

VOTF now publishes three comprehensive diocesan transparency and accountability reviews

Earlier this year, Voice of the Faithful published two new reports, one on lay involvement in governance through Diocesan Finance Councils and the other on child protection and safe environment policies and practices. With these two reports, plus its annual diocesan online financial transparency reports, VOTF now provides Catholics with three comprehensive reports on all U.S. dioceses. The faithful now have information to judge diocesan activities in the purview of each report. The three reports, each available at votf.org, are:

- “Measuring and Ranking Diocesan Online Financial Transparency: 2021 Report” (VOTF’s fifth such report)
- “Measuring Abuse Prevention and Safe Environment Programs as Reported Online in Diocesan Policies and Practices: 2022 Report” (VOTF’s first such report)
- “Measuring Lay Involvement in Governance of the Church by and through the Diocesan Finance Council: 2022 Report” (VOTF’s first such report)

The governance report, a first of its kind, showed just 10% of dioceses received scores above 60%. This is the first online review of diocesan finance councils’ composition and compliance with Canon Law as represented on diocesan websites.



“With diocesan finance councils that adhere to the letter and spirit of Canon Law, Catholics can be more confident that they exercise proper stewardship and oversight of the secular goods of the Church,” said Joseph Finn, C.P.A., former VOTF treasurer and trustee and longtime advocate for lay role in Church governance.

“In our opinion,” the report’s authors concluded, “evidence of compliance with Canon

Law by the diocesan finance councils is disappointingly low. The fact that only 18 dioceses achieved a passing grade obviously means there is room for improvement.”

For the governance report, independent reviewers examined all 176 U.S. dioceses’ websites to ascertain DFCs’ level

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Synod summary reports share common themes

During August, Voice of the Faithful put the finishing touches on its Synod 2021-2023 report to the General Secretariat of the Synod of Bishops. Formally titled “For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, and Mission,” the Synod is considered the most significant opportunity in the history of the Church for the laity to influence its future.

The VOTF report will be submitted directly to the General Secretariat in mid-August. However, it will not be completed before the deadline for this newsletter, so we cannot give you that final report here. But we can give you the central themes that VOTF will be reporting from its Synod sessions:

- We yearn for inclusive, Christ-centered local faith communities offering fellowship, spirituality, safety, and moral values, joined in unity with the Universal Church.
- We yearn for a Church that is welcoming to everyone, especially those on the margins.
- Celebration of the Eucharist and access to the sacraments connects us all globally. For many, these are the main reasons they cling to the Church.
- We yearn for implementation of Vatican II reforms, which will help us return to the synodal model of the early Church.

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VOTF publishes three comprehensive reports *(Continued from Page 1)*

of compliance with Canon Law regarding the duties, responsibilities, and authority of the DFC. Canon Law stipulates, for example, that DFC membership comprise individuals “competent” in finance, law, and real estate. Considering that clerical formation typically does not focus on these areas, the necessary competencies would usually be found with professionally educated and experienced lay men and women.

Regarding child protection and safe environment guidelines, VOTF has published the first independent, online review of all U.S. Roman Catholic dioceses’ level of compliance. The average overall score was 67%, with the most frequently achieved score 63.5%. Although some dioceses did well, no diocese achieved 100%, and three dioceses scored in the 20s. Because VOTF is independent of the Church’s institutional structure, the study is not an audit like those conducted by the U.S. Bishop’s National Review Board.

“This (report) will surely promote a constructive conversation about how to monitor and improve child safety in the church environment,” said David Finkelhor, Ph.D., who is professor

of sociology at the University of New Hampshire, director of the Crimes against Children Research Center, and co-director of the Family Research Laboratory. “The report is sensible, systematic and well-conceived.”

The report concluded that parishioners play a particularly important role in child protection: “There is a key role for parishioners to ensure the protection of children in our parishes. Parishioners should work with diocesan and parish safe environment personnel to bolster safety guidelines at the diocesan level and ensure that safety measures are carried out in their faith communities. Alive in the life of Jesus, the entire People of God can transform into a sacramental community where children, youth, and the vulnerable are nurtured and protected in safe environments.”

VOTF also maintains a webpage called “Financial Accountability” that contains links to resources to help Catholics understand diocesan and parish finances, and a website called “Financial Accountability – U.S. Dioceses,” to provide information on demographics and finances for all U.S. dioceses.

Synod on Synodality revealing common themes *(Continued from Page 1)*

- We yearn for a Church where lay voices are heard, respected, and acted upon, especially women’s voices. The stark absence of women’s voices was noted in every session VOTF held.
- We yearn for priests who really listen to us, practicing humility and modeling servant leadership.
- We yearn for more preaching and programs that recognize and act on Catholic social teaching in all its breadth.

