



“Witnesses” Statement #1

Helping financial stewardship & responsibility in Portsmouth 2023-2032

Input by HRH Gibbons of the OpenBooks Project E hughgibbons@just1.org.uk

This is a simple contribution to the thinking around You Will Be My Witnesses - in response to “...how can we encourage real stewardship, responsibility and tithing?” Coincidentally, similar suggestions from the OpenBooks Project were sent in early October to the bishops of all 34 dioceses in the UK (A PDF of that and this Statement are available from HRHG.)

Portsmouth sees a more synodal way of working as crucial for next 10 years

P8 of You Will Be My Witnesses says: “True, structural change, in particular the shift to a more ‘synodal’ way of working, especially in our parishes and communities, is crucial. We do need to change the way we collaborate, clergy and laity, and we do need to share responsibility more effectively for the mission of the Church. We need to heal and refresh the internal culture of our Diocese.”

How might this ‘synodal way’ happen? On pp52-3: “We will prudently steward our resources by...Reviewing the way in which we share information about our use and stewardship of resources to ensure it is transparent and accessible, and supporting parishes to do the same.” It’s a timely action.

Vatican sees transparency essential for authentic synodality - on agenda for Synod

October’s Working Document for the Continental Stage by the General Secretariat of the Synod shows a high level appreciation of greater open-ness. Clause #79 says that “In different parts of the world, transparency is seen as an essential practice for a Church growing into a more authentic synodality.” They gave an observation from the UK: “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”.

This is similar to “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)

These echo the general findings of the OpenBooks Project. Yet this lack of transparency shouldn’t have happened – or become something of a blind spot.

Financial transparency at parish level has been required by Canon Law since 1983

The Code of Canon Law 1983 Canon 1287 §2 was innovative - and painstakingly crafted.

“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.” Nottingham Diocese parish procedures norms on-line are: “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 §1. It is also the Parish Priest’s responsibility to report to the faithful (Canon 1287 s2) and this should also be done annually.” (There’s little on-line sign any do.)

Portsmouth is like other dioceses – few parish websites show evidence of financial transparency

Until mid-2021 Portsmouth Diocesan Operating Procedures’ version of c1287 §2 norms was: “The diocesan annual return, or extracts from it, should be published for the information of parishioners.”

It wasn’t that clear. One former head of finance admitted confusing this report to the parish with the Trustees Annual 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.” He volunteered: “I am not aware of the percentage of parishes that don’t comply, but I will draw Parish Priests attention to it in my first letter to them this year...” NB The new 2021 Procedures say nothing about anyone reporting to parishioners.

OpenBooks Project 2018-22 looked at 1500+ parish websites – including all in Portsmouth several times. Hardly any (<5% at very best) show evidence of the financial transparency expected. Priests’ reports, Finance Committee Minutes, AGM notes are rare. Yet websites have long been the place to store and share 24/7 key documents, decisions, and information – important for all parishioners when mergers are in the air.

But: some parishes manage respect c1287 §2 – as Winchester and Maidenhead p3 show.

It’s big money. In real terms, back-of-the-envelope calculations suggest that since 1983 parishioners in the diocese have given something around £400 million in offertory and Living Our Faith. Millions more have come from the public purse as Gift Aid – “a vital source of finding for many parishes” says the 2021 TAR for Hexham & Newcastle.

So there is a case for change: upgrading and opening up Canon 1287.2 – to respect Canon Law, and assure parishioners (and all other stakeholders) in consistent and prudent financial stewardship throughout the diocese.

How? See some simple suggestions overleaf.



“Witnesses” Statement #2

Suggestions on improving Portsmouth prudent stewardship 2023-32

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These are suggestions to help achieve:
“We will prudently steward our resources by...Reviewing the way in which we share information about our use and stewardship of resources to ensure it is transparent and accessible, and supporting parishes to do the same.”

They’re very obvious, and could be presented as having practical benefits:

- Lightening one load on parish priests
- Recognising and appreciating the skills and energy of the parish financial committee
- Improving consistency across parishes
- Thanking everyone for their support
- Involving the laity more – surprisingly so
- Being a newsworthy item to share with local press, former parishioners et al

#1 Update and open up c1287 §2 norms - along these synodal lines

In all current and future parishes covered by an active website (eg with a weekly newsletter or bulletin) the Portsmouth public norms might on the Diocesan website might be...

