

FINAL REPORT
SEPTEMBER 2026

ABSENT FROM THE TABLE

CATHOLICS IN AUSTRALIA WHO DO NOT
REGULARLY ATTEND SUNDAY MASS

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FOREWORD



Bishop Greg Bennet

**Absent from the Table:
Catholics in Australia Who Do Not Regularly Attend Sunday Mass**

The story told in *Absent from the Table: Catholics in Australia Who do not Regularly Attend Sunday Mass* (the Report) is both familiar and deeply sobering. Across Australia, many Catholics who once gathered faithfully each Sunday, many formed in Catholic families, schools, and communities, now find themselves on the edges of parish life. Some have stepped away gradually, others abruptly. Some carry wounds, others simply drifted. The Report finds that although many of the faithful who do not attend or participate regularly in Sunday Mass still pray, still believe, still value their Catholic identity, they do not find their place at the Eucharistic table as they once did. Their absence is a pastoral reality that touches every diocese, parish, school, and family. It is also a deeply felt sorrow for many practising Catholics.

This is a national study, and the research methodology included survey and interviews. One of the strengths of the study is the literature review that draws on both local and international research into disengagement and disaffiliation which provides context for the Australian study.

The Report involved a survey with 2,014 responses, of which 67 participants agreed to be interviewed. Their honesty and courage in allowing this sensitive area of their faith life to be examined is gratefully acknowledged.

The stories shared can be difficult to read at times. Participants show that they still care about the Church, even when they struggle to take part in its central act of worship. The reasons for disengagement are complex and interconnected: personal circumstances, family pressures, health issues, disappointment, disillusionment—particularly in response to abuse scandals—and a belief that Mass attendance is no longer central to their spiritual identity. Unsurprisingly, the COVID pandemic was also recognised as contributing to a drift away from the worshipping community. Participants expressed a longing for community, a Church that addresses the complexity of their lives, and a desire for a welcoming, inclusive environment. They described faith taking new forms—through prayer, justice, service, digital engagement, and connection via schools. The underlying desire for meaning remains strong.

The research findings arrive at a significant moment for the Australian Church. In recent years, the Church has listened deeply through the Plenary Council (2021 and 2022) and the Sixteenth General Ordinary Assembly of the Synod of Bishops: *For a Synodal Church: communion, participation, mission (2021-2024)*, as well as countless local conversations. These initiatives have underscored the importance of listening and dialogue in building a synodal Church. This Report continues that work and contributes to the ongoing synodal journey. It is a reminder that renewal begins with listening—listening without defensiveness, assumptions, or fear. The Report invites us to understand not only why people are absent, but also what their absence reveals about the Church we are becoming and the Church we are called to be. It requires of the reader a humble spirit.

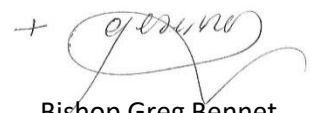
The Report findings do not offer a single solution but rather open a pastoral horizon. Participants call for liturgy that nourishes, preaching that speaks to real life, communities that welcome, leadership that is humble and accountable, and a Church that is inclusive, transparent, and courageous. They ask to be seen not as “lapsed” or “lost,” but as fellow pilgrims whose faith journeys have taken different paths. Their voices challenge us to re-imagine how we accompany one another, how we form disciples, and how we embody the mercy and hospitality of Christ.

Gathering at the table of the Lord is central to Catholic life. It is one of the most beautiful and tangible examples of how we are as Church – a people who are called together, welcomed, nourished by both Word and the Eucharist and sent, renewed for mission. The task of welcoming those who are absent and responding to their needs is a mission priority for all of engaged in Church life.

I commend this Report to all who share responsibility for the mission of the Church—bishops, clergy, religious, educators, pastoral leaders, and parish communities. We have before us a profound invitation: to reflect, to learn, and to respond with renewed commitment to the Gospel. May the pastoral insights offered here help us build communities where every person—whether present each week or returning after many years—finds their place at the table of the Lord.

I commend the research team led by Dr Trudy Dantis for their careful and thorough approach to this sensitive area of Church life and mission.

As we reflect on these findings, let us entrust our Church to the guidance of the Holy Spirit, confident that the Lord continues to walk with us, calling us into deeper communion with Him and with one another.