Within these broad themes, our report will cite the ways Catholics find “community” when it is not available through the parish; the extensive catalogue of those marginalized by the Church; the anti-Vatican II opposition among U.S. bishops; the need to significantly reform seminary education in a “broken priesthood”; and more.



The themes are the culmination of 46, 90-minute input sessions that VOTF conducted through May. We hosted 373 participants in 39 groups, and participants represented 34 U.S. states and five other countries. Discussions were not “themed” or focused on a single topic or perspective but covered only the general Synod questions asked in the Preparatory Document. We also limited

each group to 10 participants (plus a facilitator and scribe) so that everyone had full opportunity to express their views. Finally, we collected reports from three diocesan lay groups who asked us to include their reports in our submission, and we added to our main report the thoughts of more than 30 non-Catholics and former Catholics who replied to our requests.

Our full report will be available to Synod session participants in mid-August and to the full membership in late-August. We also will report on results and answer questions on follow-ups at the VOTF 20th Year Commemoration event October 29, 2022 (see page 3).

Some U.S. dioceses also have released their reports. Reports note that participants wish for more support and welcoming communities—particularly to the LGBTQ+ community, remarried or divorced parishioners, and young adults.

In the Archdiocese of Baltimore, for example, participants’ experiences were placed in two categories: 1.) where there are challenges and difficulties, and 2.) where there have been positive experiences. “Generally,” Auxiliary Bishop Bruce A. Lewandowski, C.Ss.R., said, “the challenges outweighed the areas of positive experience ... I don’t think we’re unique in that, as I’ve talked to folks around in different dioceses.”

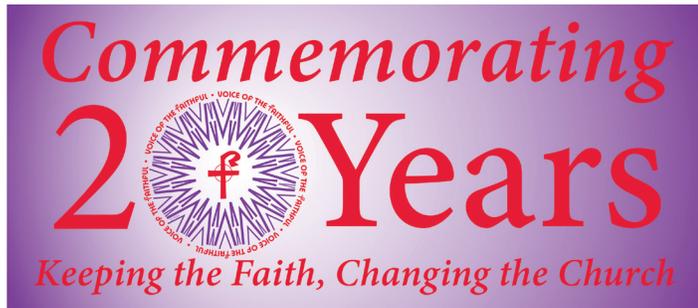
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Synod on Synodality revealing common themes *(Continued from Page 2)*

Participants said they were happy with their local communities in their parishes, where they feel there is good communication and collaboration. They wished for change in areas they felt were concerning, including racism in the community, the dearth of young people, women's roles in the church, and the need for more transparency and clarity in teachings.

Archbishop William E. Lori of Baltimore said he believes the process is going well: "I think this is extremely valuable.

As reports continue to be submitted, rich descriptions of the needs and opportunities for growth within the church will continue to be discussed and hopefully addressed.



VOTF is posting occasional notes online about different aspects of what we have done in our 20 years to help reform the Church. Look for them in our In the Vineyard e-newsletter. Here is one example by Margaret Roylance, Voice of the Faithful, Trustee, Vice President, and Finance Working Group Chair.

VOTF grew at an astonishing rate in the first few months. Looking back, though, the amazing thing is the speed and clarity with which the mission and goals of the organization were discerned. Centered in prayer, speaking boldly and listening attentively to one another, we were journeying together in faith 20 years before Pope Francis' Synod. That convinces me that VOTF was and still is a movement of the Spirit.

Founder Jim Muller's motto was "Keep the Faith - Change the Church." When our critics asked us what that meant, we said we respected the role of the hierarchy, but all the people of God must be involved in discerning where the Spirit is leading the Church. Cardinal George of Chicago responded "Keep the Faith, Change the Church" was problematic because any change in the Church will, "unless most carefully thought out," change the faith. How could we keep the faith we loved, but change the Church whose leaders had covered up tragic crimes?

Responding to our baptismal call, we submitted our needs for new leadership to the Vatican, starting with a replacement for Cardinal Law in Boston. We studied Canon Law and Church governance structures and asked the Church to follow its own promises to involve the laity in governance and guidance through membership on Diocesan Finance Councils. We volunteered for parish pastoral and finance councils. We did not fade away as many Bishops believed we would.

VOTF 20th Year Commemoration: *20 Years of Keeping the Faith & Changing the Church*

Event: Voice of the Faithful 20th Year Commemoration
Date/Time: Saturday, Oct. 29, 2022, 9:30 a.m. – 5 p.m.
Place: Boston Marriott Newton Hotel, Newton, Massachusetts, which is maintaining COVID-19 safety precautions
Register: Online at votf.org

VOTF friends will gather for a day of praying, learning, planning, and socializing to honor our 20-year commitment to Keep the Faith, Change the Church. Don't miss Prof. Tom Groome's interactive keynote presentation, the Liturgy of the Mass with Fr. Bill Clark, and Grace before an expansive buffet lunch offered by Dr. Phyllis Zagano. Visit votf.org information, to register, and to book discounted hotel rooms.

