go to League dinners for members held twice a year. It doesn't have to be painful and can actually be fun. These women are marvellous company, and you can move around the tables.
9. It is a powerful support for the pastor to encourage the recruitment of women of all ages and especially of younger women to join the parish League Council. If any pastor or parish asks, our Becket Parish Secretary Heidi or I will be glad to send them a copy of our CWL recruitment ads for the bulletin. We have a few different versions.
10. I highly recommend encouraging the chairperson of spiritual development with other women parishioner friends to plan and put on a "Women's Power Breakfast" testimonial breakfast/brunch celebration.
11. There is no better way for a pastor to discover a whole new world in the CWL than by attending the annual conventions: diocesan, provincial, and national, and in that order if possible. Each level higher is a richer expression of the objects and policy of the CWL at work, and showcases a richer diversity of the League's members, who are its greatest resource.
12. Pastors and spiritual advisors will find comfort in experiencing in the company and support of the CWL what Jesus experienced in the company of the women disciples who, Luke reports in chapter 8, accompanied Jesus and provided for him.

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