Bishop Greg Bennet

Bishop of Sale

Delegate for the Australian Catholic Council of Pastoral Research

1 April 2026

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Thank you,

Trudy Dantis, Stephen Reid and Leith Dudfield

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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Trudy Dantis is the Director of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference National Centre for Pastoral Research and an Honorary Research Associate of the University of Divinity and Honorary Fellow of Australian Catholic University. She is an experienced researcher with tertiary qualifications in pastoral studies, social work and community resource management. Trudy was the Principal Researcher for the project and lead author of this report.

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Ms Leith Dudfield

Leith Dudfield is a Research Assistant at the National Centre for Pastoral Research. Leith worked on interviewing participants, the coding and analysis of qualitative data, and reviewing the literature on declining Mass attendance, and contributed to the writing of this report. She also supported the project through numerous administrative tasks, including liaising with participants, applying for ethics approval, and editing and assembling documents.

National Centre for Pastoral Research

The National Centre for Pastoral Research (NCPR) is an agency of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference whose mission is to assist the Catholic Church in Australia at all levels in understanding the cultural, social and personal dimensions of religion in the changing contemporary context. The work of the NCPR is overseen by the Australian Catholic Council for Pastoral Research which, in turn, reports to the Permanent Committee of the Conference. The NCPR was established in 1996 and was previously located in Melbourne, before moving to Canberra in 2018. Previous research studies conducted by the Centre include *Thriving (& Surviving) in Ministry: A Profile of Catholic Clergy in Australia: Health and Wellbeing* (2025), *Synod of Bishops: Australian Synthesis* (2022), *Pedagogy Development: Building on Positive Learnings from COVID-19* (2022), *Listen to What the Spirit is Saying: Final Report for the Plenary Council Phase 1: Listening and Dialogue* (2019), *Understanding Religious Vocations in Australia Today* (2018), *Our Work Matters: Catholic Church Employers and Employees in Australia* (2017), and *Called to Fullness of Life and Love: National Report on the Australian Catholic Bishops' Youth Survey* (2017).

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This national study examined the reasons why some Catholics in Australia do not attend Sunday Mass regularly. The research responded to concerns raised during recent Australian consultations, particularly the Fifth Plenary Council and the Synod of Bishops processes, which highlighted declining Mass participation as a pressing pastoral issue. The study focused on four key areas:

1. Factors influencing a Catholic's decision not to attend Sunday Mass
2. Alternative forms of engagement with the Church
3. Attitudes towards the Eucharist
4. Implications for the wider Catholic community and Church

The research was conducted in two phases, employing a mixed-methods approach. Phase 1 involved an online survey of 1,973 self-selected Catholics aged 18 and over, across seven states and territories. Most respondents were born in Australia, with others representing at least 55 countries, offering diverse perspectives. Phase 2 consisted of in-depth interviews with 67 volunteers from Phase 1, providing qualitative insights into personal experiences and motivations. A Research Reference Group guided the project, and the Human Research Ethics Committee of the Christian Research Association granted ethics approval.

Mass Attendance Patterns and Perspectives

Seventy-four per cent of respondents attended Mass less than weekly. Of these, 19 per cent attended monthly, 36 per cent attended occasionally, and 19 per cent did not attend at all. Twenty per cent of respondents said they had attended a Sunday celebration in the absence of a priest (generally, liturgies where Mass is not available in a geographical area close by), and 96 per cent did not participate in services of other Christian denominations or religions.

Interview participants expressed mixed views: some admired weekly attendance as a meaningful commitment, while others saw it as an obligation or even frustrating. Many valued community over ritual and indicated they might return if changes were made. COVID-19 reduced the sense of obligation, reframing Mass as one of several ways to connect with God. For some, non-attendance signalled dissatisfaction with Church teachings or practices seen to be conservative.

Changes in attendance were both gradual and abrupt. Some drifted away over years due to life transitions (e.g., leaving school, moving parishes), while others stopped suddenly during COVID-19, which disrupted routines and weakened parish ties. Online Mass provided a temporary substitute, but many did not return, citing health concerns, loss of habit, or feeling Mass was no longer central to their spiritual identity. Family dynamics, personal crises, abuse scandals, and disagreements with Church teaching also influenced decisions.

Factors Influencing Non-Attendance at Sunday Mass

The study identified six 'Participant-centred' and eight 'Church-centred' reasons for not attending Sunday Mass frequently, outlined below. Many cited a combination of factors, with personal experiences often intertwined with institutional concerns.

