

Best Practices in Catholic Church Ministry Performance Management

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Best Practices in Catholic Church Ministry Performance Management: Introduction

Charles E. Zech, Ph.D.

“*The Church is not a business.*” So those of us who conduct research and teach about Church managerial practices are regularly reminded. The appropriate response is, “Yes, the Church is not a business. But it does have a stewardship responsibility to ensure that all of its resources are used as effectively as possible to carry out God’s work on earth.” Among other things, this involves managing both its financial and human resource assets in an efficient manner. In the case of financial assets, stewardship takes the form of financial transparency and accountability at all levels. In the case of human resource assets, good stewardship involves assisting those engaged in ministry (whether clerical or lay, paid or volunteer) to achieve their greatest potential through the various components of performance management.

Church leaders at all levels seem to have gotten the message that financial accountability and transparency are important. More effort is being put into properly involving Church members in financial decision making through structures such as Diocesan Finance Councils and Parish Finance Councils. More and more dioceses and parishes are making a better effort to provide parishioners with annual financial reports that are understandable, meaningful, and accessible. While as a Church we still haven’t progressed as far as many would like in our financial accountability and transparency, at least the need is recognized in most quarters.

The same cannot be said about developing our human resource assets through performance management techniques. For a variety of reasons, the Church has lagged well behind other organizations, including other non-profits, in its willingness to even address this critical issue.

This book is intended to be a first step towards rectifying that deficiency. It tackles the tricky questions relating to the performance management of lay

Church workers (both paid and volunteer) and clergy (priests and deacons). Performance management is multi-faceted, ranging from issues about hiring, job descriptions, performance criteria, performance appraisal, formation, and firing procedures. As much as we might wish it were not so, the church as a charitable organization is subject to the same civil law employment regulations as companies in the private sector. At the same time, there is support for the performance management of Church ministers (including clergy) in both Canon Law and in Church tradition. It has been said, “If you want to introduce something controversial like performance management to the Church leadership, begin your statement with the phrase, ‘As the Church has always done . . . ,’ and you will receive immediate acceptance.”

The question might be asked as to why the notion of performance management, especially the performance appraisal piece, has not been embraced by Church leaders. Among the reasons identified by chapter authors in this book are:

- The lack of training in performance management techniques in both our seminaries and our lay ministry programs
- At the parish level, the close personal relationship between those doing the performance appraisal (e.g., a pastor or staff member) and those staff members being appraised, who might well be parishioners themselves and have many supportive friends in the parish
- The view that performance management is a secular, materialistic concept at odds with the Church’s core values
- The abstract nature of many outcomes, such as “a change in peoples’ minds and hearts,” which are frequently either unobservable or unmeasurable
- Recognition that often ministry is performed (as frequently is the case of pastors, permanent deacons, or parish life coordinators) in a setting where their activities cannot be routinely monitored by their evaluator(s)
- A reluctance or inability to distinguish “who one is” (e.g., an ordained priest) from “what one does” (e.g., manage a complex organization like a parish)
- The view that an honest performance assessment, which might contain some negative comments, is somehow “un-Christian”

Nevertheless, the times demand that performance management be taken seriously at all levels of Church life. Most of the discussion in the chapters that follow relate to the issue of how best to go about doing it.

THE DESIGN OF THIS BOOK

Following this introductory chapter is a chapter by Archbishop Donald Wuerl of Washington. In his chapter, Archbishop Wuerl emphasizes the importance of accountability in a hierarchical church, and reflects on how mechanisms for accountability in the Church are determined by the unique nature and mission of the Church. This, of course, is the crux of the performance management issue: in the spirit of good stewardship, how do we ensure accountability among those engaged in a ministry while observing the special nature of what it means to be Church? There exist aspects of the Church, in her identity and mission, that form the context or framework for any specific mechanisms of accountability and against which those mechanisms themselves must be measured. At the same time, all members are called to accountability through three related but distinct activities: communication, consultation, and collaboration.

Following Archbishop Wuerl's chapter the book is divided into two parts. The first part considers performance management issues with regards to the laity, and the second part examines factors affecting the performance management of clergy.

Daniel Koys, a business school professor, leads off the first part with a chapter that provides critical background to the discussion. Koys presents a review of the elements contained in a three-step performance management system: define, evaluate/communicate, and improve/reward. The chapter demonstrates how these "best practices" in performance management as employed in the business sector can be adapted to fit the unique circumstances of the faith-based sector.

