



The OpenBooks Project – Letter sent to all UK Bishops

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Dear Arch/Bishop

You may like this as a practical and unusual – if sometimes eyebrow-raising – gift for you to put to use throughout your arch/diocese

I thought you'd appreciate getting a first glimpse of OpenBooks. It's time to get the Project out of my head and into someone else's, if only to see if I've got things round my neck, as it were. (Think of me as, well now, an Expostulator - manifesting my right and duty under Canon Law 212 §2.)

OpenBooks is my long-running sort of one-person synod exploring financial transparency and accountability today. Its core: how's Canon 1287 §2 been getting on since it was carefully crafted by a *coetus studiorum* from February 1968 onwards - as a significant innovation in the 1983 Code?

The pages are a condensation of the Project today, findings and suggestions, lined with dozens of quotes encountered. If a digital copy would be handy to circulate, I'll be happy to e-mail back.

You'll see I simply looked at the information on the websites of 1500+ Catholic parishes and dioceses (and Conferences) mostly in the UK but exploring worldwide. For free. So it's easy for someone to go online and verify if my findings apply to a diocese or parish (and btw, to see parishes' variation in the latter's variations in the Sacraments shown...)

The sources now also include all the Synod Reports and Syntheses from UK Dioceses and Conferences, plus several dozen on parish website. These showed that transparency and accountability in parish finance and decision-making are widespread concerns. (Parishes merging may be susceptible to what I call Cliqueralism – fewer people deciding things, and a few more miles away).

My main finding? Something of a bishops' blind spot, perhaps. An investigative journalist's take might be that "Catholic clergy ignore their own Church law – keep parishes in dark on millions spent." In any diocese, very few parish websites show any sign of the financial transparency possible today – notably the priest's obligatory report to the faithful, Finance Committee or PPC Minutes, or AGM notes. Dioceses don't help. Few publish their 1287.2 norms on-line.

Not Wilful but Webful Blindness seems the problem. Unlike in 1983, parishes are not pre-internet. Websites mean it's easy to share and store significant documented information. But they're under-appreciated in parishes. Yet if some parish priests can post an annual financial report on-line, why not more, or most? It's not as though extracting a few figures from the Annual Financial Report sent in to you and putting them into a PDF on-line is a major burden on time. One number a week should do it.

So my suggestions for you to consider? You'll see they're aimed to be easy to effect, practical, and welcome. The main one is in your gift – upgrading and extending norms on Canon 1272.2. A twist? Asking the faithful to approve your changes. This might be a welcome sign of listening in response all those synodality efforts now - without waiting for the outcome of Rome 2023 way down the decade. Annual Parish Notebooks also feel like a good initiative, as does a quality mark.

Anyway, I hope this seems useful. Comments (and challenges) will be welcome – when time allows.

With best wishes for a good browse.

Hugh Gibbons
4 October 2022

“The Church has still a long way to go in terms of realizing transparency in her administration of temporal goods but Canon 1287 §2 has laid down the ground work.

Once transparency is diligently observed, proper management of ecclesiastical goods is not far behind.

And once there is proper and diligent management of goods, the Church may be able to effectively carry out her mission of evangelization and salvation in the world with special care for the poor and needy, respond well to the needs of the times, and manifest truly her spirit of ecclesial communion, and thus, stand out as a credible institution faithful and true to her mission and worth supporting”.

In “The Obligation of Transparency in the Administration of Temporal Goods of the Church in Canon 1287” Fr Robert Young 2016 Doctoral Thesis, Faculty of Canon Law, Pontifical University of the Holy Cross, Rome (and a Vice-Postulator in the cause of Darwin Ramos)

“A synodal ethos will enhance transparent and collaborative decision-making, listening out, in particular, for those who might have a ‘small voice.’”

In Bishops’ Reflection on the National Synthesis of the Bishops Conference of England & Wales 22 June 2022

“The mission of the journalist is to always stick to the facts: ‘The facts are these. My interpretation is this’. It distinguishes you from the storyteller... Journalists must remain human, humane and constructive.”

Pope Francis answers questions from journalists 10 September 2019, reported by Catholic News Service

“My own old-fashioned belief is that every Presidential message should be a model of grace, lucidity and taste in expression. At the very least, each message should be in English, clear and trenchant in its style, logical in its structure, and devoid of gobbledygook”.

Said to have been circulating circa 1961 in the office of the first US Catholic President, John F Kennedy



Welcome to an early eyebrow-raising browse for bishops and beyond

The pages here are a first glimpse of an unusual and practical contribution to the financial wellbeing of Catholic parishes and dioceses in the UK now - well before Rome 2023.

They should give some idea of the Project and its value – enough for bishops and others to consider whether the Suggestions offered might fit their diocesan and synodal ethos.

The Project itself is a sort of one-person synod on financial transparency and accountability in dioceses and parishes. The main source has been the contents of upwards of 1500 of their active websites examined from about 2017 onwards – particularly the observance of Canon 1287.2 in the 1983 Code. In mid-2022, this data was complemented (and often echoed) by the many Synod 2023 Reports and Syntheses.

These pages drawn up from the planned full report include...

- The catholic range of sources explored
- Main findings from dioceses and parishes
- Diocesan divergence from Canon Law
- A big array of quotes encountered
- Simple do-able suggestions for Bishops to consider. They include upgrading their interpretation of Canon 1287.2, letting parishioners approve; and encouraging an annual parish on-line notebook. There’s even a suggested starting date – the 40th anniversary of the 1983 Code of Canon Law!

Further information? Discussion? Happy to help.

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#1 For openers

SOME VOICES ENCOUNTERED IN THE PROJECT

"In 1983 Pope St John Paul II promulgated the revised Code of Canon Law with the Apostolic Constitution Sacrae Disciplinae Legis... Recent years have seen an explosive growth in what is now possible with modern information technology, a growth that could hardly have been imagined in 1983, let alone in 1962-65, the years of the Council."