Table 1. Participant- and Church-centred Reasons for Non-Attendance

Participant-centred Reasons:	Church-centred reasons:
1. Going to Mass not a priority	1. Liturgical issues
2. Crisis of faith	2. Challenges with the parish priest and other clergy
3. Family or household-related issues	3. The misuse of power and authority in the Church
4. Travelling, weather or temporary illness	4. Structural factors
5. Chronic illness, infirmity or old age, transport	5. Concerns related to the parish as a community
6. Attendance at another time or elsewhere	6. Disappointment in the Church
	7. Lack of inclusivity or a sense of being excluded by Church rules
	8. The irrelevance of the Church to life today

These findings echoed themes from a 2007 study, while also revealing new or more prominent Church-related factors such as disappointment in the Church, liturgical dissatisfaction, and inclusivity concerns. Similarly, novel participant-centred reasons included attending at another time or elsewhere, chronic illness, old age, transport and travelling, weather or temporary illness (among weekly attenders).¹ The study also revealed several new minor themes, identified in *italics* against the main reasons below.

Participant-centred Reasons:

1. Going to Mass not a priority (*Change in Mass attendance habits since COVID-19*)
2. Crisis of faith (*Connect to God in other ways, Attending weekly Mass unnecessary to maintaining faith*)²
3. Family or household-related issues (*No family or friends attending, Partner not Catholic, Partner or family unsupportive of attendance, Other living issues*).

Church-centred Reasons:

1. Liturgical issues (*Boring or depressing Mass, Do not connect with Mass, Mass not relevant, Issues with the liturgy or the structure of Mass, Mass not age-appropriate, Poor music*)
2. Challenges with the parish priest and clergy (*Challenges with priests born in other countries*)
3. Misuse of power and authority (*Clericalism, hypocrisy and contradictions in the Church, Lack of trust in the Church*)

¹ The 2007 study examined the reasons why certain Catholics, aged 25 and older, who formerly attended Mass regularly, ceased to do so within the past five years, excluding factors such as age or ill health. The omission of illness as a reason for non-attendance was intentional; Robert Dixon et al., *Catholics Who Have Stopped Attending Mass* (Pastoral Projects Office Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, 2007), 9.

² The theme of weekly attendance at Mass being no longer obligatory is not a 'new' concept, as it was mentioned in the supplementary findings of the 2007 report, but was not identified as a distinct theme at that time. It emerged as a theme in its own right in this study; Dixon et al., *Catholics Who Have Stopped Attending Mass*, 50.

4. Structural factors (*Disability support or access issues, Lack of priests, Lack of Traditional Latin Mass, Mass not offered weekly, Prefer to attend online Mass*).

Faith Life and Alternative Church Engagement

Despite their irregular attendance, most participants remained deeply connected to their faith. Around two-thirds said faith was very important, and more than three-quarters affirmed belief in Jesus as the Son of God. Similarly, over two-thirds described God as very important.

For many, the Catholic faith was highly significant during childhood, shaped by family traditions (85%), school-based religious education (83%), and sacramental preparation (81%). Over half (53%) had participated in youth or church groups, while 55 per cent had attended spiritual retreats or conferences. Sixty-nine per cent agreed or strongly agreed that being Catholic was an essential part of who they are today.

Nearly two-thirds (64%) prayed regularly, and many expressed Catholic identity through sending their children to a Catholic school (44%), sharing their faith with others (40%), wearing religious symbols or displaying them at home (40%), and volunteering in the wider community (39%) or parish (29%). Other expressions of faith included through small groups, faith-based events, and private Bible reading.

Catholic school communities were valued more highly than parishes (74% vs. 51%). Participants often attended Catholic rituals for family events, but some resisted personal participation and had strong views against them.

Beyond Mass, engagement occurred through Catholic support or welfare services, education, health care, and social justice groups. A majority (62%) reported other connections, such as working or volunteering in Catholic schools and hospitals, and participating in prayer and study groups, youth events, religious communities, and Catholic cultural or social clubs. Spiritual connections included Catholic devotions, personal prayer, Catholic arts, and spiritual direction, while digital engagement occurred through online Mass, Catholic podcasts, social media, and Catholic seminars. Almost all respondents (96%) did not attend the services of other denominations, though a few did so for inclusivity or preference.