In another chapter intended to provide needed background and context, David DeLambo summarizes some findings from his landmark studies of parish ministry. The chapter presents background information on the current practices at the parish level with regards to performance management issues such as job descriptions, job contracts, performance appraisals, and personnel policies and employee handbooks, and highlights the rather informal nature of these practices at the parish level.

In a third chapter meant to introduce the issues, Christopher Anderson traces the history of the establishment of standards and competencies (which are at the heart of performance management) for lay ecclesial ministers. Developed by four groups representing various ministries performed by lay ecclesial ministers, and approved by the USCCB, five standards were identified, and they serve as the headings for 33 competencies. The strength of this effort lies in the fact that these certification standards emanate solely from Catholic institutions, unlike other professional certifications which come from either

government or secular organizations. Anderson goes on to provide examples of how these standards can be applied in practice.

Zeni Fox covers many of the critical issues in the performance management of laity with her aptly titled chapter, “Performance Management in a Family Business?” Her data suggests that lay ecclesial ministers would welcome the affirmation and professionalism that performance management would include. At the same time, she acknowledges that the “strongly relational pattern” inherent in parish hiring and firing decisions presents a challenge to the development and implementation of an effective performance management system. She doesn’t believe that a strict business model of performance management would fit the reality of parish ministry. Nevertheless, she recognizes that there is much that can be learned from the business model. At the same time there is also much that can be learned from more typical Church approaches, such as discernment, spirituality, and interpersonal ways of holding one another accountable.

Part two of this book is concerned with an even thornier issue, the performance management of clergy. In the first chapter of this part, Fr. John Beal appropriately begins by examining the issue of the performance management of clergy from the perspective of the Code of Canon Law. Although the Code does not explicitly call for ongoing performance appraisals, it does suggest the need for some kind of regular assessment of pastoral performance to allow for warnings and corrective action that could avert the need for removal. Thus, it provides a canonical warrant for the introduction of some sort of system of performance management for pastors and other ecclesiastical office holders. Fr. Beal also discusses the tradition of the performance management of clergy emanating from the Council of Trent. To insure that truly qualified candidates would be appointed as pastors, Trent required that candidates for vacant parishes were to be examined by the bishop and a board of examiners about their theological competence, pastoral prudence, and other qualities suitable for the direction of the vacant parish. When all of the candidates had been examined, the bishop and the board of examiners voted on their suitability. Only those judged competent could lawfully be appointed to the parish.

In the following chapter, Sr. Katarina Schuth compares and contrasts the high degree of performance appraisal that seminarians are subject to with the fact that for the most part performance appraisal is limited to the early years of ordination and if it happens at all, it is much less comprehensive. Her research has revealed that priests who do undertake various forms of self-evaluation are usually satisfied, or even delighted, by the outcome of the process. Rather than resulting in criticism, they learn of the general approval of parishioners.

In her chapter, Lisa Berlinger points out that a performance appraisal is a developmental tool, and therefore should not be used to determine punish-

ment, discipline, removal, termination, incarceration, or institutionalization. Instead, its purpose is to facilitate learning. Major transgressions should be handled outside of the appraisal system, and the bishops have their own systems for handling problems with clergy. The primary purpose of a performance appraisal for clergy is for the development of the priest. This means the purpose is not so the organization can have a form in its file or keep up its system. The chapter concludes with some specific suggestions about how to conduct the performance appraisal of a priest. These include discussions on the timing of the process, learning to give and receive feedback, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation, all presented within the context of the performance appraisal of a priest.

In a chapter similar in intent to Christopher Anderson's earlier chapter on standards and competencies for lay ecclesial ministers, James Alphen articulates a conceptual framework to facilitate alignment of priests' performance with the purpose of their ministry. The project implements the recommendations contained in the USCCB's 2001 document, *The Basic Plan for the Ongoing Formation of Priests*. The framework is based on competency modeling, a contemporary management practice used in business, education, and other sectors. Its purpose is to help learners achieve desired performance by identifying the constituent knowledge, skills, and attitudes of behavioral outcomes that reflect the desired performance. It experiments with the application of a generally accepted performance management practice in a specific performance setting, formation for priests and presbyterates. This chapter introduces the conceptual framework to date by analyzing twelve cells representing the interfaces of the three presbyteral munera and the four dimensions of formation.

The performance management of the emerging clergy model of permanent deacon is very topical. Deacon Justin Green considers the performance appraisal of deacons from a variety of perspectives: deacons as clergy; deacons as quasi-staff; deacons as volunteers; the multi-site, extra-ecclesial role of deacons; and deacons as professionals. He concludes that the best fit for developing a performance management system for permanent deacons is one based on a model of deacons as professionals.