Cardinal Vincent Nichols in *The General Data Protection Regulation: A Brief Guide for Catholic Dioceses*, Catholic Insurance Ltd 2018

"На што ідуць грошы з касцельнай скарбонкі? Where does the money go from the church piggy bank? Priests must submit a report to the believers about the donations that they make for the good of the Church, according to the norms that are set in a separate law (see Canon 1287 § 2)."

Norms seen on the website of the Bishops Conference of Belarus in 2017 & 2022 www.catholic.by

"I always find statistics are hard to swallow and impossible to digest. The only one I can remember is that if all the people who go to sleep in church were laid end to end they would be a lot more comfortable."

Mrs Martha Taft, cited in *Dim Wit* by Rosemary Jarski

"There are no mechanisms for listening, mutual input or communication between laity and hierarchy. Consultation is virtually non-existent, is a common complaint. 'The laity are simply not informed of what is happening and why.' A top-down, one-way communication (bishops via clergy down to people) was contrasted with the horizontal, sharing nature of the synod..."

National Synthesis Document 22nd June 2022 Catholic Bishops Conference of England & Wales

"The old bishop under whom I worked for twenty years and who was both a civil and a canon lawyer said Law, especially Canon Law, doesn't work at over 2000 metres above sea level."

Fr Michael Garnett, Peru, Letter in *The Tablet* 6 July 2019.

The complete set of Manuals for use in the Diocese is on the diocesan website. If you have broadband please consider if you need to print out the Manuals.

Nottingham Parish Administration Manual seen 2022

"A former colleague's wife, on arrival at her husband's new parish church, deigned to move a flower-stand from its accustomed place. The woman 'In charge of flowers' came straight over and over punched her."

Letter in *The Guardian* 17 December 2017 by Anglican vicar in Manchester Fr Alec Mitchell

"...for three weeks in the newsletter last month, and on the outdoor sign, and I made an announcement for the last three weeks at the start of worship, but I'm sorry you missed it"

US Methodist Pastor shares her experience and patience, and gets over 80 Likes at Unvirtuous Abbey's Facebook page in 2020.

"Which parish am I in? Please enter the postcode below to find the parish it belongs to."

Seen in a Diocese of Salford website mid-2021

"The emergence of Canon 1287 §2 as a universal legislation in the Church is the best summary articulation of the tenets of Vatican II Council... transparency comes as an indispensable principle in living out the thrust of the Vatican II Council for the world today."

The Obligation of Transparency in the Administration of Temporal Goods of the Church in Canon 1287. Fr Robert Young 2016 Doctoral Thesis, Faculty of Canon Law, Pontifical University of the Holy Cross, Rome

The church asks for money but is not transparent about how it is used.... On a parish level, there is a lack of consistency between priests in different parishes and from priest to priest in a parish."

Synod 2023 Synthesis Report by Diocese of Northampton

"Later in life, Tolkien found the Hammond too heavy and turned to more portable typewriters. Despite the pain it caused, he often wrote detailed notes about Middle Earth in longhand with a pen, before switching to his typewriter. He typed the entire manuscript of *The Lord of the Rings* twice in his favourite writing space - on his bed in an attic. In a letter written in 1964, he wrote to a friend: "I like typewriters; and my dream is of suddenly finding myself rich enough to have an electric typewriter built to my specifications, to type the Fëanorian script."

JRR Tolkien's Writing Habits, seen in <https://tonyriches.blogspot.com/2014/06/j-r-r-tolkienes-writing-habits.html>. (You can get English translated into Elvish using the Fëanorian script at <https://tengwartranscriber.github.io>)

"Overall, approximately 56% of parish giving was given under Gift Aid, with a further 15% eligible for the Small Donations Scheme, so the reclaims averaged £4,350 per parish, a vital source of funding to many parishes"

Diocese of Hexham & Newcastle Annual Report and Financial Statements 31 March 2021

"This is a tricky one between DH and I as I attend church and he's an atheist! He is happy to give to other charities, for example immediate crisis support or to charities that aim to create self sustaining projects..."

I really do want to increase my giving but feel it's not fair on DH to take from the family income for a cause he doesn't believe in - very tough."

'Boleh', 1 August 2016., one of 80 posts in Mumsnet discussion on how much to give every week to church. (ICYMI DH=Dear/Darling Hubby)

"Although parishes and dioceses are private entities, they operate in the name of the Church in service to members and the community at large with support from the faithful and the general public. As such, all parishes and dioceses should provide the faithful and the public with information about their mission, ministry program activities, and finances"

The US National Roundtable on Church Management Leadership Standards for Excellence Code and Canon Law Booklet November 2018

"Parish Pastoral Councils, Finance Committees and other consultative councils should be balanced in their representation of the communities they are called to represent and not be elitist or groups that simply talk about doing"

Synodal Synthesis by Irish Catholic Bishops Conference August 2022



#2 Shaking the internet's apple trees

ON-LINE OPEN-TO-ALL SOURCES MEANS SIMPLE METHODOLOGY

"In God We Trust.

All Others Must Bring Data."

Business canon usually attributed to William Deming - but data that others brought to www.quoteinvestigator.com shows that he denied authorship.

"As a child, I was taught "the scientific method – see a problem, devise a hypothesis, test it with experiment, I've never actually done that. Instead, we get some new tool, bang it on whatever is handy, and look through the resulting pile of data until we see a pattern. Then we look for a problem that maybe that pattern can resolve."

In Backwards Thinking by Br Guy Consolmagno SJ, Director of the Vatican Observatory, The Tablet 4 June 2021.

"Most forms of qualitative empirical inquiry have taken a minimalist approach to openness, providing only limited information about the research process, and little or no access to the data underpinning findings. What scholars do when conducting research, how they generate data, and how they make interpretations or draw inferences on the basis of those data, are rarely addressed at length in their published research...it can sometimes take considerable detective work to piece together a picture of how authors arrived at their conclusions."

