

## Voice of the Faithful 2021 Initiatives

*VOTF will promote women's roles and build on its successful annual financial transparency reviews to tackle financial governance and child protection guidelines*

In the previous issue of *Voice Matters* (Fall 2020), we provided you with some background information on women's roles in the Church and movement toward more synodal Church government in Australia. We also provided a brief history of Voice of the Faithful's early efforts in child protection. Now, here is how we are moving forward with these initiatives. VOTF has created the Women's Emerging Voices working group to intensify its efforts to bring about a more just and inclusive Church. VOTF also is using its successful annual online diocesan financial transparency review as a model for examining diocesan financial governance and assessing how well dioceses are adhering to child protection guidelines.

### Can we enhance women's roles?

Recently, Pope Francis formally expanded roles for women serving at the altar. He changed Canon Law so that women, as "non-ordained ministers," could serve as lectors and eucharistic ministers, and read Scripture, roles they were already filling in many places. Some see the change to Canon Law as an indication of where Pope Francis wants the Church to go, as he also recently appointed two women to Vatican posts previously held only by men, one as co-undersecretary of the Synod of Bishops and the other as Promoter of Justice in the Vatican's Court of Appeals.

"These moves essentially broke centuries-long prohibitions against women," says Svea Fraser, former VOTF Trustee and member of the Women's Emerging Voices Working Group. "These are significant steps in recognizing the dignity and equality of men and women made in the image and likeness of God. Francis

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*Lay and gender equality regarding involvement and leadership in the Church must reflect the justice and mercy that meet on the cross.*

### Are lay people involved in DFCs?

In his talk at VOTF's 2019 conference, Villanova theologian Massimo Faggioli asked what the audience thought the definition of laity is in Canon Law. Looking at their expectant faces, he said, "Non-ordained." The laity have no positive standing in Canon Law—just not ordained.

According to VOTF Trustee and Treasurer Joseph F. Finn, Jr., CPA, however, the laity have standing in at least one arena of the institutional Church—Diocesan Finance Council.

Finn, a member of VOTF's Finance Working Group, points out that Canon 492 reads: "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

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# Lay leadership in Church governance *(Continued from Page 1)*

expert in Financial affairs and civil law, outstanding in integrity, and appointed by the bishop.” Thus, the laity, the “Christian faithful,” here have standing in Canon Law.

VOTF distributed its fourth annual “Measuring & Ranking Diocesan Online Financial Transparency” to all U.S. bishops and their CFOs this past November. These reviews have become a successful means of encouraging diocesan financial transparency. The reports are online at [votf.org](http://votf.org).

Encouraged by this success and concerned about the lack of lay involvement in Church governance, the FWG will begin this fall to conduct annual reviews of lay involvement in the governance of the Church by and through the Diocesan Finance Council, using its transparency review as a model.

Governance reviewers will employ a 10-question worksheet, similar to the transparency worksheet, to scrutinize diocesan websites and evaluate how well DFCs are following Canon Law regarding lay involvement and covering Canons 492, 493, 1277, and 1287, including:

- Is current information about the DFC and the nature of its membership posted on the website?

- Is DFC contact information posted on the website?
- Are terms of service for DFC members posted?
- Are agendas or highlights of DFC meetings posted?
- Is the DFC responsible for preparing the diocesan budget as to income and expenses for the coming year?
- Does the DFC examine accounts of revenues and expenses at the end of the year?
- Does the DFC exercise authority over Acts of Extraordinary Administration?



*Depending on your point of view, monumental structures, like Sicily's Cathedral of St. Nicholas, can be either peans to God's glory or edifices representing power keeping the laity subservient.*

One example can show how important VOTF's new governance review is. If the Wheeling-Charleston, West Virginia, DFC had information regarding the financial malfeasance of retired Bishop Michael Bransfield and judged his activity an Act of Extraordinary Administration, the retired bishop might not have been able to commit such extraordinary malfeasance.

This new governance review was mentioned in VOTF's letter to bishops announcing the 2021 transparency review, and a copy of the governance worksheet was enclosed. Another letter and copy of the governance worksheet will be sent to bishops this summer to remind them about the new review and give them time to change their websites if necessary.

## Enhancing Women's Roles *(Continued from Page 1)*

is to be applauded for these first steps, but they should not be the only ones for years to come.” Fraser adds that, “Women have assumed authoritative positions in every aspect of secular life and are no longer second-class citizens and are no longer content with the crumbs that fall from the table in the institutional Church. It is a matter of justice for all the baptized.”

Justice was clearly a motivating factor when Fraser and others worked with the Association of U.S. Catholic Priests to formulate its *Declaration on the Status of Women in the Church*. “Working with priests in the AUSCP,” Fraser says, “was a collaborative opportunity to name and address the challenges and changes that face the Church today in regard to women's equal status that concluded with a demand for the justice of equal dignity and equality for women and men, endorsed with visible signs of reform.”



These ideas energized the nascent Women's Emerging Voices Working Group into formalizing its mission to call for “prayers and support for women to have a voice with authority in decision-making and

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*Could this mosaic of the Holy Virgins in the Church of St. Apollinare Nuovo, Ravenna, Italy, illustrate women in ministry and governance?*



## Enhancing Women's Roles *(Continued from Page 2)*

to be more effective ministers as permanent deacons, for the good of the Church and the Gospel we proclaim.”

