A Letter from a PPC Chair

Dear Fellow PPC Chairs

I once stood in your shoes at the threshold of a new beginning – the start of a journey unknown – filled with questions, trepidations, hope and (in my case) a lot of naivety! There are many things I have learned over the past years that I wish someone had told me when I began my journey as you do today. I hope I can humbly pass on some of the lessons and 'wisdom' I have learnt. They may help and encourage you, though honestly, if someone had offered me advice back then, I am not sure I would have been willing to listen. So perhaps that may be the first lesson … to seek advice, to be hungry and curious for information and to enter the journey with a humble and open heart! At the end of my term of office as PPC Chair, I know for sure that I am a changed person. Indeed, I feel ready now to do the job of PPC Chair. So please humour me a little and let me share my lessons that I hope will help you a little as you step into your role.

Much is said about Servant Leadership. As we look around the world today there are countless examples of the opposite – of what it is certainly not. There are examples of people in leadership roles who selfishly and arrogantly use their position for personal gain. We know what servant leadership is NOT. But truly – what does it mean to be a servant leader.

To start with, servant leadership is the recognition that you have been elected or appointed to your position to serve God and to serve His people and the mission of the Church. It is not about you or your status or your importance. You are charged with a solemn responsibility. Knowing this should keep you strong, focused and humble in all you do – faithful to your purpose, God's will. The decisions you make, the actions you take and the programs that you support must always be for the greater common good. Let this remain your compass through your term of office. When things get murky, when things get complicated, return to this foundational principle, and always remain deeply rooted in your faith, staying close to Jesus and listening to the voice of the Holy Spirit echo in your heart.

BE A BUILDER

Sometimes you may have the choice: to break down or build up. Our first job is to build! We are here to build the Kingdom of Heaven on earth, to build the church in our communities, to build something good, to build hope in a world where there is much despair.

As builders we need to build teams. We can connect people to work together, people of common interests, people who will benefit from each other and in the process grow.

We need to build communities. A community is a fragile and delicate entity. It needs to be nurtured, and it needs to be built on firm foundations. You are the builder who must lay and protect those foundations which are made up of love, trust, mutual respect, unity, and inclusiveness.

Pope Leo says it all the time. We need to build bridges. If there is a chasm somewhere, a divide, then your job is to build a bridge over that chasm so that all the parties have a means to approach each other from every side on a safe road. Not all people will agree with everything but if we keep on building bridges of dialogue, tolerance and mutual respect those differences will not divide us but contribute to better understanding and enrich us. This is also the starting point for building consensus. If there is a bridge between people, then there is a way to share understanding, identify commonalities and build consensus. If there are no bridges, then there is no path by which to come together. Forming small groups in the parish is one way we build our community, but while doing that, always build bridges between those groups so that those groups do not become isolated silos of special interests. Build bridges between groups, connect them with each other, encourage groups to be aware of each other and how we all fit into the bigger picture of serving the greater good.

Build people. One of the most satisfying and gratifying things for a PPC leader is to see people flourishing in their ministries and to watch people go about their work in the church with zeal and competence. One of the best measures of your leadership is how people grow, learn, and thrive through your leadership. Enable people, train people, empower them. Formation of people in their ministries is also immensely gratifying work – and Godly for sure! Take formation seriously – provide training and as many learning opportunities as you can. Our faith is a treasure chest of inestimable value and depth. Roll up your sleeves and reach into the gift given to us. If each team leader does that for their team, imagine the result!

Get to know people. Take a genuine and sincere interest in everyone – who they are, where they are from, what's going on in their lives and those of their families. It may be hard – but learning people's names is a great way to start. And as you get to know people, you can connect them with others. I don't know how many times I've been chatting to someone and introduced them to someone else who has something in common…. And it's surprising what a small world we live in! Building people and building relationships is a deeply rewarding part of being a PPC chair and leader in the parish.