Data Access and Research Transparency in the Qualitative Tradition by Colin Elman and Diana Kapiszewski. Published online by Cambridge University Press: 29 December 2013

"First I shake the whole apple tree, that the ripest might fall. Then I climb the tree and shake each limb, and then each branch and then each twig, and then I look under each leaf."

Attributed to Martin Luther.

The OpenBooks Project has the purpose of finding and assessing...

- the awareness, interpretation of, and attitudes to Canon 1287.2 – the parish priest's obligatory report to the faithful - as shown in diocesan norms on-line
- signs of observance of diocesan Canon 1287.2 norms shown on active parish websites – ie the priest's obligatory financial report to the faithful
- transparency and accountability in Membership, Minutes and other decision information for Finance and other Committees
- use of parish websites for archiving (eg Synod 2023 reports, pandemic lessons).
- AOB surfacing eg inconsistency with Sacraments; parish history

The 2018/19 Survey examined finance references on the websites of...

- about 60 episcopal conferences worldwide; plus the Oficina de Transparencia of the Conference in Spain, for its data on the socioeconomic value of the Church.
- all 34 UK dioceses; all in Chile, Argentina, France, New Zealand; and others.
- all parishes in 6 dioceses in England & Wales plus samples in many others.
- one parish's offertory data in its on-line newsletters, several years Finance and Pastoral Committee Minutes, and contributions to a diocesanwide appeal.

The mid-2021 Survey examined finance and other content in...

- the websites of over 1200 parishes/churches – all those listed in 7 dioceses in England & Wales, 2 in Scotland, 1 in Northern Ireland, and 2 in Australia
- the websites all 40 Cathedral parishes in UK and New Zealand
- annual mass count data for several years in 150+ parishes in two dioceses
- the Gift Aid norms in all dioceses; 2 years' data for individuals in one parish

The Summer 2022 Survey included

- All online UK Synod 2023 Diocesan Reports and Conference Syntheses; about 30 Parish synodality reports found through Google/Yahoo/DuckDuckGo
- The websites of 80+ parishes in one diocese looking for annual financial and synodality reports; PPC and FC Minutes; and presentation of the Sacraments

Other free on-line information sources included...

- Charity Regulators, for diocesan annual reports and accounts on-line: The Charity Commissions of England & Wales and of Northern Ireland; the Office of the Scottish Charity Regulator; An Rialálaí Carthanais, the Regulator for Ireland. In New Zealand, individual Catholic parishes are registered with the charity regulator Ngā Ratonga Kaupapa Atawhai who have their key financial information on-line.
- The on-line annual reports of about two dozen faith-based charitable organisations, including CoFE parishes, chapels, mosques, temples, synagogues.
- The Voice of the Faithful surveys 2017-21 of on-line financial transparency and accountability in all Catholic Dioceses in the USA.
- Her Majesty's Revenues & Customs; National Audit Office; National Census 2011.
- The Church of England's Research & Statistics Unit.
- National Leadership Roundtable; Association of Fundraising Organisations; Transparency International; National Council of Voluntary Organisations.
- Pew Research Centre on Religion and Public Life, and other academic units.
- MumsNet; a few blogs; some Facebook pages; not Twitter.

A handful of extra sources included...

- Half a dozen personal e-mails; letters and articles in some papers and on-line.
- In early 2021 two helpful backgrounders surfaced, originating in the Pontifical University of the Holy Cross, Rome. They're in faithful-friendly English.
- *"The Obligation of Transparency in the Administration of Temporal Goods of the Church in Canon 1287.2"* is Fr Robert Young's 2016 Doctoral Thesis in the Faculty of Canon Law (though clearly a big academic team effort for a definitive work that includes a detailed history of the worldwide efforts that went into 1287.2)
- *"What kind of transparency for the Church? Proposing operational transparency for processes, solutions and decisions in the Catholic Church"* is by Fr Cristian Mendoza Ovando in the open-access Church Communication and Culture www.tandfonline.com/toc/rchu20/5/2



#3 Dioceses could support more transparency

SOME OF THE FINDINGS FROM DIOCESAN WEBSITES

"We make ourselves powerless when we choose not to know. But we give ourselves hope when we insist on looking... As all wisdom does, seeing starts with simple questions: what could I know, should I know, that I don't know? Just what am I missing?"
Closing words of Wilful Blindness by Margaret Heffernan, Simon & Schuster 2019 ISBN13: 9781471180804

"Financial transparency increases the quality of the relationship between pastors and the laity in the Church, thus advancing co-responsibility... Financial councils in dioceses and parishes are not in place mainly for controlling but for assuring good planning..."
In: What kind of transparency for the Church? Proposing operational transparency for processes, solutions and decisions in the Catholic Church by Fr Cristian Mendoza Ovando, Church, Communication and Culture www.tandfonline.com/oc/rchu20/5/2

"But if a diocese is going to ask more people to give more, with that comes responsibility for accountability and transparency".
Cardinal (then Archbishop) Vincent Nichols speaking to priests in Westminster Archdiocese, as reported in The Tablet in late 2010.

"The effect of charitable activities on beneficiaries and society is at the heart of what charities exist to do, and stakeholders' reasons for engaging with charities. Reporting publicly and transparently on this impact can form the basis of improved effectiveness, accountability, legitimacy and trust: potentially securing stakeholders' ongoing support and engagement".
Dr Danielle McConville of the Queen's University Belfast Centre for Not-for-Profit and Public Sector Research in The Journal of Public Money & Management Volume 37, 2017 Issue 3 February 2017

Back-of-the-envelope calculation from the surveys suggest that since the introduction of the Code of Canon Law in November 1983, the Catholic faithful in the UK have given to their parishes something approaching £10 billion in today's money. Since 1991, public funding through Gift Aid has provided perhaps £600 million more. The history of Canon Law 1287.2 shows that it was specifically created so that parishioners could know how their donations were spent – not an after-thought to c1287.1 but for the spirit of transparency after Vatican II.