Attitudes Toward the Eucharist

The Eucharist remained deeply meaningful for many participants, though beliefs varied. Just over half (55%) affirmed the Real Presence of Christ, while 24 per cent saw the elements as symbolic and 21 per cent were unsure. Interviews revealed that even among irregular attenders, the Eucharist often held significance—sometimes more for its sense of tradition and community than for doctrinal beliefs. Some expressed discomfort receiving Communion when disagreeing with Church teachings, while others questioned transubstantiation or regarded the Eucharist as having little personal relevance.

Implications for the Catholic Community

Six interwoven themes emerged across both phases of the research, reflecting deeper emotional, cultural, and spiritual dynamics that shape Catholic engagement today.

1. **The Impacts of Abuse:** Experiences of abuse, particularly clergy sexual abuse, were cited as significant factors affecting trust and participation. Survivors and their families expressed deep disillusionment, highlighting the need for healing and accountability.
2. **Seeking Community Beyond the Parish:** There was a strong desire for community and belonging, which many respondents felt was not met within their parish settings. This led to a search for connection beyond parish Mass attendance, with some finding relational and spiritual fulfilment in Catholic schools, online communities, social justice groups, or other denominations.
3. **Spirituality Beyond the Church:** Several participants reported connecting with God through personal prayer, nature, online Mass, and acts of service, often finding these expressions more meaningful than the usual Sunday liturgies. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated this shift, with many discovering alternative forms of worship that were physically easier to access and spiritually more fulfilling.
4. **Burnout and competing priorities:** These were common experiences, especially among parents, carers and rural residents. Structural challenges, such as inconvenient Mass times, scarcity of clergy and limited access, further compounded these pressures, making Mass difficult for many.
5. **Generational Disconnect:** Younger Catholics were more likely to feel disengaged from parish life, citing a lack of relevance, inclusivity and community. While many affirmed core beliefs, they sought more relational and contemporary expressions of faith that aligned with their lived experiences.
6. **Indigenous issues:** These respondents had mixed views, some respondents expressed disappointment over the Church's perceived lack of support for the Voice Referendum and cultural inclusion. Contrasting views on using an Acknowledgement of Country revealed tensions around reconciliation and liturgical practice, highlighting the need for deeper engagement with First Nations' perspectives.

Strategies for Reconnection

Participants called for a renewed pastoral approach that reflects the diversity of Catholic experience and responds to contemporary spiritual needs. Suggestions included making Mass more engaging through better homilies, music, shorter services, more accessible Mass times, and greater liturgical relevance, as well as guidance for those unfamiliar with the service. Some proposed that days other than Sunday be approved to fulfil the weekly obligation.

Others advocated for a more inclusive and progressive Church that welcomed diverse voices and fostered compassion rather than judgment. Suggestions included greater involvement of lay people, the inclusion of women and married individuals in ministry, and acceptance of LGBTQI+ individuals and divorced and remarried Catholics. Respondents emphasised building stronger relationships within parish communities and broadening the Church's interaction with people beyond traditional settings.

Structural reforms, greater transparency and accountability, and improved priestly ministry were also highlighted.

Participants stressed the need for parishes to foster environments where people feel they belong and can participate meaningfully. A welcoming atmosphere—especially for families and younger people—was seen as essential. Respondents also emphasised building faith through formation focused on core Catholic beliefs and scripture. Greater parish involvement in volunteering, community outreach, and social justice initiatives was encouraged to reflect the Church’s mission and deepen engagement.

While many participants expressed openness to re-engagement, a number identified personal barriers that prevented more frequent attendance. A small group of respondents stated that they were not interested in returning to the Church at all, citing disillusionment or a shift in personal beliefs.

Limitations and Future Research

While the findings are based on a self-selected sample and are not fully generalisable to all Catholics in Australia, they provide significant insights into patterns of engagement and reasons for non-attendance at Mass.

Further research could focus on specific subgroups (young adults, Indigenous Catholics, culturally diverse communities) and explore long-term trends. Comparative studies and deeper qualitative work could inform more responsive pastoral strategies.

