



Vatican: we have a §2 problem.

The OpenBooks Project Update June 2023

Are UK bishops making ‘the mother of all errors’ on parish financial transparency – hence on synodality? And might it apply elsewhere, too?

“In different parts of the world, transparency is seen as an essential practice for a Church growing into a more authentic synodality.” That was #79 in the Vatican’s October 2022 Working Document for the Continental Stage (DCS) by the General Secretariat of the Synod.

But transparency, accountability (and synodality) have to be seen to be done – not just claimed or assumed. The authors cited a UK observation: *“The Catholic Church needs to become more open and transparent, everything is done in secret. Parish Council agendas and minutes are never published, financial committee decisions never discussed or balance sheets shared”.*

It’s not true of all. But in 2022, similar concerns surfaced in many UK parish synodal reports and diocesan syntheses on-line. In Clifton’s, for example, *“It was often commented on that some people appear to know the workings of the parish, but there are many who do not, including having a knowledge of the financial state of the parish and how money is allocated to different projects.”* Nottingham’s Synthesis shared a related issue: *“Often parishes splinter into small, closed groups with no cross communication.”* (It’s a sign of Cliquerism: few are called, and all are chosen.)

The unease is consistent with the objective data in the OpenBooks Project. This examines financial transparency in an open-to-anyone source: the websites of 1600+ UK parishes, all 34 dioceses, and 40+ bishops’ conferences. *Inter alia.*

The findings? The laity’s concerns about financial transparency are well justified. They shouldn’t have arisen. Clergy have a blind spot for a key Canon Law. Bishops could easily remedied these – and set a timely example of synodality in 2023, forty years after a first.

“Ignorance, the mother of all errors, is especially to be avoided by priests of God”, said St John Paul II in his Promulgation of the 1983 Code of Canon Law. *“To each person is given a source of knowing his or her proper rights and duties...the canonical laws by their very nature must be observed”.* Ignorance of the Law by the laity is one thing. But clergy ignoring – knowingly not observing - a Law feels like wandering into wilful blindness.

Good accountability practice in the Code means that in each diocese just one person is down to be the steward of observance. Canon Law 392 §1 says: *“...a bishop is bound to promote the common discipline of the whole Church and therefore to urge the observance*

of all ecclesiastical laws.” Do they? How? All? (The Project found up to a quarter of parish websites show 0-9 Sacraments rather than seven; a sort of post-Code lottery...) One Canon tests respect – for Law and laity.

The 1983 Code continued a 1917 finance duty on which UK bishops can easily check observance.

Here’s Southwark’s lay-friendly version in their procedures on-line in 2019. *“Timely filing of the parish Financial Return is obligatory under the provisions of Charity Law (to enable the Trustees of the Diocese to submit their audited consolidated accounts to the Charity Commission) and under Canon Law (Can. 1287 §1).* But there a further – not onerous - step for priests, working with the advisory Finance Committee they’ve appointed. Since 1983, §2 has to be done.

Canon 1287 §2 introduced an entirely new duty: parishioner-facing reports. After Vatican II, this innovative nod to the faithful was initiated and painstakingly honed by a *coetus studiorum* before worldwide consultation. Though breaking new ground, §2 keeps to one-person accountability. The official English version on the Vatican website is: *“According to norms to be determined by particular law, administrators are to render an account to the faithful concerning the goods offered by the faithful to the Church.”* Southwark’s norms translate this as: *“Under the provision of Canon Law (Can.1287 §2) a Parish Priest should give an account to his parishioners of how the money they have given or raised has been used”.*

The §2 rationale wasn’t stated. But as well as encouraging good stewardship, engagement, and transparency, it might also be seen as common sense and courtesy to the faithful, appreciating their right to be informed. This seems all in the spirit of Vatican II – and synodality today.

The form of reporting isn’t specified either: the Code has to suit the circumstances of parishes worldwide. Today, most UK parishes are served by a professionally-designed website that parishioners have paid to set up and maintain. You might expect to see finance and other reports, minutes, committee membership, plans, highlights and happenings – providing information differently from newsletters, noticeboards, talks, photocopies, or Facebook. Take a look for yourself and see what OpenBooks found.

NB It’s big money. Rough calculation suggests that since 1983, the UK faithful’s offertory and diocesan fundraising donations have been towards £8 billion in real terms. In a decade, a typical parish’s finance committee will handle upwards of £1 million. And not only the faithful give to a parish. Since 1991, public funding by Gift Aid has provided perhaps £600 million. So HMRC is the biggest single source of income and stakeholder in many parishes. The biggest single outgoing in many? The diocesan levy.

How's the obligation of financial reporting to the faithful faring? Well, UK websites show scant evidence that the duty of c1287 §2 is observed by parish clergy or known by the laity.