The official 1983 Canon 1287.2 as on the Vatican Website says *"De bonis, quae a fidelibus Ecclesiae offeruntur, administratores rationes fidelibus reddant iuxta normas iure particulari statuendas."*

The official (US) English version translates this as: *"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."*

NB In the 1983 Code, the term 'Parishioner' appears only once. The more catholic term 'Faithful' occurs 274 times – nearly always as a collective noun. "Parish" is seen 257 times, and "Parishes" 22. "Account" appears 46 times and "Accounts" twice – in all cases meaning narrative, not the English financial term "The Accounts". "Goods offered" are essentially financial, and may be given by other than massgoers in a parish – eg through joint bank accounts, by long-or short-stay visitors, government funding by Gift Aid or grants. "To the Church" may apply to giving for some special collections (eg Peter's Pence), and diocesan appeals. The Bishops' Conferences of Portugal, Italy, Belarus and the USA have documents affirming the obligation on the parish priest to make the report. "Transparency" does not appear (and God only once). TV and radio get mentions; but not the Internet – not born till 1991.

Dioceses have easy opportunities to promote greater financial transparency

- All UK dioceses have an active website. Trustees are (probably) accountable for the content of this and all their parish websites – and newsletters, blogs, etc.
- Not all post up-to-date or easily-found Trustees Annual Reports. The charity regulators' websites have up-to-date reports with key finance data syntheses.
- Most websites contain the names of Finance Councils and Trustees somewhere, but few show their qualifications under Canon 492.1.
- Norms for Canon 1287.2 are rarely shown on-line, and usually as parish operating procedures. In documents, reporting on finances was assigned variously to parish priests, their Finance Committee, 'the parish', or no-one in particular. It is framed as a duty to inform – not as a right of the faithful to informed. Between 2019 and 2021, at least two dioceses dropped this duty.
- In three dioceses, Procedures included *"In particular, the Trustees must ensure that...parish accounts are presented annually to the faithful."*
- One diocesan website posts detailed annual accounts for each of its parishes.
- Gift Aid notification policies varied – some dioceses seeing letters as a must.
- Pre-Covid diocesan data on years of claimed Mass attendance at parish level seen on two websites showed many unlikely year-to-year changes +/- 20%.
- In the Synodal Syntheses by CBCEW, finance matters got no mention; one in that by the Scottish bishops, and three in the Irish.

HRHG notes If some can, why not more – or most? That's a take-away from the Project. Dioceses could easily be more transparent by making sure that their website does show and archive up-to-date Trustees Annual Reports, and gives the bio details of Finance Council members. Moreover, they could publish their operating procedures on-line. Above all, bishops might update and open up their norms for Canon 1287.2, with use of parish websites to show these are met.



#4 Webful Blindness endemic in parishes

MAIN FINDINGS FROM PARISH WEBSITES

"A growing number of parishes, dioceses, religious congregations, and church-related institutions, programs, and organizations of all kinds now make effective use of the Internet for these and other purposes."

Vatican's Pontifical Council for Social Communications review of The Church and the Internet, February 2001

"Due to the coronavirus restrictions there was no Parish Annual General Meeting this October. However, we have produced St Joseph's Parish Annual Report 2020 which includes:

*+ Letter to parishioners from the Chairman of the Parish Council
+ Review of the year by Fr Michael + Update on parish health & safety + Report on parish finances by the Chairman of the Finance Committee; and + Financial Statement."*

On mid-2021 website of St Joseph's Parish Chalfont St Peter, in Northampton Diocese

"We all know that living with covid has been one of the most difficult times many of us have experienced throughout our entire lives. The financial year just ended saw us in lockdown and then trying to re-emerge and bring our parish back to some sort of normality. The figures for the Parish show that we have managed to maintain our income with regular offerings in line with last year. We have had the benefit of many one-off donations plus the monies received from the job retention scheme. On the payments side, the Diocese took the decision to keep the levy as low as possible."

Parish of St Joseph & St Elizabeth, Maidenhead Annual Financial Report for year ended 31 August 2021 by parish priest

Most UK Catholic parishes are covered by an active website

- This is one updated weekly with a newsletter or bulletin page – some going back months (useful those away on the day or for a while). A very few have just Facebook or Twitter accounts for short-term news.
- Finance pages were seen in many websites, sometimes with Committee names. Few referenced Diocesan procedures – and only one cited Canon 1287.2.

Parish websites are an under-appreciated information resource

- Though usually handsome using professional graphic design, many miss out on information, are not kept up to date, or are hard to navigate for eg Finance.
- Fewer than 5% of 1500+ websites visited in 2018-2022 showed any form of financial or AGM report, recent or not. In some dioceses, none was seen. This scale of absence in any diocese applied even where their procedures required a report; where Trustees said they had a duty to ensure this happens; and in all but three of the 40 cathedral parishes in the UK + New Zealand.
- Of the reports seen, nearly all were the traditional accounts with income, expenditure and reserves, and a short commentary (light compared with the charity trustees' annual reports in parish equivalents such as churches, chapels, mosques, synagogues, available on-line at their charity regulators' websites).
- For most UK parishes, the biggest single yearly outgoing is probably their Diocesan Levy. The biggest single source of income is HMRC through Gift Aid (with upwards of £500 million of public funding for them since 1991).
- Few websites showed any Minutes of the obligatory Finance Committee or documents relating to financial decisions. Any were fragmented, with scant continuous record of stewardship. PPC and AGM notes were rarely seen.
- The Pareto Effect - "The Law of the Vital Few" – is possible. On one website, two years anonymous data for 123 planned givers showed about half gave 80% of the total. In one diocese, the top 20 of 80 parishes reclaimed 45% of Gift Aid.
- Synod Reports cited complaints that parishioners were not informed enough about finances or who was making key parish decisions. On websites, some PPCs claimed to be updated on finances, but without evidence of sharing more widely – suggesting that "cliqualism" is a cause for concern.
- Parish statistics sent to the diocese (eg FHC and baptisms) were rarely seen.
- Few parishes made use of their website to show a record of events. Parish history was usually centred on buildings and priests. Though perhaps covered in newsletters, very few archived any celebration of the people of the parish, highlights of the year, an appreciation of the culture and achievements of the parish, outreach, or social justice support.
- No website was seen with lessons from the pandemic for use in years to come. In 2022, few parishes showed a Synodal Report sent into the dioceses.
- Over a quarter of websites were unorthodox in the Sacraments shown – from none to nine (RCIA and funerals often added, Vocations dropped).