- The parish priest’s finance reporting to the faithful is important in showing appreciation of good stewardship – respecting Canon Law 1287 §2 and its duty to the faithful.
- To ensure this is done, the Parish Priest and Finance Committee must organise and present a short annual financial report to parishioners – ideally in person and on-line - as soon as possible after the AFR is sent in to the diocese.
- This report must be as a Doc or PDF file; well publicised eg by a routine note in newsletters; archived and easily found on the parish website.
- The report must include detailed income and expenditure, balance and reserves; notes on the past and coming year; obligatory and voluntary collections; special diocesan appeals.
- It must include key annual parish statistics sent to the diocese (eg FHC, marriages, Mass Counts by Mass times).
- As good stewardship practice, the Finance Committee must produce Minutes and publish these (any other significant documentation) on the parish website, and publicise their open availability to parishioners eg in the newsletter.

There’s a groundbreaking synodal opportunity with new c1287 §2 norms

“We do need to change the way we collaborate, clergy and laity, and we do need to share responsibility more effectively for the mission of the Church. We need to heal and refresh the internal culture of our Diocese”. That ethos in “Witnesses” might be helped by another adventurous innovation – letting the laity say OK.

- There’s a need to ensure that the parishioners are aware of their right to finance information.
- In the spirit of synodality, the Bishop might invite acceptance of his updated c1287 §2 norms - requiring their initial and annual renewal...
 - By the Parish Finance Committee eg in one of their meetings
 - By a majority of the faithful eg by a show of hands at Masses

An official starting date for new norms?

By 26 November 2023. That’s the 40th anniversary of the introduction of the 1983 Code of Canon Law.

#2 Consider encouraging synodality with Parish Annual Notebooks

The idea is to produce a simple historic on-line document, with highlights, lessons, events, experiences from across the parish. Notebooks would be an opportunity to appreciate and thank individuals and groups, and to publicise their values and activities. The parish priest might provide an introduction and overview. 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 could just need updating.

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 parish mergers happen – or pandemics, synodal or diocesan consultations, for that matter. And Bishops create Awards.



“Witnesses” Statement #3

Examples of visible transparency – in and far from Portsmouth Diocese

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“‘Transparency’ and ‘communication’ were two words used by 80% of responses. It is felt that the church needs to improve its methods of communication (and what is communicated) and must be more transparent, especially at an international level”. The Portsmouth Synodal Synthesis raised the question: if some can, why not more, or most? OpenBooks found exemplars on-line – rarely seen in any UK diocese.

“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 of a parish in Elk Grove, in the Diocese of Sacramento in California.

“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. The pattern set by Fr Joshy can be seen on the parish website which has the financial reports for 2018-21.

FYI Fr Joshy was formerly priest in the town of Weed where fast-moving wildfires destroyed Holy Family church in 2014, along with a Presbyterian church, the library, a community center, and 110 homes. Holy Family church has since been rebuilt, and flourishes. Fr Joshy is now at St Joseph’s parish in Vacaville CA.



“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 Fr John Lee – which includes data on the second collections and the big hit they took.



“Once a year in accordance with canon 1287, under the vigilance of the parish priest, the [Parish Council for Economic Affairs] will report to the faithful on the offerings they have made, on the management of the parish, on the state of their participation in the life of the whole Church, parish needs, duties incumbent on the parish, and plans for its future.”

Montredon parish website quotes the official norms of Marseille Archdiocese – seeing an opportunity to think much wider than just finances. A similar ethos was on-line in the dioceses of Angers and Arras.



“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. The report reads a little like a typical Trustees Annual Report from parish-sized Faith-Based Charity Organisations such as the those of the 12,000 in the Church of England, churches, chapels, temples, mosques, and synagogues - whose stewardship is on public view 24/7 on-line at the three UK charity regulators websites.

Fr Mark is seen here at his birthday party on 22 November 2022. Unusually, the well-stocked parish website has a gallery of photos from a variety of events, including their recent parish pilgrimage to the Holy Land.