LISTEN AND BE SYNODAL

Everyone now knows the word 'synodal', but do we practice it? The truthful answer is, 'no' or 'no, not perfectly.' We still have meetings where the loudest voices or the strongest opinions are the only ones heard, drowning others out. To be synodal is to actively listen. Synodality is not a technique out of a management textbook. It is sacred. It starts in prayer by listening to the Holy Spirit and inviting the Holy Spirit into the entire process of listening to each other and discerning God's will. The presence of the Holy Spirit is therefore crucial because without it, the gathering is simply a 'listening session' or a 'town hall meeting'. The only way to learn to be synodal is to practice it repeatedly. After a meeting, assess how it went and what went well and where the process can be improved. To listen we must be quiet, we need to still ourselves and we need to observe others – what they say, how they say it, and how others react. We need to 'read' the room

and to be sensitive to nuances and undertones. We need to have empathy and compassion and to be accepting – to listen without judging. We need to create an atmosphere of trust in a synodal session. A safe place must exist where differences are accepted and respected.

BE COURAGEOUS

Be Bold. Be Catholic. When we read the life of Jesus, there is nothing lukewarm in our faith. Jesus was radical. He loved unconditionally and without any limit. He gave his life and forgave us when we were still sinners. Why then should we be any different? Our faith is a bold one, and we have been assured repeatedly in scriptures to fear not – or to be fearless. Now is the time for Catholics to be proudly and boldly Catholic. The world needs us to shine the light into all the corners of darkness and gloom and to dispel darkness wherever it exists. So as a PPC Chair, be that bold brave, fearless leader. Arm yourself with the gospel and trust that the Lord will equip you for the task ahead. Do all things with love. Even if you disagree, even if you need to correct someone – and especially in those circumstances – do all things in love.

CREATE A CULTURE – THE WAY WE DO THINGS AROUND HERE

One of the first things you can (and must) do when you start your term of office is to set up 'the rules of engagement' or the WOW – ways of working – or whatever you want to call it. It is about setting up how the PPC team will work, what structures and channels of communication you will adopt within the PPC and across the parish organisation in the portfolios and ministries. The portfolios give you a great structure and under these 7 areas you can include all the pastoral activities of the parish as teams and sub teams.

How will you organize? How will you communicate? How often will you meet? Where will you store minutes? What will be the reporting structure and how will that work. Get organized and be professional. Start as you mean to carry on. Establish protocols to be followed. Define what is not acceptable too – e.g. make it known by your example and behaviour that gossiping is not acceptable. Lead by example in terms of how we speak to each other, the respect we show everyone, and the fairness with which everyone is treated. A culture is created by your communication stye, standards of performance (e.g. keeping deadlines, producing quality materials); your decision-making processes; atmosphere of openness, trust and equality; team approach of inclusion and collaboration. Culture is a combination of values, integrity and behaviours. Take time at the outset of your term of office to set this up. It is worth the effort!

THREE YEARS IS A SHORT TIME

One of the biggest enemies of your term will be time. As we tend to work around weekends, that means that there are only 52 weeks in the year. If you miss one weekend – that is effectively a week that has gone by. Also, we only have one Christmas each year, and one Easter. We do not have time to do things by trial and error. If you are deciding on something for Christmas and need to change it next time, a whole year goes by. And in your term of office, you only have three Christmases. So, make time count and treat it as a precious and scarce resource. Weekends get busy. This means you need to plan well and prioritise well too. You have heard the phrase 'LESS IS MORE' which is very relevant here. You are setting off on a marathon, pace yourself well for this journey. Choose wisely the things that you are going to do. This does not mean that you cannot be

brave, ambitious and courageous. Learn to say no … for the right reasons but also set your sights high and shoot for the stars. Jesus would!

You have three years. What are you going to do with that time given to you?

VISION

As the PPC Chair, you need to be the steward of the vision, the flag bearer of the vision and you need to make sure that everyone knows the vision, shares it and all are marching towards it. Remind your teams constantly about it and do periodic self-assessments to ask yourself where you are and how you are doing.

But what makes a good vision? A vision for your parish must be Christ-centered above all else. It cannot be a business plan or a set of targets borrowed from corporate management books. It must be rooted in the Gospel and aligned with the mission of the Church. Ask yourself: if Jesus walked through our parish doors today, would He recognize His mission in what we are doing? Would He see His love reflected in our community?