HRHG Notes If some parish priests can, why not more – or most? Websites have long been well-established alongside traditional means of communication. They have advantages of being available 24/7, low-cost, easily updated. Adding an annual financial report of 2-3 pages as a document should be no great burden (the data will be drawn from the report sent to the diocese under Canon 1287.1 and Charity Law). If an annual financial report to the faithful is produced as a digital document, it's no more demanding than uploading a newsletter once a week. All involved in parish decision-making and administration might encourage and appreciate websites' value in their communication mix today.

Hence the main suggestion for bishops: update and open up the norms on 1287.2.



#5 The duty of one named cleric – or whole parish?

DRIFT IN ACCOUNTABILITY SEEN WITH CANON 1287.2 NORMS

"In the course of our research for particular laws, the few results we were able to collect reveal the lack of implementation of the mandate of Canon 1287 §2 in the different regions and particular churches, if not well understood...Some particular norms and guidelines consider it even as one of the duties of the parish finance council rather than that of the administrator."

In The Obligation of Transparency in the Administration of Temporal Goods of the Church in Canon 1287.2 by Fr Robert Young 2016 Doctoral Thesis, Faculty of Canon Law, Pontifical University of the Holy Cross, Rome.

"There's one further canon that you can use to support the right of financial information – and again it's not complete. It's not as sweeping as many of us would like, but Canon 1287 in the section on the code of Church property says that those in charge, the administrators of church property, pastor of a parish, bishop of a diocese, abbot of a monastery, whoever is the administrator of the Church property, have the obligation to report to those who supported it, who gave money to the Church, or endowed property, or something like that. They have to be accountable to them. And in our Church, that's all of us; that's everybody with envelopes, right? That's everybody who is contributing in any way, and most parishes and dioceses do that to a greater or lesser extent. Some kind of financial disclosure is, I think, part of every parish and diocese."

Canon Law commentator Fr James Coriden speaking on "The Parish in a Time of Diminishing Numbers of Priests" at Sacred Heart Church, Detroit on Monday 19 March 2007.
Seen at elephantsinthelivingroom.com

EXAMPLES OF NORMS IN FAITHFUL-FRIENDLY LANGUAGE

Nottingham Diocese 2021: *"It is the Parish Priest's responsibility to report on his administration to the Curia...this is performed through the annual financial return to the Finance Office (Canon 1287 s1). It is also the Parish Priest's responsibility to report to the faithful (Canon 1287 s2) and this should also be done annually."*

EXAMPLES OF NORMS CHANGING ACCOUNTABILITY FOR REPORTING

- **French Bishops "Les Biens des Paroisses et le Diocèse."** *"In accordance with the provisions of Canon 1287 §2, this council is also obliged to report to the faithful on the use of the offerings they have made."*
- **Buffalo Diocese Parish Pastoral Council Operational Manual 2019.** *"Finance councils are charged in Canon 1287.2 to render an accounting to the faithful concerning the goods offered by the faithful to the Church in accordance with norms determined by church and civil law."*
- **East Anglia Diocese Parish Handbook 2022** *"The [Finance] committee should report annually to the wider parish on the financial situation of the parish, for example at the AGM of the Parish Pastoral Council and in the parish newsletter."*
- **Archdiocese of Armagh Financial Administrator letter to parishes on 16 April 2019:** *"From several points of view, not least those of transparency, openness and accountability, taking best practice into account, but also from a pastoral point of view and working closely in tandem with the Parish Finance Committee, our close collaborators in the administration of temporal goods, parishes will wish to furnish their parishioners with such a Summary. Where this is not already happening, we ask parishes to rectify this immediately".*

SOME SENIOR CLERGY OPINIONS – "IT'S THE PARISH'S DUTY"

- **"Canon 1287.2 is not a complicated directive and I cannot even begin to fathom why someone would want write an article on it.** In case you were wondering, each parish currently, and 'according to the norms to be determined by particular law', present their accounts annually both to the Diocesan Financial Secretary and to their own Parish Communities through the duly appointed Finance Committee or Parish Treasurer." Bishop's Private Secretary personal e-mail late 2017. (In 2018, only 4 of their 60+ websites showed a financial or AGM report.)
- **"The Archbishop's Council were conscious that practice varies but that many, if not most, of the parishes make their financial situation available to parishioners."** Archbishop's Secretary in 2017 personal e-mail late 2017. (In mid-2018 and 2021, only two of their 150+ websites showed an annual financial report.)
- **"You will be pleased to learn that I have been told that I am wrong and that the Diocesan Operating Procedure does apply to the Parish Return."** Diocesan Finance Head (and deacon) e-mail to HRHG admits confusing Trustees' Annual Report with return by parish priest. He volunteered: *"I am not aware of the percentage of parishes that don't comply [with Canon 1287.2], but I will draw Parish Priests attention to it in my first letter to them this year..."* Websites showed <5%.
- **"There is a requirement for the parish to report its financial status both to the Bishop and to the faithful according to canon 1287. This is achieved in two ways; to the Bishop through the annual parish return... The second is by reporting to the parish which can take varied forms."** Spokesperson for the Catholic Bishops Conference of England & Wales in personal letter late 2021, commending AGMs.

F.A.O. DIOCESAN TRUSTEES

- **"In particular, the Trustees must ensure that...parish accounts are presented annually to the faithful."** Wording seen in Procedures for the Archdiocese of Birmingham 2008, listing all Trustees including the then Archbishop; in the on-line procedures for Arundel & Brighton in 2019; and St John's Cathedral Parish Norwich.