The final chapter of the book considers a series of recommendations.

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Framework of Accountability in the Church

Most Reverend Donald W. Wuerl, S.T.D.

*I*n this chapter, I want to discuss the idea of accountability in a hierarchical Church and how what is assumed of Church leadership, i.e., that it is properly carrying out its responsibility, is verifiable in an affirming and credible manner.

In the remaining chapters of this book, there will be discussions on best practices regarding lay ecclesial ministers and the clergy. Each of these topics has its own specific focus as a part of a much larger picture. What I would like to do in this chapter is to reflect with you on how any mechanism for accountability in the Church will be determined by the unique nature and mission of the Church. Thus, I will highlight the aspects of the Church, in her identity and mission, that form the context or framework for any specific mechanisms of accountability and against which those mechanisms themselves must be measured.

While it is important to manage effectively and responsibly the many institutional aspects of the Church and her ministry, we can only do this fruitfully with a clear understanding of how different the Church is from any other reality we experience, even though the Church in her spiritual and pastoral ministry relies on the organizational and managerial skills and expertise required to carry out her work in a structured manner.

The discussion about accountability in a divinely established hierarchical Church takes us into an area that is distinct from—even though in some of its manifestations it might be related to—the question of specific, practical, managerial or fiscal controls that might be put in place to ensure the proper oversight of the many institutional aspects of Church life and ministry.

In this chapter, I want to focus first on the larger issue of the accountability of pastors of souls and how such unique responsibility can be both exercised and verified.

SUPPOSITIONS

There are a number of “givens,” facts, in our discussion because we are dealing with a divinely established and structured reality. At the same time, there is a need to integrate these “givens” into the vicissitudes of the human condition and the circumstances of our day.

Bishops and pastors have a leadership and oversight role that is theirs by ordination. Our discussion recognizes the sacred ordering of the Church and focuses more directly on how those in holy orders can best exercise their responsibility.

To understand governance in the Catholic Church, we have to go back to its origin, its divine institution and its purpose. Fully aware of the perennial importance of the truth he was revealing to us, Jesus established his Church. In Matthew’s Gospel, after Peter’s dramatic profession of faith, Jesus foretold his intention to establish a Church that would endure until the end of time. “You are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my Church” (Mt. 16:18).

After his Resurrection and before his ascension in glory, Jesus fulfills his promise with the mandate to Peter and the Apostles: “Feed my sheep” (Jn. 21:17).

The Church—the Body of Christ, the People of God—is structured, visible, and identifiable. The Lord Jesus endowed his community with a structure that will remain until his kingdom is fully achieved. He willfully chose the Twelve, with Peter as their head, as the foundation stones of “the new Jerusalem” (Mt. 19:28). The Apostles and other disciples share in Jesus’ mission and his power precisely to lead and serve his new body so that, together, through works of faith and love, the kingdom of God might become manifest in the world.

In his apostolic exhortation, *Sacramentum Caritatis*, our Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI, calls us to reflect on the Church as the great sacrament of Christ’s presence. Jesus intended to remain with us in a new, yet visible, manner. In imitation of his own Incarnation in which the divine and human came together, Jesus would continue in his Church in which the spiritual and temporal would be present.

In establishing his Church, Christ instituted the sacrament of baptism to bring about a new creation of all of the faithful who form his new body. Thus, we look to the faithful laywomen and laymen to see the vitality and mission of the Church unfold in the world around us. As the Second Vatican Council in its document on the apostolate of the laity taught us, the task of the laity is the evangelization and sanctification of the temporal order. The same vision is evident in the dogmatic constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium*.

All of us through the gift of baptism are configured to Christ as part of his body—the Church. In the Eucharist we participate in the mystery of Christ’s death and Resurrection in a way that we share in this great saving action. The Church of Christ, spread throughout the entire world, is manifest in her many particular churches entrusted to the care of a successor to the Apostles and always in communion with our Holy Father, Universal Shepherd of the Church and successor to Peter.

As the ordination rite teaches us, the work of the bishop who has the overall responsibility and oversight of a diocesan Church is carried out in intimate collaboration with his brother priests and, in a particular manner, with the pastors with whom the bishop shares the responsibility for teaching, sanctifying, and leading the flock entrusted to his care. Deacons are configured to Christ the Servant. Priests and bishops are configured to Christ the Head.

The Second Vatican Council chose, in a particular way, to speak of the Church as the “People of God” (*Lumen Gentium*, 9-17). The Church is not an abstraction. It is certainly not merely a group of bishops or priests in important positions, nor is it a group of individuals who determine what they will believe and how the Church will be constituted. The Body of Christ is made up of all the members of the family of faith who are blessed with the gifts of the Holy Spirit and are united as one body around the Apostles and their successors—with Christ as its head.