A good vision is also specific to your parish. Every parish has its own unique character, its own particular needs, its own specific gifts and challenges. A vision that works beautifully in one parish may not fit another. So take time to know your parish deeply—its history, its people, its neighborhood, its particular calling. What is God asking of this community in this place at this time? Listen to the people. Listen to the Holy Spirit. The vision must emerge from prayer and discernment, not from a template.

Your vision should be aspirational yet achievable. It should stretch you and your community to grow, to reach higher, to do more than you thought possible—but it must also be grounded in reality. An unrealistic vision leads to frustration and failure. A vision without ambition leads to complacency. Find that sweet spot where faith meets action, where trust in God's power meets honest assessment of your resources and capacities.

Make your vision visible and tangible. Write it down. Share it often. Weave it into every meeting, every decision, every initiative. When someone proposes a new ministry or activity, the first question should be: how does this serve our vision? When you need to make a difficult choice about priorities or resources, let the vision guide you. A vision that lives only in the minds of the PPC is not truly a vision—it must be carried in the hearts of the entire parish community.

And finally, remember that the ultimate vision is always the same: to build the Kingdom of God, to make disciples, to be the hands and feet of Christ in the world. Your parish vision is simply your particular way of living out that eternal call in your specific corner of God's vineyard.

BUILD RELATIONSHIPS – ESPECIALLY WITH YOUR PRIEST

Always remember the purpose of the PPC. It is to counsel and support the priest in his pastoral work. The laity has an important role to play in the Church of today and tomorrow. The number of priests is declining and the pressures and demands on priests and expectations of them is huge. Many of our priests have multiple jobs and responsibilities. A priest's job is full time - 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. And the life of a priest can be lonely. As parishioners, we go to our priest with our joys and sorrows, our woes and suffering, and they carry our burdens upon their shoulders. As PPC Chair, you need to support your priest wholeheartedly. Whatever is said between you must

be kept in confidence – even the trivia. It's a relationship of mutual respect, trust and complete honesty. And remember, always to remain humble and with good humour. Build a partnership with your priest and make sure that it is based again in faith, friendship and love. Your role as PPC Chair is not to elevate yourself above others and to be pompous or important. You are also not a priest or even a 'mini-priest'! You (importantly) represent the laity, you are the laity and you are an important bridge to the laity for your priest. Priests do not like surprises – so in playing your role as a bridge, it is important to keep your finger on the pulse of the parish so that you can communicate that to your priest. He will know this himself, but you are a backup and a safety net and an extra pair of eyes and ears. You are a builder remember, one who builds consensus, and raises people up.

IN CLOSING

So, dear friend, as you begin this journey, know that you are not alone. The Holy Spirit who called you to this ministry will sustain you through it. Your parish community, your fellow PPC members, your priest—we are all walking this path together. There will be moments of frustration and moments of pure grace. There will be meetings that feel endless and encounters that remind you exactly why you said 'yes' to this calling.

I began by telling you that I now feel ready to be a PPC Chair—just as my term ends. But here is the beautiful paradox: God doesn't call the equipped; He equips the called. You are already enough. Your willingness, your open heart, your desire to serve—these are the seeds from which everything else will grow.

Three years from now, you too will sit down to write your own 'letter of wisdom'. And in that moment, you will realize that this journey changed you in ways you cannot yet imagine. You will have grown – and maybe not all in the ways of this world. You will have become more patient, more compassionate, more trusting in God's providence. You will have learned that leadership in the Church is not about having all the answers—it's about asking the right questions, listening deeply, and trusting that where two or three are gathered in His name, He is there in the midst of them.

Go with courage, dear PPC Chair. Build with love. Listen with humility. Lead with faith. And remember always: you are planting seeds in a garden that belongs to God. Some you will see bloom; others will flower long after your term ends. Trust the Gardener.

May God bless you abundantly in this sacred work.

In Christ's service.

By: Karen Parkin, PPC Chair, Our Lady of the Visitation