

A Practical Participation Guide for a Council Responsible for Discernment

During the Meeting

For sessions, committees, commissions, and other councils exercising responsibility for consequential discernment. These recommended practices supplement—not replace—the applicable Book of Order, governing procedures, and confidentiality obligations.

1. Begin with dignity, clarity, and sufficient time

- Remember that a routine council meeting may be life-changing for those appearing before it. Introduce participants, explain roles, the meeting's purpose, authority, process, and possible outcomes.
- The chair should maintain respectful dialogue, prevent intimidation or interruptions, and allow adequate time for each participant to be heard. Offer reasonable pauses or breaks when appropriate.
- Confirm that members have read written statements submitted under applicable procedures. Invite participants to clarify or correct the council's understanding of those statements.
- Do not treat anxiety, tears, frustration, or disagreement as proof of dishonesty or wrongdoing. Compassion and accountability belong together.

2. Listen to understand and seek the whole truth

- Let people complete their explanations. Ask open questions; summarize important points and ask whether you have understood correctly.
- Distinguish established facts, allegations, firsthand accounts, secondhand reports, interpretations, and unknowns. Repetition is not necessarily independent corroboration.
- Examine evidence that challenges the council's preliminary view. Consider context, conflicting accounts, and information that may have been overlooked.
- When consequential information concerns a participant, provide an appropriate opportunity to understand and respond to its substance, consistent with applicable rules and confidentiality.

Practical listening test: Could we explain this person's perspective in a way that the person would recognize as fair and accurate—even if we disagree?

3. Examine assumptions, authority, and fairness

- Ask whether prior relationships, reputation, institutional interests, cultural or theological differences, or informal conversations are shaping judgments. Do not give evidence extra weight solely because it comes from someone in authority.
- Invite members to voice doubts and alternative interpretations. Address conflicts of interest or possible bias under the applicable procedures.
- Confirm the relevant Book of Order provisions, the council's actual authority, any applicable standard of proof, and the required opportunities for participation. Do not import courtroom rules that do not govern the matter.
- Consider relevant previous discernment and constitutional interpretations, distinguishing binding requirements from advisory or historical guidance. Apply comparable standards consistently while attending to genuine differences.

4. Determine whether sufficient discernment has occurred

Before taking consequential action, assess whether understanding and participation are sufficient for the matter's complexity, gravity, consequences, and reversibility. Perfect certainty is not required; a crowded agenda or desire to finish is not evidence of sufficient discernment.

- What facts are established? What remains disputed or unknown? Would additional information materially improve understanding?
- Have affected people been meaningfully heard, and have significant misunderstandings been addressed?

- Have we followed applicable requirements, considered alternatives, examined bias, and assessed likely harm—including the consequences of delay?
- **YES — Sufficient discernment supports a favorable decision for the person or body under consideration.** The council concludes that the concerns do not warrant an adverse action or that a favorable resolution is appropriate.
- **NO — Sufficient discernment supports an unfavorable decision for the person or body under consideration.** The council concludes that the evidence and applicable standards justify an adverse decision. It should clearly explain its reasons and any available next steps.
- **NOT YET — Sufficient discernment has not occurred.** The council determines that important information, meaningful participation, or other necessary considerations remain incomplete. Where permitted, the council should identify what further discernment is needed, establish a plan and reasonable timetable for addressing the unresolved matters, and arrange for further deliberation. The affected parties should be informed of the reasons for the delay, what additional steps will be taken, what is expected of them, and when they can expect further communication.

5. Explain the Faithful Why and next steps

- Explain what was decided and, to the extent responsibly permitted, the principal facts, standards, constitutional provisions, and reasons supporting it. Distinguish a final decision from a recommendation.
- For “Not Yet,” explain what remains unresolved and what happens next. Communicate the decision and its reasons in language affected people can understand.
- Identify who will communicate the outcome, carry out commitments, and provide information about any applicable reconsideration or review procedures and deadlines. Preserve an accurate record.

6. Continue toward shalom

A vote may conclude deliberation without completing discernment. Consider ongoing pastoral care, accountability, implementation, restoration where appropriate, and evaluation of effects over time. Shalom means truthful, just, reconciling wholeness—not merely the absence of conflict. Christ provides the norm; the Spirit produces fruit; fruit provides evidence; shalom provides the horizon.

Council meeting checklist

- ☐ We explained the purpose, roles, procedures, and possible consequences.
- ☐ We considered written submissions and gave participants sufficient time to be heard.
- ☐ We tested evidence, contrary perspectives, assumptions, and possible bias.
- ☐ We confirmed our authority and applicable constitutional requirements.
- ☐ We explicitly considered Yes, No, or Not Yet and whether discernment is sufficient.
- ☐ We explained the Faithful Why and assigned follow-up responsibilities.