CULTIVATING UNITY

*Cultivating Unity* is a pastoral initiative of NOCERCC, the National Organization for Continuing Education of Roman Catholic Clergy, in partnership with CARA, the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate at Georgetown University, to foster the unity of priests and bishops, in response to *The Basic Plan for the Ongoing Formation of Priests*, promulgated by the Catholic bishops of the United States in 2000. Cultivating Unity is intended to be a transformational process engaging the entire diocesan presbyterate with its bishop in frank and faith-centered dialogue leading to a common rededication to priestly ministry.

**Components**

*Research:*

A survey of priests;

An interview of the bishop;

Listening sessions with priests

*Convocation:*

A carefully-structured and attentively-facilitated convocation, centered in common prayer and faith sharing, with bishop and priests;

Resources available to assist the local church in following up on action items arising from the Cultivating Unity process.

**Leadership Team**

The Cultivating Unity process is directed by Sr. Mary E. Bendyna, R.S.M., Ph.D., Executive Director, CARA; and Rev. Stephen J. Fichter, Ph.D., Interim Executive Director, CARA. Convocations are facilitated by a distinguished team of faculty, including:

Rev. Patrick M. Carrion  
Director, Deacon Formation Program, Archdiocese of Baltimore  
Pastor, Catholic Community of South Baltimore, Baltimore, Maryland

Rev. Susan Nienaber  
Senior Consultant, The Alban Institute  
Trainer, psychotherapist, professional mediator

Dominic J. Perri  
Facilitator & organizational development consultant working with dioceses, presbyterates, religious communities, parishes, & national Church organizations

Victoria M. Tufano  
Pastoral Associate, AscensionChurch, Oak Park, Illinois  
Facilitator & speaker, writer & editor: liturgy & Christian initiation

Trish Sullivan Vanni  
Director, Emerging Models of Pastoral Leadership Project
Speaker, author, facilitator, & consultant working with parishes & professional groups in ministry formation & mission development

Rationale

In considering the ongoing formation of the entire presbyterate, Part III of the bishops' Basic Plan echoes the teaching of the Second Vatican Council and of Pope John Paul II in Pastores Dabo Vobis, the 1992 apostolic exhortation issued following the 1990 Synod of Bishops dedicated to “the formation of priests in the circumstances of the present day”:

The ongoing formation of a presbyterate is the deliberate cultivation of the unity of the priests and their bishop, a unity that responds to God's grace and the mission entrusted to them.

The ongoing formation of a presbyterate's unity makes the very presbyterate a more transparent sacramental sign. “This unity among priests . . . makes [them] witnesses of Jesus Christ, who prayed…'that they may all be one’” [Pastores Dabo Vobis, no. 74]…And the very purpose of that unity is a sacramental one,…to draw others into faith: "that the world may believe that you sent me" [John 17:21].

It is clear that the ongoing formation of presbyterates is significant for the vitality of the Church's mission. It is also clear that the formation of presbyterates centers on cultivating their unity. [In Pastores Dabo Vobis Pope John Paul II] summarizes teaching from Vatican II and offers this simple yet challenging statement: “The ordained ministry has a radical 'communitarian form' and can only be carried out as ‘a collective work’” [no. 17]. This truly is the teaching of the Second Vatican Council abundantly evident in Presbyterorum Ordinis, which so emphasizes the communitarian-collective dimension of priestly ministry that it quite deliberately avoids any reference to "priest" in the singular form. From start to finish, the decree only speaks of “priests.”

[Pastores Dabo Vobis] identifies priestly sacramental existence as essentially and intrinsically linked to a life lived in unity among priests themselves and with their bishop. The text reads, "Unity among the priests with the Bishop and among themselves is not something added from the outside to the nature of their service, but expresses its essence inasmuch as it is the care of Christ the priest for the People gathered in the unity of the Blessed Trinity." These words speak of the sacramental value of living presbyteral unity. Such unity lived out becomes an effective or efficacious sign of the presence of Christ caring for his people and leading them into the unity of the Trinity" [no. 74].