The Church does not hover formlessly over the cities and communities of people. Nor does it exist solely in the hearts of people. Rather, it is reflected in the lives and activities of the faithful as they carry out their God-given mission with their God-given abilities to transform the temporal order and bring it into God’s kingdom. At the service of the Church are the hierarchy and the apostolic tradition which guarantee that the saving revelation of Jesus Christ continues to be proclaimed, celebrated and lived in every successive generation.

GOVERNANCE

When we speak about structure, governance, and accountability, what must be presumed is the “obedience of faith” that the Second Vatican Council speaks about in its *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, Dei Verbum* (DV, 5). In other words, we must assume as our starting point that which Christ has revealed, established and ordained, and also entrusted to a continuous living body in which the power of the Spirit, transforming grace and the gifts of God are constantly at work. Otherwise, we might be tempted to reduce the question of accountability to one of organization, popular approval, or even poll

taking to determine the content of the apostolic proclamation, or the horizons of our Catholic ministry.

Our frame of reference for all means of accountability is the vision of the Catholic Church communicated by Christ, articulated in the Scriptures and passed on in a 2,000-year unbroken, living tradition. Yet, we also recognize that the fullness of this vision has not always been realized in individual members. It is the nature of an incarnational Church that the divine is mediated through the human. Christ promised that his Holy Spirit would be with his Church until the end of time to preserve it in all truth. He never assured us that every believer, including priests and bishops, would be sinless or even good managers. But he did guarantee that his teaching would not be adulterated, falsified, or lost. It is a wondrous gift passed on in earthen vessels.

How ministry can be exercised in a highly complex, technological, modern world is one thing; that it be done and in continuity with the apostolic understanding of that ministry is another. Both are related, but the latter is foundational to the former. Thus, no matter how we envision best practices, we do so realizing that the Church in which these best practices develop and are realized is already a uniquely structured reality that will bring its own determinants to what can ultimately be recognized as a “best practice.”

Our task as we ask how best we might serve the Church is one we approach with great reverence, mindful that what we deal with ultimately is mystery, Incarnation, grace, and redemption.

ACCOUNTABILITY

Given the divinely established and sacramentally articulated structure of the Church to guarantee that the teaching and ministry of Jesus continue in our time, how do we ensure a level of accountability? Or, put another way, how do we provide for the leadership of the Church a mechanism to be accountable together with the whole body? This, I believe, is an important issue of our day—and not necessarily driven by current events alone. It is healthy for the whole body to know that members and leaders alike are accountable to Christ and his Gospel. What we must insist upon is both accountability and, at the same time, respect for the distinct and unique nature of the Church.

There is a temptation for some to make the Church into an American democratic organization as if we, the members, had supreme authority over the body. Our starting point is different. We begin with the faith community and recognize that there already is a foundation of truth for the consensus out of which we act. We do not vote or take a headcount to determine what we

should believe or how the Church should be structured. But we are called to see that the whole Church is faithful to its identity, message, and mission. This responsibility extends to a verifiable oversight of the way in which we deal with the array of means at the service of ministry. These are sometimes referred to as the Church's temporalities. But it also includes the right relations among and treatment of Church personnel.

Pope Benedict XVI in his first encyclical, *God Is Love*, reminds us of the three-fold essential work of the Church: to proclaim the Gospel, to celebrate the sacred mysteries, and to provide a ministry of charity. These three activities—reflected in the educational, pastoral, and charitable works, structures and institutions of the Church—require appropriate, adequate professional direction and oversight.

In fact, today the very effectiveness of the structures, institutions, and programs of the Church can be facilitated and, to some extent, measured by their governing policies and guidelines, as well as by the mechanisms that provide for the implementation of these various directives.

When we address accountability in the Church, we must be careful not to use a political model for a reality that transcends human political institutions. When we consider accountability in the Church, we are speaking of a real and valuable principle, but one that must be exercised within the reality of the spiritual gift that Christ established in his Church.

Everyone in the Church is called to accountability before the faith—the Creed—of the Church. No one is above the Creed. The Church teaches with divine authority in matters of faith and morals. We are all called out of the received teaching to respond with an adherence that transcends our own particular preference, appreciation, or even understanding.

At a practical level, all members—lay and clerical, baptized and ordained—are called to accountability operative in an openness found in three distinct but related activities: communication, consultation, and collaboration.