Recognizing that the abuse crisis was enabled by a pervasive culture of financial secrecy, a dedicated group of volunteers collaborated for five years to develop a fair, fact-based, reliable and repeatable system to measure financial transparency on diocesan websites. This Finance Working Group realized that all of us, even bishops, care about grades. We published our first diocesan financial transparency report in 2017 with financial scores for every diocese in the USCCB.

The average score was 60% in 2017. Our fifth annual report in 2021 showed an average diocesan score of 69%, and five dioceses received perfect scores of 100%. Thirty eight dioceses received scores in the 90s. Diocesan leaders have realized that receiving a good transparency score from an independent organization like VOTF can help convince their members to provide financial support for their programs.

Bishops have thanked us for our efforts and a steady stream of CFOs has asked us for assistance in increasing their transparency scores. Genuine financial transparency is on the rise in the U.S. Church. We will continue the yearly transparency reviews, and are using the same approach to look at child protection policies on diocesan websites. We have found that love of the Church, prayer, hard work and persistence can produce results that were unimaginable in 2002, and we are just getting started!

Voice of the Faithful Programs, Projects & Initiatives

Financial Working Group

- Publish annual Diocesan Financial Transparency Report (now in 6th year)
- Provide online web listing of all U.S. dioceses' finances
- Publish first ranking on adherence to Canon Law for Diocesan Finance Councils
- Distribute brochures & guidelines for parish collection security
- Post principles for diocesan finance councils on website
- Provide Church structure primer on website

Child Protection

- Publish ratings on all U.S. dioceses' implementation of child protection standards
- Developing database to monitor diocesan/parish observance of protection standards
- Promote awareness of child protection standards
- Post ideas for promoting awareness of guidelines online

Women's Roles

- Host Women's Advocacy Network
- Work with Discerning Deacons to restore the ordination of women deacons in the Catholic Church
- Host virtual gatherings for women deacon's discussions
- Post resources about women in the Church on our website

Ordination of Married Men/Optional Celibacy

- Provide Action Plan model on website, with letter template to contact local bishop
- Promote request for Pastoral Provision to allow married men to become priests
- Provide Study guide on celibacy and a related reading list and essay

Broken Vessel™ Healing Circles

- Conduct Broken Vessel™ Healing Circles, based on Restorative Justice principles, for survivors, families, and all others harmed by clergy sex abuse
- Work with institutional and local partners to train facilitators and host Broken Vessel™ Healing Circles

Lay Education

- Provide Study guides online for origins of the Church, Gospel timeline, Vatican II, and more
- Provide lay-renewal resources on website Synod Preparation 2021-2023

- Post videos, action steps, background, timeline, and resources on Synodality
- Hosted more than 50 Synod sessions internationally for members and others to participate in the Synod
- Provide resources and a how-to guide for others to host Synod sessions and to enhance planned parish and diocesan meetings
- Prepare report for submission to the General Secretariat for the Synod

Clericalism

- Collaborate with AUSCP on Clericalism report, which was sent to every U.S. bishop and Vatican offices
- Offer The BridgeDialogues on clericalism with AUSCP and FutureChurch
- Provide clerical culture descriptions and historical background on website
- Provide bibliography for further study on website

Bishop Selection

- Host on website a portal for national input on bishop selection needs
- Provide background papers for lay input into bishop selection
- Propose demonstration projects for lay input to pope and cardinals
- Complete bishop-selection models
- Provide a primer on Bishop selection process

Survivor Support

- Support efforts to obtain justice for survivors
- Call for bishops to be held accountable
- Store government/academic reports on website
- Make guidelines for reforming statute of limitations available
- Make Fr. Thomas Doyle's Clergy Sex Abuse Bibliography available

Prayerful Voice

- Provide options for devotional practices online
- Provide models online for lay-led days of renewal, prayer groups, prayer services, and retreats
- Periodically post spiritual reflections

Visit www.votf.org

- For information about all Voice of the Faithful programs and resources

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Keep the Faith, Change the Church

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Voice of the Faithful® is a worldwide organization of Roman Catholics working to provide a prayerful voice, attentive to the Spirit, through which the faithful can participate actively in the governance and guidance of the Catholic Church. We support survivors of clergy sexual abuse, support priests of integrity, and work to help shape structural change in the Church.

KEEP UP-TO-DATE — Sign up to receive our free *In the Vineyard* e-newsletter at www.votf.org.