[Pastores Dabo Vobis] elaborates the basis for presbyteral unity by linking it to the heart of the Church's mission and humanity's trinitarian destiny: "The nature and mission of the ministerial priesthood cannot be defined except through this multiple and rich interconnection of relationships which arise from the Blessed Trinity and are prolonged in the communion of the Church, as a sign and instrument of Christ, of communion with God and of the unity of all humanity" [no. 12].

For more information on Cultivating Unity, contact the NOCERCC National Office by email at nocercc@nocercc.org or by telephone at 410-978-3676.
The rapport between a bishop and his priests is the single most important factor contributing to the health of a diocese. So says Bishop Blase Cupich, who is in a position to know. The 60-year-old Nebraska native and former chair of the U.S. bishops’ Committee on Vocations heads the Rapid City, S.D., diocese.

“It is clear to me after more than a decade of serving as a diocesan bishop that the one nonnegotiable for the growth of a local church is a sound and vibrant relationship between a bishop and the members of the presbyterate [the body of priests within a diocese],” said Cupich.

On one level, the priest-bishop relationship is fraught with the sort of supervisor-staff tensions that arise daily in the secular workplace. The bishop is the one person who oversees priest appointments, their aspirations and their futures. But, of course, bishops are not typical bosses and priests are not average employees. Diocesan priests, for example, promise obedience to their bishop on ordination day.

Theologically, the Catechism of the Catholic Church describes the “brotherhood” among priests and their bishop: “All priests … are bound together by an intimate sacramental brotherhood, but in a special way they form one priestly body in the diocese to which they are attached under their own bishop.”

Pope John Paul II summarizes the teaching from Vatican II: “The ordained ministry has a radical ‘communitarian form’ and can only be carried out as ‘a collective work’” (Pastores Dabo Vobis).

Still, a healthy relationship is a two-way street, said Cupich. “It is a relationship forged by ongoing communication and consultation, respecting the fact that priests have a deep reservoir of pastoral experience that can only benefit the bishop as he works for the building up of the church entrusted to his care.”

Such “openness” and “regular consultation,” said Cupich, “creates a sense of trust with priests and conveys that the bishop has respect for them. This kind of approach cannot help but generate a favorable climate for the bishop to challenge his priests when they need challenging, and motivate them to take ownership for the needs of the entire diocese and not just the parish or community they serve.”

The good news is that according to “Priests in the United States: Satisfaction, Work Load, and Support Structures,” a 2002 study by Paul M. Perl and Bryan T. Froehle of the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate at Georgetown University, “most priests view their bishop as supportive and understanding toward priests and describe their own relationship with their bishop as good.”

The study also found, however, that “priests who perceive a lack of encouragement or support from fellow priests, who have relatively few close friends who are priests, and who view their bishop as unsupportive are more likely than others to express dissatisfaction [with their priesthood].” In fact, 10 percent of priests say they have “seriously thought about leaving the priesthood in the past five years.”

Yet, the 2002 eruption of the sexual-abuse crisis inserted pain, trauma and mistrust into the bishop-priest relationship. At last summer’s meeting of the U.S. bishops, several bishops and priests began talks about how bishops can repair relations with priests after six years of scandal.
Jim Alphen is executive director of the National Organization for Continuing Education of Roman Catholic Clergy, whose mission is promoting presbyterate unity. Alphen’s organization, in conjunction with the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, offers dioceses a unique program called “Cultivating Unity.” This program is a transformational process engaging the entire diocesan presbyterate with its bishop in frank and faith-centered dialogue leading to a common rededication to priestly ministry.

Cultivating Unity is a two-part program. One part includes research -- listening sessions, an interview with the bishop, and a survey of priests. The second part is a carefully structured, facilitated convocation with bishop and priests, centered in common prayer and faith sharing.

Alphen’s group also provides resources to assist dioceses in following up on action items arising from the Cultivating Unity process.

Perl, the researcher and Alphen collaborator, identifies one easy fix: “If a priest is hospitalized, every effort should be made by the bishop to visit that priest, as this issue comes up frequently in focus groups.”

“It takes a courageous bishop to want to undertake Cultivating Unity,” said Alphen.

Tom Gallagher is a regular contributor to NCR. Ideas for a “Mission Management” story? Contact him at tom@tomgallagheronline.com.