1. UK bishops rarely make their parish financial policies transparent and available on-line (even though this is a *Laudato Si* way). OpenBooks found only 7 among the 34 dioceses. Of these, between 2019 and 2021 two dropped c1287 §2. No policies were seen on good stewardship practice when parishes merge.

2. Bishops dilute transparency and accountability for c1287 §2. Some Conferences and dioceses keep close to the official Vatican words. Others were found to shift the duty of reporting to the priest's advisory Finance Committee. One English diocese says it's the parish's job – a odd take on accountability seen also in personal correspondence with spokesmen for three bishops and a Bishops' Conference. Urging, in three dioceses, policies said: *"In particular, the Trustees must ensure that...parish accounts are presented annually to the faithful"*. (Their 300+ parish websites searched in 2018 and 2021 showed only a handful of reports.)

3. Many UK Bishops, finance councils, parish priests and their finance committees exhibit webful blindness. OpenBooks found that nearly all parish websites show a weekly newsletter or bulletin, usually with a weekly short sermon by the priest. Many have a finance page, often about donating. Yet fewer than 5% of 1600+parish websites - in some dioceses, none at all - show *any* trace of finance reports, minutes, AGM notes, or membership of finance committees or PPCs. Quite why there's a reluctance to use websites is an area for other research. Yet: if some, why not more, or most? #79 of the DCS seems a very valid concern.

4. UK parish websites are neglected as places of recent record. Few show any annual history, highlights, happenings. Rare are annual statistics sent into the diocese, such as FHC, baptisms, confirmations. Mass counts are even rarer (NB two dioceses' on-line data revealed startling parish variations year-on-year well before the pandemic). No example was seen of parish lessons from the pandemic that might be of help to successors when the next one comes along.

5. Most UK parishioners are way under-informed compared to their equivalents in churches, chapels, mosques, synagogues, temples - charities in their own right, with very detailed annual reports on finances and activities, all available on the UK regulators' websites.

Bishops urge the faithful to give more – and continuously - to maintain parish life. But they overlook parish priests not giving the reports required. This may have downsides. First, there may be a link between a lack of information and declining donations, engagement and Mass attendance. Second, as more and more parishes merge, committee cliqueralism may mean less transparency and quality decision-making. Third, there's the risk of another awkward story aired in social and other media –

"Catholic clergy ignore their own Church law - flocks kept in dark on millions of their money."

Cannelling Canon 212 §3, in 2017 four UK bishops were sent early findings from OpenBooks. Responses came from two bishops' secretaries. One said that each of their 60+ finance committees reported to their parish at an AGM. (Checking, only 4 websites showed anything at all.) The other said that many if not most of their 200+ parishes made reports available to parishioners (only 4 of their websites showed one). These spurred the main Project research of 1600+ websites in 2018/19 and 2021-2.

In 2018, one very senior bishop personally e-mailed to HG: *"The topic you have tackled is complex and, as you will know, concerns matters which are already under regular public scrutiny through annual audits and public reports to the Charity Commission."* (This seems only to be about observing c1287 §1. Of his 200+ parishes in 2018 and 2022, fewer than 10 websites showed any parish finance report to the faithful – a simple matter, outside the remit of the Commission.)

In October 2022, a OpenBooks Project letter, Summary and Suggestions were sent to the bishops of all 34 UK dioceses – often linking c1287 §2 to synodality seen in their reports and syntheses.

The obvious main Suggestion was for bishops to refreshing their commitment to transparency, along these lines for all parishes covered by a website:

- **Bishops** could upgrade, update and publish their diocesan c1287 §2 policy and procedures.
- **Parish priests** could be required to produce an annual financial report to the parish in the form of a PDF file including all offertory, second collections, parish statistics, and a commentary. They must post this on the website – and publicise this.
- **Finance Committees** could post their Minutes on the website *asap* – and publicise widely.
- **Parishioners** en masse might give and renew approval of these norms – as active synodality
- **Priests & parishioners** might combine to compile an annual parish record for the website archives.

Of the 34 UK dioceses, responses came from only 12. Most of their bishops passed the Project to advisers. Two saw no cause for concern. One archdiocese asked for further help. The bishop above repeated his words. In June 2023, no change in the observance of law c1287 §2 has so far been noticed, notified, or urged.

So, a problem for the Vatican? How to get bishops to avoid or correct the mother of all errors in transparency and authentic synodality today. One first step: invite them and advisers to browse their diocesan and a sample of parish websites, and see what they show – or don't.

This June 2023 brief is by Hugh Gibbons Conductor of the OpenBooks – an independent, non-academic project. The October 2022 Summary & Suggestions for UK Bishops, this article, and some special diocesan versions are available for anyone as PDF files at www.just1.org.uk. E-mail hughgibbons@just1.org.uk