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INTRODUCTION

Background to the Study

The Catholic Church has a three-fold responsibility of proclaiming the Word of God, celebrating the sacraments, and exercising the ministry of charity.³ The primary act of worship is to join with others to celebrate the Eucharist, or, as is commonly known, ‘attend Sunday Mass’, which is essential to the identity and the mission of the Church.⁴ ‘The Lord’s Day’, as Sunday was called from Apostolic times, remains at the heart of the Christian life and Catholic celebration of the Easter mystery as affirmed by the Second Vatican Council.⁵ Pope Francis explained that participation in the liturgy was ‘to really enter into the mystery of God, to allow ourselves to be brought to the mystery and to be in the mystery’.⁶

In 2007, Dixon et al. undertook a detailed study on Catholics who had ceased attending Mass for reasons other than age or ill health.⁷ The study examined how once-regular Mass attenders saw themselves in relation to belonging to the Church and whether anything would cause them to become involved with the Church again.⁸ The findings revealed that most people did not have one definitive reason for their disengagement from the Mass but often had two or three intersecting reasons.⁹ The participants’ reasons were categorised into ‘Church-centred reasons’ and ‘Participant-centred reasons’ as follows:¹⁰

Church-centred reasons:

1. The irrelevance of the Church to life today
2. The misuse of power and authority in the Church
3. Challenges with the priest in the parish
4. Lack of intellectual stimulation
5. Concerns related to the parish as a community
6. A sense of being excluded by Church rules
7. Structural factors

³ Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est* (Vatican Press, 2005), sec. 25a, https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20051225_deus-caritas-est.html.

⁴ *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1993), 1324-27, https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_INDEX.HTM#fonte.

⁵ Second Vatican Council, *Sacrosanctum concilium*, Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (Holy See, 1963), https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19631204_sacrosanctum-concilium_en.html; John Paul II, *Dies domini*, apostolic letter (Holy See, March 19, 1998), https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_letters/1998/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_05071998_dies-domini.html.

⁶ Francis, “Homily at the Casa Santa Marta”, February 10, 2014, in “Pope Francis on Active Participation and the ‘Sense of the Sacred’”, Nathan Chase, February 11, 2014, <https://praytelligblog.com/index.php/2014/02/11/pope-francis-on-active-participation-and-the-sense-of-the-sacred/>.

⁷ Dixon et al., *Catholics Who Have Stopped Attending Mass*.

⁸ Dixon et al., *Catholics Who Have Stopped Attending Mass*, 10.

⁹ Dixon et al., *Catholics Who Have Stopped Attending Mass*, 16.

¹⁰ Dixon et al., *Catholics Who Have Stopped Attending Mass*, 49.

Participant-centred reasons:

1. Family or household-related issues
2. Crisis of faith
3. Going to Mass simply not a priority

A subsequent consultation process invited readers to assist in preparing recommendations to help the Church enhance its pastoral practices, and a 'Pastoral Strategies' document was subsequently produced.¹¹

While Dixon et al.'s study was thorough and provided valuable information about the experiences and motives of those who had stopped attending Mass at that time, the 'landscape' of the Australian population, and the Catholic population in particular, saw significant changes in the almost two decades following. The impacts of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse (2012-2017), the Marriage Equality Plebiscite (2017), the experience of the Fifth Australian Plenary Council (2018-2021), the consultations and 'conversations in the spirit' from the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops on Synodality (2020-2024), and the COVID-19 pandemic and associated lockdowns and restrictions (2020-2021) were some factors that caused significant changes to the experience of Mass attendance in the Australian Catholic population.

In early 2024, when this project was envisaged, it was recognised that the Church in Australia had been discerning pastoral strategies to respond to this challenging context for some time. However, many of the Church's attempts at evangelisation and outreach had not been able to remediate disengagement and non-engagement among Catholics from participation in Sunday Mass in their local parishes and faith communities. Many local communities tended to focus on initiatives that appealed to Catholics already attending and participating, rather than as an outreach to those Catholics who identified as such but did not attend Mass. Previous research revealed that many Catholics connected with the Church through Catholic schools, both systemic and independent, and some community service agencies of the Church (e.g., CatholicCare, St Vincent De Paul Society).¹²

The pastoral issue of Mass attendance was raised during the Fifth Plenary Council and the Synod of Bishops processes. 'Attention to falling Mass attendance' was one of the key themes raised in the *Final Report for the Plenary Council Phase 1: Listening and Dialogue* where participants voiced concern over the diminishing number of attenders.¹³ Decree Five of the Plenary Council, in particular, acknowledged the need for greater 'renewal in catechesis, formation, and devotion' to the sacrament of the Eucharist.¹⁴

¹¹ Pastoral Projects Office, *Catholics Who Have Stopped Attending Mass: Pastoral Strategies* (Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, 2007), <https://ncpr.catholic.org.au/pdf/PastoralStrategiesDoc29Oct2007.pdf>.

