

A possible Financial Transparency Policy for Catholic Dioceses in the UK and beyond

Rationale: respecting courtesy, common sense, Canon Law and synodality

Transparency is a word you won't find in the Bible - or the 1983 Code of Canon Law. But transparency – and concern about the lack of it - was spoken of in many of the Synodal Pathway reports by parishes, diocesan and national syntheses, the DCS, Instrumentum Laboris - and the first Synthesis of the Synod in Rome in October 2023. *“Transparency and a culture of accountability are of crucial importance for us to move forward in building a synodal Church.”*

So now seems right to refresh, remind and firm up where finance information can and should be openly available. Of course, dioceses can't be transparent in everything. But there are obvious opportunities and expectations for them to be more open, especially since all nowadays have a resource also not seen in Bible or Code: websites.



Financial transparency matters. It does so because being open about things is a key element of trust and integrity. It's a sign of courtesy and appreciation. It's also common sense: people give more if they're more informed. It's an expression of applied synodality. And Canon Law has obligations very much on the side of transparency as part of good stewardship.

Transparency has to be seen to be done – not just assumed or claimed. So this policy sets out actions and ethos to show financial openness – without affecting charity law procedures.

Canon 1287 has two very different finance reporting duties for priests in charge of a parish. Its first part, §1, is the centuries-old annual report to the bishop and diocese. In the UK, it's submitted on-line today, usually the painstaking work of the advisory parish finance committees that priests must appoint. The individual parishes' returns are then consolidated into the diocesan annual reports that Trustees have to send to their charity regulator. Canon Law doesn't require publication, but diocesan websites usually show them. And in any case, in the UK it's impossible

not to be transparent - the charity regulators' websites show recent diocesan reports, and handily flag up headline statistics.

There's a second important part. In the November 1983 Code, Canon 1287 §2 introduced the idea of significant financial transparency in parishes. Created in the spirit of Vatican II, it was a groundbreaking obligation for the parish priest and right of the faithful. *“The Church of today lives from the offerings of the faithful and they too, would like to know how these were spent...”* said one of its initiators in 1968. Painstaking expert debate and worldwide consultation resulted in §2.

Here's the official English form of §2. *“Administrators are to render an account to the faithful concerning the goods offered by the faithful to the Church.”*

There's a proviso: *“According to norms to be determined by particular law”*, which allows local rulings to meet the circumstances of a particular diocese. For example?

In all dioceses, Administrator means parish priests. “Render an account” could also mean not just presenting “the accounts” but reviewing the past year, looking ahead, and posting an open report on the website. Again, interpretation of “goods offered” could be wide, to include money given to the Church whether in a weekly collection, standing order, or contactless; in obligatory and voluntary collections, and diocesan fundraising schemes.

And “by the faithful” in all dioceses means far more than weekly massgoers – for example, short- or long-stay visitors, leavers, newcomers, returners during the year. And as Gift Aid provides a large amount of UK public money for parishes, it's right that their finances should be on general public view.

And websites allow transparency on finances in a way undreamt of in 1983. They make it easy to provide information – as reports, Minutes, links – and be an open book to anyone offering goods, anywhere, 24/7.

Overleaf are the suggested Policy features...

A possible Financial Transparency Policy for Catholic Dioceses in the UK and beyond

The sort of actions and ideals in mind

The obligations below will be familiar and widely practiced, at least in part.

They're meant to be straightforward, not particularly onerous, and purposeful.

They're needed, to make sure that a Diocese is seen to be as open as possible today with all finances – appreciating all those whose goods offered make their work possible.

On the Diocesan website

- The Trustees must ensure an easily-found archive of annual reports, and a link to the Diocese on the charity regulator's website.
- They must list members of the Diocesan Financial Council, with information on their qualifications for this post under c 492 §1.
- They must show current diocesan parish financial procedures and related policies.

In the annual report to the parish

After the annual financial return to the diocese is submitted, within a few weeks...

- The parish priest must provide the parish (and his successors) with his short report on key finances. This should show name and appreciation of his appointed Finance Committee members by name, and anyone else contributing in their related matters.
- The report must include detailed income and expenditure, balances and reserves; comparisons with previous years; and an informed commentary on the past year and the one ahead.
- It must also show all obligatory and voluntary second collections by the faithful, and the status of any ongoing parish or diocesan fundraising schemes.
- It must include the key parish statistics sent to the diocese eg FHC, Baptisms, Mass counts.

On the parish website

- The priest in charge must ensure that his annual reports are available as PDF or DOC files in an archive on the website. This must be continually publicised by eg a link in weekly newsletters or bulletins.
- For parishes not covered by a website, the parish priest must seek to make it available on-line in a nearby parish, deanery, or pastoral area – and publicise this.

In Parish Finance Committee Minutes

For parishioners, Minutes are an important and source of information on key decisions, assumptions, rationale, actions, legal correctness and people involved. For new clergy and committee members they are essential briefing. Very occasionally, publication may be limited because of sensitive issues. Otherwise:

- The parish priest must arrange for Minutes of all his Finance Committee's meetings.
- He must ensure these and any documents or information are in an archive on the parish website, and well publicised.

In an annual parish record

To show the context, it's a good idea to embed the financial report in a priest-led account of the past year's happenings and highlights – drawing on the help of individuals and groups in the parish – widely available on the website.

Finally, first steps by the diocese in the spirit of synodality now

To gauge the value of these ideas, dioceses might want Parish Finance Committees to assess them. Any eventual policy might benefit from being endorsed by a majority of parishioners in each parish – perhaps by a show of hands after a briefing at Mass...

