

Financial Transparency and Accountability

Since its founding in 2002, Voice of the Faithful has worked consistently to support increased transparency and accountability with regard to church finances at the parish and the diocesan level. We realized then that the scandal of clerical sexual abuse was enabled by lack of diocesan financial transparency. Since 2002, significant progress in this regard has been made in many dioceses, although the progress has varied greatly across the United States.

Even though our Bishops still hold all legislative, executive and judicial authority within the diocese, it is now no longer considered acceptable in many parts of the country for them to take our financial gifts without any pretense of accountability. In places where professional diocesan financial reports are provided, it is no longer possible for the leadership of a diocese to pay huge legal settlements or provide large sums of money for legal fees without the faithful of the diocese being alerted to the ways in which their contributions are being used.

We applaud those Bishops who have embraced meaningful financial reporting to the members of their diocese. Lay Catholics within those dioceses, especially those with specialized expertise in finance and accounting, should read and reflect upon the diocesan financial report when it becomes available, asking questions for clarification where necessary. Those whose Bishops do not provide such a report should strongly encourage them to do so. Review of finances is one powerful way of rebuilding lay trust in the leadership of our Church.

Many parishes and dioceses also now have active and effective finance councils as required by Canon Law, although some do not.

According to Canon 492, “In every diocese a Finance council is to be established, over which the diocesan bishop himself or his delegate presides and which consists of at least three members of the Christian faithful truly expert in Financial affairs and civil law, outstanding in integrity, and appointed by the bishop.”

Because most members of the Christian faithful possessing true expertise in financial affairs and civil law are lay Catholics, the diocesan finance council should have lay members.

Those qualified should make their willingness to serve known, and bishops should consider moving outside their usual circle of lay advisors to invite highly qualified lay members to serve on diocesan finance councils. This would be a powerful sign of openness. Such openness will lead to true transparency and accountability which, in turn, will be essential in rebuilding the trust upon which the relationship between a Christian people and their pastor must be built.