#6 Challenging jigsaws, and counting babies

SOME MORE VOICES ENCOUNTERED ON WEBSITES

"Not everything is cancelled... Sun is not cancelled, Spring is not cancelled, Relationships are not cancelled, Love is not cancelled, Reading is not cancelled, Devotion is not cancelled, Music is not cancelled, Imagination is not cancelled, Kindness is not cancelled, Conversations are not cancelled, Hope is not cancelled, And God's love for his people is never cancelled."

Fr. Shibu Jacob at Salisbury Parish in the Archdiocese of Adelaide 21 November 2020

"To the question: where was the Church during this time, for him it was not inside empty churches, 'but out in the daily lives of so many good people, nurses, carers, others – who, motivated by their faith, were going the extra mile to help out others.'"

Archbishop Eamon Martin, Primate of All Ireland on-line launch of 'Maynooth College Reflects on Covid-19; New Realities in Uncertain Times', The Tablet 29 May 2021.

"Almost before the morning mists had cleared away over the Malvern Hills, which he loved so well, Sir Edward Elgar was laid to rest on Monday. He lies by the side of Lady Elgar, his beloved partner in life who died 14 years ago. The great musician went to his rest without a note of music being played. In the Catholic Church of St Wulstan's Little Malvern; a brief simple service was conducted by the Reverend GC Alston. Scarcely a score of people were present, and in fact only a few intimate friends knew of the time and place of the service. There was no mourning dress or "formal attire".

Press Association Report seen on the St Wulstan's website 2021. "The gravestone was designed by Arthur Troyte Griffiths, the Malvern architect and close friend whom Elgar evokes in Enigma Variation number 7."

"The Parish is also a challenging jigsaw, where the committed, the casual, and the disengaged, are frequently thrown together, because they often stem from the same household."

Fr John Mulligan, Southwark Archdiocesan Lead for Adoremus in 2018 - seen on the Pastoral Council page of Our Lady of Lincoln parish in Lincoln.

"In every crisis there are also opportunities for service and the parishes, which comprise the diocese, have been second to none in the services offered to their local communities and beyond. Teams of ready volunteers have been at the forefront of 'reaching out' to those in any need whatsoever. Loneliness and isolation presented themselves as major problems for the elderly, sick and housebound. Rotas of visitors ensured that contact was made with calls, messages, shopping and food. A major initiative entitled 'Staying Together While

Apart' was funded by the Voluntary Services Emergency Fund, administered by the WCVA and funded by the Welsh Government."

Archdiocese of Cardiff Trustees Annual Report March 2020

"In the late 1920s, a Miss Gladys Peet, a convert, was the only Catholic in Bardney. During the second World War, Catholic services were held at the Bardney airfield and at the Angel Inn, attended by local Catholics and by German and Italian prisoners-of-war, who worked the local farms. When the airfield was closed and the Catholic chaplain vanished, Miss Peet was able to obtain that a Mass centre be opened at Bardney. An old poultry-shed was made into a chapel and a bungalow built for a tenant near the new chapel, the priests coming out from the parish church of S. Hugh's at Lincoln."

Seen on the Nottingham Diocesan website parishes page. (They still come out from Lincoln, apparently)

"There is still a tendency to think that lay people are in the Church to help priests. On the contrary, priests exist to help lay people to live their own unique vocations in the world. Very little good is achieved by ceremonies, however beautiful, or societies, however flourishing, if they are not directed towards encouraging people to reach their full maturity in their Christian vocation. To that end, we are dedicated to making this vision a reality.

On website of Catholic Eskrine: St John Bosco & St Bernadette April 20201

"We are grateful to Corpus Christi Parish Wokingham UK who shouldered the responsibility to fund the relief food programme to the tune of over £12,000. Through each member of the parish, one and all, we were able to reduce hunger, stress and put a smile on a needy child's face and to their entire family."

Marianist Education Foundation on Our Lady of Nazareth Primary in Kenya, on Corpus Christi website mid-2021

"The Parish PC is a response to the call of Vatican II for shared leadership of clergy and people in the mission of the parish. The PPC is about caring and listening. It is entrusted with the care of the parish. It thinks about the parish as a whole, not just a particular group or activity. It is there to plan for the future, to manage change and to provide leadership and vision. The PPC is pastoral because it is concerned with the issues that affect the lives of parishioners rather than with parish administration or finances. The members reflect the entire parish mix of people"

Haggardstown and Blackrock PPC page 2021

"Not everything that counts can be counted, and not everything that can be counted counts."

Seen in a parish in Southwark, and often attributed to Albert Einstein. But it was Professor of Sociology William Bruce Cameron who got there first with an article in the Bulletin of American Association of University Professors titled "The Elements of Statistical Confusion Or: What Does the Mean Mean?" See www.quoteinvestigator.com

"StA & StM does not warrant the accuracy of any material on this website nor is [the parish] obliged to keep material on this website up-to-date."

On parish website in 2019. The 400-word warning Terms and Conditions for its use of any content were drawn up by consultants, but since withdrawn from the website.

"Do we count only adults, or children? If children, do we include babies? If babies, do we include the unborn babies of visibly pregnant parishioners? (I don't think anyone seriously would, but theologically, they are also human persons attending Mass.) Revd Gareth Leyshon in his Catholic Preacher blog for February 2019

"Be careful of averages and how they're applied. One way that they can fool you is if the average combines samples from disparate populations. This can lead to absurd observations such as: 'On average, humans have one testicle.'"

Daniel J. Levitin in A Field Guide to Lies: Critical Thinking in the Information Age

"But generally, it is the same people contributing to these appeals and in terms of the weekly offering, 10% of the people are giving 90% of what is collected...On a business as usual basis, we just about break even or make a small loss because our income is static but our costs are slowly increasing."