The Working Group seeks its mission through three goals:

1. To begin with conversation at the local (synodal) level by providing prayers, listening sessions, story telling, education, resources, and opportunities for women's voices to be heard.
2. To work collaboratively with clergy and laity to appreciate the experience, challenges, and hopes of lay women, responding to their just call for greater authority in their ministries to better serve the People of God.
3. To urge the pope and bishops to institute pathways to leadership in positions which have been open to celibate clergy only.

Among other areas, the Working Group's goals point toward a permanent ordained women's diaconate. “True, women already do the work that is the ministry of the permanent diaconate—in word, liturgy, and charity,” Fraser says. “But they have never had the authority nor the public and permanent affirmation to better minister to the people they serve.

Eighty percent of lay ministry is preformed by women. It is not only a matter of justice for them to be included now, but also of meeting the pastoral needs of the Church.”

She continued, “The impact of women heard preaching the Gospel, baptizing new Christians, witnessing marriages, and leading funeral services would have a huge impact on the People of God. Our daughters would see opportunities only open to their brothers as possible for themselves. The Church would be more inclusive, publicly and permanently affirming the ministries women have already been doing in lay ministry without ecclesial authority.”

Fraser readily admits much more needs to be done to raise awareness of the issue. More conversation is needed, as well as prayer, dialogue, research, sharing resources, webinars, letter writing. “Interested?” she asks. “Contact VOTF.”

“Above all,” Fraser concludes, “pray for discernment and the power of the Holy Spirit to inspire and animate actions for a vibrant Church that boldly lives the Gospel. As Catherine of Siena proclaimed, ‘Speak the truth with a million voices. It is silence that kills the world.’”

## How well are dioceses protecting our children?

From VOTF's founding, the creation and maintenance of safe environments for children in our Church has been essential to the organization's mission. Previous Protection of Children actions have focused on raising awareness of child abuse prevalence and educating people on abuse prevention. These efforts have included: supporting abuse prevention training for adults and children in parishes, encouraging creation of parish safe environment committees, and providing resource materials. VOTF continues to promote such local child protection activities.

The current POC Working Group initiative takes a different tack by scoring U.S. dioceses on what they are actually doing to protect children, as reflected on their websites, rather than auditing self-reported annual statistics, as dioceses presently do in their “Annual Report on the Implementation of the Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People.”

“Interest in the prominence of posted abuse prevention information on diocesan webpages has inspired the POC team to question the adequacy of annual audits of diocesan compliance with the Charter,” says VOTF Trustee and POC co-chair Patricia Gomez.

“In fact,” she continues, “Francesco Cesareo, Ph.D., former chair of USCCB's NRB, pointed out in a letter prefacing the 2017-18 annual audit that questions remain about whether the ‘audit is sufficiently adequate to determine if a culture of safety within dioceses has taken root’ and that audit evidence shows continuing ‘signs of complacency and lack of diligence on the part of some dioceses.’”

Gomez points out that, “development of the Questionnaire was meticulous and involved input from POC members, as well as

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### Mark Your Calendars

*for this important Zoom gathering*  
Friday Evening, Oct. 22, 2021  
All Day Saturday, Oct. 23, 2021

# Protecting our children *(Continued from Page 3)*

consultants and advisers, all knowledgeable about prevention guidelines and all concerned about diocesan adherence to the Charter and about prevention best practices.”

The POC team’s new study will review diocesan webpages for completeness of safe environment policies, like VOTF’s Finance Working Group annual reviews of diocesan online financial transparency, and will use a similar questionnaire.

The POC reviewers’ questionnaire will study 10 categories: Policy, Code of Conduct, Reporting of Abuse, Background Checks, Prevention Education and Training, Contact Information, Audit Reporting, Review Boards, Publication of Names of Clergy Accused of Abuse, and Victim Assistance.

“Although the parish environment is where the implementation of the majority of safe environment measures takes place, such as background checks and abuse prevention training,” Gomez says, “this initial diocesan website review is a vital gauge to measure posted diocesan requirements and compliance to existing standards and best practices.”

Questions of primary interest, according to Gomez, are in two categories: criminal background record checks on clergy, diocesan personnel, parish staff, and volunteers in contact with minors; and abuse prevention education and training for adults and children. Equally important questions concern disclosing diocesan review board membership; publishing names of clergy accused of abuse; and posting victim assistant coordinator contact information.



*VOTF has used this photo of children happily playing on a tire swing to symbolize the innocence stolen from those whom child protection guidelines are meant to protect.*

However, data from questions in all categories will provide pertinent information on diocesan compliance. “We believe that findings from this review,” Gomez says, “will reflect diocesan commitment to protect children, to assist victims of clergy sexual abuse, and to provide transparent communication regarding diocesan requirements and conformance to standards.”

Data from POC’s review will be distributed to the bishop and diocesan safe environment coordinator in every diocese. “I think the publication of findings,” Gomez says, “can move dioceses to eliminate deficiencies in compliance and empower parishioners to insist the protection of children remains a priority.”

## VOTF helps you check dioceses’ financial transparency



Voice of the Faithful reported this past November on its fourth annual review of diocesan online financial transparency. These reports are holding dioceses accountable to Canon Law and generally accepted accounting principles and showing the faithful how forthcoming their dioceses are financially. VOTF’s “Measuring and Ranking Diocesan Online Financial Transparency”

reports can be read on VOTF’s website. Together with “How to Read a Diocesan Financial Statement,” also on VOTF’s website, they allow Catholics to judge their dioceses’ stewardship.

*We encourage you to visit [www.votf.org](http://www.votf.org) and use these resources to see how financially transparent your diocese is—and don’t be shy about contacting your bishop or a member of your Diocesan Finance Council if you have any questions.*

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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.

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