¹² National Centre for Pastoral Research, "The Australian Survey of Social Attitudes: Australians' Connections with Catholic Agencies", *Pastoral Research Online*, no. 48 (2020): 5, <https://ncpr.catholic.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Pastoral-Research-Online-Edition-48-March-2020-1.pdf>.

¹³ Trudy Dantis et al., *Listen to What the Spirit is Saying: Final Report for the Plenary Council, Phase 1: Listening and Dialogue* (Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, 2019), 44, <https://plenarycouncil.catholic.org.au/resources/reports/>.

¹⁴ Fifth Plenary Council of Australia, *Decree 5 Communion in Grace: Sacrament to the World* (2022), 9, <https://plenarycouncil.catholic.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/FINAL-Decree-5-Communion-in-Grace-Sacrament-to-the-World.pdf>.

The *Synod of Bishops Australian Synthesis* report identified the ‘Importance of liturgy to faith’ as one of its key themes, with respondents noting the reality of many Catholics not participating in the liturgical life of the Church for a variety of reasons and calling for ‘life-giving, faith-supporting celebrations with the opportunity to share their faith, and to heal and build community relationships’.¹⁵

The National Centre for Pastoral Research (NCPR), with the support of the Australian Catholic Council for Pastoral Research, sought to respond to these voices by laying a strong research foundation to support further pastoral action in this area.

Research Question and Objectives

The main research question for this study is: What are the reasons why Catholics do not regularly attend Sunday Mass?¹⁶ In comparison to previous research, the study investigates a starker reality—the fact that many Catholics today do not develop a habit of regular weekly attendance at Mass at all and explores the reasons why this is so. The study addresses gaps by investigating the personal and ecclesial factors influencing a lack of attendance at Sunday Mass. The research also presents an opportunity for a follow-up study on pastoral strategies, as was conducted following the initial 2007 research project.

This topic is considered essential and relevant because it raises questions about the contemporary religious practices and beliefs of Catholics in Australia, as well as the role of the Eucharist in their spiritual lives. The findings are expected to assist pastoral leaders in understanding better those Catholics who do not attend Mass at all or attend only infrequently, identify how their expression of Catholic identity has changed, and suggest responses for those seeking to encourage participation in the Mass.

The study seeks to meet the following objectives:

1. Identify the factors that influence a Catholic’s decision not to attend Sunday Mass.
2. Explore other ways, if any, in which they engage with the Church and why.
3. Gain a greater understanding of their attitudes towards the Eucharist.
4. Explore the implications of this phenomenon for the wider Catholic community and the Church at large.

¹⁵ Trudy Dantis et al., *Synod of Bishops: Australian Synthesis*, rev. ed. (Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, 2022), 6, https://s3.ap-southeast-2.amazonaws.com/acbcwebsite/Articles/Documents/ACBC/Synod_of_Bishops_Australian_Synthesis_-_FINAL.pdf.

¹⁶ Sunday Mass includes the Saturday vigil.

Research Methods

The research method for this project was a mixed-methods strategy involving qualitative and quantitative data and content thematic analysis.

The project was undertaken in two phases.

- Phase 1 – An online survey distributed to a wide population of Catholics to gain a broader understanding of the phenomenon.
- Phase 2 – Qualitative data collected through several semi-structured interviews with participants. Participants chosen for Phase 2 were based on Phase 1 respondents who indicated their willingness to be involved in this stage.

A Research Reference group was established to advise and guide the project.

Ethics approval was granted by the Christian Research Association Human Ethics Committee for Phase 1 on 16 May 2024 (Appendix A) and Phase 2 on 8 November 2024 (Appendix B). An amendment to the application for Phase 2 was granted on 2 March 2025 (Appendix C).