Whatever our responsibility, we must exercise it with an openness that takes the form of shared information (communication), reporting on the discharge of our duties, and accepting critique of our actions (consultation), as we strive to work together for the spread of the Gospel (collaboration).

Today no organization, ecclesiastical, political, economic, academic, or other can function well without adequate and extensive communications. This can take the form of sharing information, first of all among those in leadership positions, then between leadership and those they serve, and finally between the body and the rest of the wider community.

So often we assume that what we know is also known and appreciated in like manner by others. Our starting point should include actively sharing significant information.

Along with the sharing of information should be an openness to hear from others, particularly those involved and affected by our actions. Consultation involves some process for feedback. At its best, consultation includes a serious evaluation of all valid and credible points of view on the issue.

Out of a sharing of information and the serious weighing of the variety of points of view should come a commitment to collaboration. This is particularly true when the responsible authority arrives at a decision.

Acceptance of the decision of legitimate authority should be manifest in a commitment to its collaborative implementation. Such active collaboration, even in difficult decisions, more readily follows on an active prior consultation rooted in shared information.

The structures to do this already exist. If our goal is to establish as a working principle within the Church a level of openness or transparency, let us look at what we already have and see how it should be used to achieve the outcome.

If our purpose is to encourage an attitude of accountability and a climate of collaboration, should we not begin with those structures that are already a part of the fabric of the Church and that respect her identity and mission?

On the diocesan level, canon law already requires that there be a priest or presbyteral council and a finance council. Wisdom also urges the existence of a pastoral council made up primarily of lay people. On the parish level, there should be both a pastoral/parish council and finance council. These structures provide mechanisms for the regular and routine participation of both the clergy and the faithful in the oversight or verification of the leadership ministry.

What do these advisory and participatory institutions bring to the Church and to the issue of accountability? The first thing they provide is a forum for the sharing of information. Communication of information is the beginning of that level of consultation that produces effective collaboration.

In this model, the presbyteral council and the diocesan pastoral council are utilized to tap the expertise of the clergy and laity of the diocese in formulating policy and seeing that it is carried out. The authority of the bishop remains intact since the final judgment remains his. Yet, his accountability to the Church is highlighted through the process of communication and consultation.

This process and approach presumes the absolute unique magisterial role of the bishop in matters of faith and morals. At the same time, it engages the bishop on the diocesan level and the pastor on the parish level with the expertise and experience of all of those who make up the Body of Christ.

Most of the faithful assume and, I believe, rightly so that their priests and bishops are doing a good job, that they are responsible to Christ, to his

teaching and to his Church. By sharing more information with the faithful entrusted to our spiritual care, we complement what is assumed by what is now verifiable.

When all the members of the body assume their proper and responsible roles in the Church, ecclesial communion is strengthened. There is a sense in which solidarity is nothing less than the practical expression of the Church's communion or unity. Communion in and with the Church obliges its members, even in practical decisions, to support the legitimate exercise of a bishop's responsibility. Solidarity, which is the practical manifestation of spiritual communion, requires such support. Otherwise, the unity of the Church becomes a theoretical consideration and the role of the bishop, who has the responsibility of unifying, is diminished.

In our discussion so far, we have kept our focus on the Church as manifest at the diocesan level by a bishop and in the local parish under the care of a pastor. Another whole area of accountability involves Catholic educational institutions, universities, colleges, and others, as well as Catholic health care institutions and Catholic social service agencies. All of these expressions of the Church are also called to accountability as they carry out their mission in the name of the Church. The very nature of a Catholic institution, which is part of a larger community of faith, makes it incumbent upon that institution to work out of a lived and concrete communion with its diocesan bishop whose task is to oversee all ministry in the local Church. Institutions that are recognized as Catholic and that exercise their ministry and activities as a part of the Church are not independent from the Church. As members of the Catholic community, they must live and act within the structure of this community. That means working in solidarity with the bishops.

How these institutional expressions of the Catholic faith are held accountable to the unifying and authenticating ministry of the pastors of the Church is another question for another national gathering. The *Ethical and Religious Directives for Catholic Health Care Services* as well as *The Application of Ex Corde Ecclesia for the United States* are examples of ways today in which clearly articulated avenues of accountability are being developed through mutual consultation and collaboration, and against which institutional identity can be measured and verified.

For the bishop or pastor accountability understood as the transparency of the exercise of authority does not mean giving up decision-making authority. It does, however, mean that such apostolic authority is exercised in the context of an informed and consulted local Church.

The challenge of accountability in the Church in the United States today calls for bishops not to abdicate our responsibility, but to share information.