News



A person puts an offering into a collection basket at St. Patrick's Pro-Cathedral in Newark, New Jersey in this file photo, 2017. (CNS/Gregory A. Shemitz)



by Peter Feuerherd

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November 26, 2018

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Is the glass half empty, or half full? When it comes to financial transparency among U.S. dioceses, there's reason to think both.

Last year, Voice of the Faithful, a group devoted to bishops' accountability begun in response to the Boston Archdiocese sex abuse scandals of 2002, put out its first study on diocesan financial transparency.

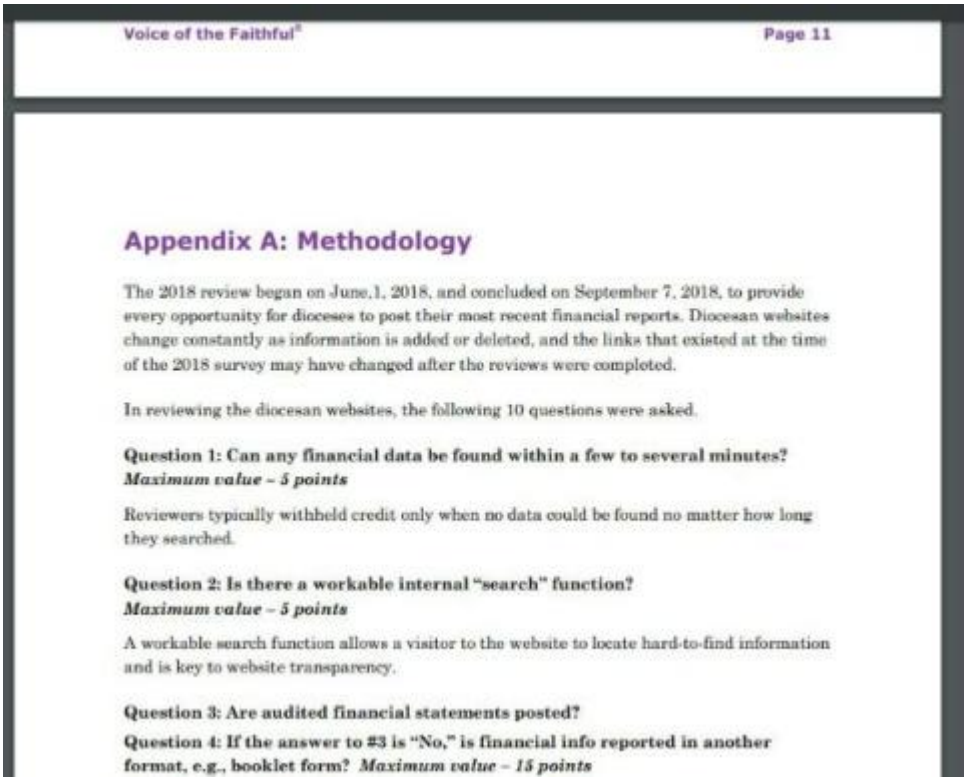
Titled "Measuring and Ranking Diocesan Online Financial Transparency," the study charted 177 dioceses across the United States, and discovered that most were not open about their financial statements.

This year's 2.0 version, reports Margaret Roylance, chair of the committee that compiled an updated study, offers reason for optimism: 77 dioceses were found to have improved their transparency scores, meaning it became easier to find out information about how diocesan money was being collected and used.

The Dioceses of Orlando, Florida, and Burlington, Vermont, earned perfect transparency scores, rating a top number of 60 on the Voice of the Faithful scale. The Archdioceses of Atlanta and Baltimore were right behind, with a 59 rating, along with the Diocese of Sacramento, California.

Others did not rate so well. The Dioceses of St. Thomas, Virgin Islands, and Grand Island, Nebraska, scored the lowest, with marks of 12 and 13, respectively. The study found that 39 percent of dioceses do not post audited financial statements on their websites. A quarter do not post a financial statement of any kind.

Other low-scoring dioceses in this year's survey were Harrisburg, Pennsylvania; Orange, California; Santa Fe, New Mexico; Salina, Kansas; Brownsville, Texas; Knoxville, Tennessee; Lubbock, Texas; Portland, Oregon, and Tulsa, Oklahoma.



Screenshot of Voice of the Faithful's report on U.S. dioceses' online financial transparency, showing questions

Marked improvements were made by some of last year's low scorers, including the Diocese of Camden, New Jersey, which moved from a low score of 10 to 25, and the Diocese of La Crosse, Wisconsin, which improved from a 28 to a 51 score. The 2017 survey results were sent to bishops and diocesan financial officers, some of whom made adjustments in light of last year's survey, said Roylance.

Dioceses were rated according to responses on 10 inquiries. Voice of the Faithful researchers, including accountants and finance experts, rated dioceses on whether financial data was readily available, whether financial audits were posted on diocesan websites, and if they offered clear explanations on how assessments were made on parishes.

Concern for knowing how dioceses spend money is directly related to the sex abuse crisis, Roylance told NCR.

"We've always felt the penchant for secrecy," she said about how many dioceses handle their finances. "It is part of the same culture. If people had known how much money was being spent on settlements, it would have prevented sexual abusers

going on and hurting children," she said.

"Carrying out a widespread coverup of criminal acts without access to large amounts of untraceable money is impossible," she said.

[Peter Feuerherd is a correspondent for NCR's Field Hospital series on parish life and is a professor of journalism at St. John's University, New York.]

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