Participant Recruitment and Data Collection

Participants for Phase 1 were recruited via an invitational letter to complete an online survey. The NCPR distributed this invitation, which included the survey link, through diocesan networks, contacts and leaders of other Catholic organisations. These recipients were asked to share the invitation with individuals who met the research inclusion criteria and encourage their participation. The research criteria for respondents were that:

1. They self-identified as Catholics and were 18 years and over.
2. They do not regularly attend weekly Mass on Sundays.

Regular weekly attendance was defined as physical attendance at Sunday Mass three or more times a month. This could include the Saturday vigil celebrated in many parishes.

A copy of the invitational letter and the related email templates can be found in Appendices D, E and F.

Information about the survey and the invitation to participate were also circulated through the June 2024 NCPR newsletter, an ABC radio interview, ACBC media releases, and the NCPR LinkedIn account. Individuals were invited to contact the NCPR for the survey link. We received 59 requests for the link through these channels. The survey link included access to the Participant Information Letter (Appendix G) and the Support Services Document (Appendix H). A copy of the survey questionnaire is available as Appendix I.

Data collection in Phase 2 was done through one-on-one interviews. At the end of the Phase 1 survey, respondents were invited to contact the NCPR to indicate their willingness to participate in an

interview in Phase 2. A copy of the invitation can be found in Appendices J and K. Participants were provided with a Participant Information Letter (Appendix L) and Support Services Sheet (Appendix H), and were asked to complete a Demographics Profile (Appendix M) and a Consent Form (Appendix N), prior to the interview.

Total Responses Received

There were 2,014 responses received in the Phase 1 survey. The first question in the survey asked respondents about their initiation into the Catholic Church. If the response 'I am not Catholic' was selected, respondents were taken to a page that thanked them for their interest in the survey and noted that they did not fulfil the respondent criteria. Forty-one people were screened out of the study in this manner. There were several incomplete responses, and the researchers chose to include incomplete responses from those who had answered at least up to question 16 (which asked, 'What is the main reason you do not attend Mass at least weekly?'). Any responses that did not address this core question were removed. After cleaning the data to remove duplicates and incomplete responses, the researchers were left with 1,963 responses.

A total of 98 respondents from Phase 1 indicated their willingness to be interviewed in Phase 2. Semi-structured interviews were held from March to July 2025, using Microsoft Teams or Zoom, or over the phone. A copy of the Interview Schedule is available in Appendix O. A total of 67 people participated in interviews, 11 withdrew from the study, and 20 were unable to be contacted or did not respond after the initial contact.

Data Analysis

Quantitative results were analysed in SPSS and MS Excel using univariate (frequency) analysis.

Qualitative data analysis was done using NVivo software. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. During their discussions, interviewers noted impressions, recurring themes, quotes and points of interest. The data from the open-ended responses to questions in the survey and interviews were uploaded into NVivo. A comprehensive process of data coding and analysis was undertaken, using two approaches; firstly, descriptive coding, where information was coded by topics, and secondly, 'in vivo coding', where themes emerged from the language or phrases used by participants.

Inter-researcher reliability checks for NVivo and SPSS coding, to measure the consistency and agreement between the researchers, were undertaken to ensure the reliability of the research findings.

About This Report

This report presents the findings of both phases of the project. The first section provides a short review of the demographic changes in the Australian Catholic population and shifts in their Mass attendance practices. It also explores some recent events since the 2007 project that may have contributed to declining attendance and disaffiliation. Some relevant Australian research on declining attendance and affiliation is reviewed, as well as pertinent recent overseas studies.

The second section presents a summary of the participants in Phases 1 and 2 of the study, offering fundamental analysis of their demographics—such as age, sex, ethnicity and occupation—as well as details of how and when they became Catholic and motivations for joining the project.

The remainder of the report provides a detailed analysis of the findings, divided into the following four sections:

- Participants' Faith: A Profile of Beliefs, Practices and Perspectives
- Mass Attendance Patterns
- Reasons for Non-Weekly Attendance
- Re-engagement with the Mass and How the Church Can Help

Several sections in the report include numerous open-ended survey responses, which elicited more detailed answers. Phase 2 interviews offered further insights into specific issues. Due to the substantial volume of these responses, not all comments could be included; only those that illustrate key themes are presented throughout. Short quotes exemplifying these responses are included, indicating the participant's sex (M or F) and age group (e.g., 50-54), although these should not be considered representative demographics for all similar responses.