Bracknell Parish PPC Minutes June 2017

"There's one, but absolutely crucial point I want to make. I understand that many of you struggle to keep yourselves above the water. The current situation is badly affecting individuals, families and businesses. Many face very difficult decisions on a daily basis and now it's exacerbated by a very uncertain future...! DO NOT want you to think about supporting our parish financially at this time UNLESS you feel you CAN afford it without putting yourself or your family into trouble. YOUR and YOUR FAMILY's well-being and financial stability is the most and foremost need you have to take care of..."

Parish priest of St Joseph's in Woodside near Aberdeen in 2020



Update & open out your Canon 1287.2 norms (and maybe let parishes say Yes)

"In accordance with the provisions of Canon 1287 §2, I present to you, St. Maria Goretti Catholic Church parish family, this report of the financial condition of our parish. This annual report helps make you aware of the financial operation of our parish and is one measure of determining our stewardship role in this church. Thank you for your prayers and contributions to our parish."
Fr Joshy Mathew CMI, Parochial Administrator Elk Grove, California
www.smgcc.net/uploads/3/4/8/3/34838286/smgcc_annualreport_05182019.pdf

"My objective through the presentation of the financial report to the parish was also guided by the principle of financial transparency and accountability. It was a great way of letting the community know exactly what's happening in the parish not just financially but also pastorally. Therefore you also saw the pastoral initiatives presented to the community. For me it is two sides of the same coin. Thank you so much."
Fr Joshy January 2021 email to HRHG explaining his rationale

"Can. 1280 Each juridic person is to have its own finance council or at least two counselors who, according to the norm of the statutes, are to assist the administrator in fulfilling his or her function."
Official (NB US) English language version of 1983 Canon Law on Vatican website seems to envisage women priests (not seen in the original Latin or other translations)

"Minutes shall be made of each meeting [of the Finance Committee], and kept in a minute book, which shall form part of the parochial archive."
Nottingham Diocese on-line Parish Administration Manual 2022

"You and your co-trustees must... avoid exposing the charity's assets, beneficiaries or reputation to undue risk"
The Essential Trustee, The Charity Commission for England & Wales 2022

"Becoming a synodal Church means listening better, sharing information more broadly, and becoming more transparent and accessible. It means making better use of digital platforms and social media to develop a more networked, horizontal style of communication." That's in the National Synthesis Document June 2022 Catholic Bishops Conference of England & Wales.

Finance got no mention, though the reports from parishes and dioceses said lack of transparency on finances and parish decision-making was a concern. Since 26 November 1983, Canon 1287.2 has required parish priests to report to parishioners on what they've given, modified by diocesan norms. Few reports find their way on to the websites that cover most UK parishes. Yet parish websites offer benefits that weren't available in 1983 – for "sharing information more broadly, and becoming more transparent and accessible." They can also show a Church listening better.

There's an unsurprising OpenBooks suggestion ticking those needs. It would be easy to implement and maintain. It could ensure that financial reporting is appreciated and achieved as a clear duty for parish priests; show courtesy and thanks to all stakeholders in and funders of the Church; provide public and accessible appreciation of all sources of funding; renew and reinforce a basic right of parishioners. It would also reduce the risk to the reputation of a diocese failing to see that a significant Canon Law is respected.

Dioceses might first make sure that their own website has a clear statement on the norms they set for Canon 1287.2 – possibly in the parish procedures and policies made available on-line (eg Nottingham do).

Updated Canon 1287.2 norms might be along these on-line lines

In parishes covered by an active website (eg with a weekly newsletter or bulletin)

- The parish priest must produce his annual financial report to parishioners as a Doc or PDF file; within two months of sending in an AFR under c1287.1.
- He must ensure this is available and archived on the parish website – and well publicised eg by a routine note in newsletters.
- The report must be in his name, though he will usually have and acknowledge help from his Finance Committee members and others.
- His report must include: detailed income and expenditure, balance and reserves; notes on the past and coming year; obligatory and voluntary collections; special diocesan appeals; and perhaps the key parish statistics sent in to the diocese.
- He must ensure that his Finance Committee's meeting Minutes and any other significant documentation are published on the website, and be well publicised to parishioners eg in the newsletter. The Committee must advise him of this.
- NB In the spirit of synodality, the Bishop might open out acceptance of his updated Canon 1287.2 norms - requiring their initial approval and annual renewal not just by the diocese and parish clergy but by:
 - By all the Parish Finance Committee eg in one of their meetings
 - By a majority of the faithful eg by a show of hands at Mass
- If a parish isn't covered by a website? A nearby parish, deanery or pastoral area might house the Report/Accounts. Or the Diocese (as in the Diocese of Paisley).
- Who are stewards of these norms? The Trustees, perhaps.

An official starting date? By or before 26 November 2023, the 40th anniversary of the introduction of the 1983 Code of Canon Law.



Commend Parish Year Notebooks (with an eye on posterity)

"This parish would not exist without you, each playing your own part in the story, in various different ways helping us to be a parish where every day we are "bringing people closer to Jesus Christ in hope and joy". Thank you so much to all of you, clergy, staff, volunteers, parishioners and guests, especially those who have made great sacrifices and shown incredible patience and understanding of the constraints under which been working. ...Those of us entrusted with leadership in the parish need your forgiveness and continued patience for the times when we have fallen short of the high standards which we have set ourselves and by which we wish to serve you and the wider community.

Fr Mark Hogan in his Financial Report dated 25 January 2022 to the Parish of St. Peter and the Winchester Martyrs

"Lack of transparency and accountability was a recurrent theme. People do not have a voice in the parish where every major decision is taken by the priests without consultation. Many requested the return of a parish council, annual financial reports and higher visibility and accountability of the Senior Leadership Team."
Synod 2023 Report from English Martyrs parish in Reading seen on its website mid-July 2022

"The eloquent Abbot Suger omitted to name the masons who came up with the fresh shapes that people could look at and walk among and talk about. Surely it is those masons' inventiveness with stone-cutting and space to which we must attend."
Julian Bell: "Shaggy Horse Story" reviewing A History of Art History by Christopher Wood, London Review of Books 17 December 2020.

"Father John Connolly became the long serving Parish Priest 1916-1947." Seen on website of Corpus Christi parish in Wokingham in 2019 (a time that covered the end of one and the whole of another world war, and a global pandemic)

"Many speak of giving parishioners a far greater responsibility for the life of the parish, rather than rendering the lay people feeling nominal at best, or even hurt or overlooked." That's in the CBCEW National Synthesis Document. Some parishes manage that ethos - and simply. Here's an example.

"The current Parish Council would like to thank everyone who supports our parish community and works hard to ensure that our parish not only survives but continues to grow in the future." These are the closing words to the 2022 AGM report by the chair of the PPC at Our Lady Immaculate & Saint Cuthbert's in Crook, Co Durham. Though a small parish, its home-grown website is brimming with information rarely seen on others - an annual finance report, PPC constitution with current names and photos, and recent Minutes. (The previous report named 32 people - not nominal.)

"There are many faith-inspired initiatives already happening in parishes and dioceses and at the national level which are not being reported or publicised," said the Scottish Bishop's Synodal Synthesis. Websites are today's place to share and store them.

So here's a simple draft suggestion for bishops to ponder, and maybe commend.

A Parish Year Notebook might be created and renewed on these lines

The idea is to compile a simple document, with highlights, lessons, events, experiences, compiled from across the parish. The Notebook would be an opportunity to appreciate and thank individuals and groups, and publicise their values and activities. The parish priest might provide an introduction and overview. (A burden? One word a week should do). Compile it into a PDF or other digital file. Put it on the website, and make an archive. If appropriate, include information from or link with other documents - eg the priest's annual financial report to the faithful. Done once, it would just need updating. Bishops, think of Awards.

Benefits? Year Notebooks would show and celebrate the local stories that make people feel good about their parish, the Church and - importantly - themselves. They would let others see lessons on what happened. These could be helpful when mergers happen - or pandemics and synodal consultations, for that matter.

Parishes already have a lot of material for a Year Notebook

- Numbers and names officially recorded (sometimes in newsletters) eg Baptisms, Marriages, Confirmation, First Holy Communion, Deaths, Mass counts
- Highlights of the year - eg parties, pilgrimages, anniversaries, visiting priests or speakers, concerts
- Name of people to appreciate the time and talents given to the parish - Secretaries, members of PPC and FC, sacristans, ministers of many sorts
- Groups - their main happenings in the year
- News and reviews of schools within or fed by the parish
- Outreach and ecumenical activities in local or national communities
- Social justice activities eg support for campaigns
- Changes to and plans for the church buildings or settings
- Changes in the local area or communities - such as Food Banks, other faith groups, housing development, transport.

You get the drift? Worth at least thinking about for 2023 - and way beyond?

Starting date? Anytime that suits from now on.



Show a visible mark of transparency?

"It is important that organisations can prove they have attained a recognised level of quality. We believe that self-assessment is essential for learning and development – but we know that external recognition can also be vital for some organisations, which is why we developed the Trusted Charity Mark...This nationally recognised award offers both users and funders/commissioners external verification of the quality and credibility of an organisation."

National Council of Voluntary Organisations website in 2019



"Churches, mosques, synagogues, and other places of worship across the UK have been at the heart of the success of Fairtrade – putting faith into action by using and promoting Fairtrade products and leading public conversation about justice for the farmers and workers we rely on."

There is a brand-new online commitment process that's easy to complete whether you have applied for Fairtrade status before, or not, and new certificates, posters and materials available to celebrate and showcase your Fairtrade commitment.

FairTrade Places of Worship Recommitment Guide 2021



"My second reason for cheerleading the Code is its emphasis on communication and transparency." This is Sir David Spiegelhalter about the Code of Practice for Statistics seen on the website of the Office for Statistics Regulation (who have Awards for Statistical Excellence in Trustworthiness, Quality and Value).

He referenced a world authority on trust, Onora O'Neill, and her idea of "intelligent transparency". Dioceses might consider its four important features:

- Information should be accessible – people should be able to get at it.
- It should be comprehensible – people should be able to understand it.
- It should be useable – it should suit their needs.
- And it should be assessable – interested parties should, if necessary, be able to examine the workings and assess its quality

There's perhaps a place and case for some mark of intelligent financial transparency in Catholic dioceses – of having reached a certain standard. It would be a sort of remote cousin of the familiar Fairtrade symbol you'll see in Greggs and many other shops and goods, saying a lot about their values in a simple way. (FairTrade UK was founded in part by CAFOD, and dioceses and churches signed up to it. However, the symbol was rarely seen or mentioned in the 1500+ parish and diocesan websites surveyed in the OpenBooks Project).

For a diocese to show a sense of intelligent transparency, they might like to consider something like a Quality Mark

It would simply show that they had committed to and reached some basic requirements on financial transparency and stewardship do-able on-line today. It would be voluntary, simple to organise, and cost nothing.

It would also show common sense and courtesy, show synodality and solidarity with and reduce the risk of criticism or reputation that the church was hiding finance matters. OpenBooks might be one version.

A sort of OpenBooks Diocese Mark might show commitment to publishing its financial operating procedures and Finance Council biographies; have accounts easily available; and assert rules on Canon 1287.2 to reinforce the rights of the faithful. (NB In the USA, Voice of the Faithful do an annual survey of financial transparency as seen on the websites of their 170+ dioceses. They rate each diocese on 10 different factors, and publish league tables, and commentary.)

A sort of OpenBooks Parish Mark might show that the parish had met standards for showing financial accounts; keeping PPC and Finance Committee Membership and contact points up-to-date; and publish and publicise their Minutes.

At least worth mulling on? Perhaps over a coffee. FairTrade. In a diocesan or parish room. Or Greggs.