The findings contain some degree of content overlap, as participants addressed similar issues across different questions in the survey and the interviews. As a result, some similar themes recur throughout various sections of the report.

Stories of faith, life and ministry shared by participants in the interviews are interwoven throughout the report. These stories use pseudonyms and have been edited for brevity. Consent to share these has been granted by each participant. The final section discusses the report's findings, highlighting emerging trends, describing the study's limitations, and outlining areas for further research.

THE AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC COMMUNITY—2006 TO 2025

Population Changes

Over the past 18 years, since the 2007 study, the Catholic community in Australia has experienced notable demographic changes, with one of the most significant changes being the decline in the proportion and number of individuals identifying as Catholic. In 2006, 26 per cent of the Australian population identified as Catholic, which by 2021 had decreased to 20 per cent.¹⁷ While the Catholic population grew in every Australian Census from 1911 to 2011—reaching a peak of 5.4 million—the trend reversed in 2016 and then again in 2021, when the number of Catholics declined to 5,075,910.¹⁸

Some have suggested that the decline is offset by increased immigration.¹⁹ However, the proportion of Catholics born overseas has only marginally increased—from 23 per cent in 2006 to 27 per cent in 2021.²⁰ The top five countries of birth for Catholics in 2021 were the Philippines, Italy, the United Kingdom (except Northern Ireland), India and New Zealand.²¹ While migrants from the United Kingdom have historically formed the largest group in the broader Australian community, this proportion is decreasing, with other communities, such as Indian and Filipino migrants, increasing significantly.²² Multiculturalism has brought both valuable benefits and challenges to the community. On the one hand, it fosters greater diversity, which can encourage tolerance, critical thinking, creativity, more options for culture and cuisine, and a broader range of skills and viewpoints in the workplace.²³ On the other hand, it can also lead to communication barriers, cultural misunderstandings, and instances of insensitive behaviours.²⁴

Mass Attendance Trends

An analysis of 2021 data on Catholic Mass attendance in Australia revealed a continued decline, with only 8.2 per cent of Catholics attending Mass, down from 11.8 per cent in 2016.²⁵ This reflects a broader downward trend that has been evident since data were first gathered in 1996, when 18 per

¹⁷ Trudy Dantis et al., *Social Profile of the Catholic Community in Australia* (Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, 2023), 4, <https://ncpr.catholic.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/2021-Social-Profile-of-the-Catholic-Community-in-Australia-R.pdf>.

¹⁸ Dantis et al., *Social Profile of the Catholic Community in Australia*, 4.

¹⁹ "Immigration Cannot Save Catholic Church in the West", *The Catholic Herald*, August 1, 2022, <https://catholicherald.co.uk/immigration-cannot-save-catholic-church-in-the-west/>.

²⁰ Robert E. Dixon, *The Catholic Community in Australia* (Openbook Publishers, 2005), 90; Dantis et al., *Social Profile of the Catholic Community in Australia*, 17.

²¹ Dixon, *The Catholic Community in Australia*, 90; Dantis et al., *Social Profile of the Catholic Community in Australia*, 17.

²² "Cultural Diversity of Australia", updated September 20, 2022, <https://www.abs.gov.au/articles/cultural-diversity-australia>.

²³ "Cultural Diversity in Australia: An Ethnolinguistic Symphony", Australian Translation Services, accessed February 14, 2025, <https://australiantranslationservices.com.au/cultural-diversity-in-australia/#:~:text=Multiculturalism%20in%20Australia%20has%20led,freedom%20of%20creativity%2C%20and%20innovation.>

²⁴ Australian Translation Services, "An Ethnolinguistic Symphony".

²⁵ Trudy Dantis et al., *The Australian Catholic Mass Attendance Report 2021* (Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, 2024), 6, <https://ncpr.catholic.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Mass-attendance-in-Australia-2021-FINAL.pdf>.

cent of the Catholic community attended Mass.²⁶ The most recent five-year decline was more marked, with a decrease of around 33 per cent, compared to 5.9 per cent from 2011 to 2016.²⁷ This more significant decrease in 2021 may be attributed to the impact of COVID-19 restrictions and health guidelines in place at the time of the 2021 Count of Attendance.²⁸

More recent data from NCLS Research, covering Christian denominations between 2021 and 2024, indicated that church attendance in 2024 had largely returned to pre-COVID-19 levels.²⁹ Among the top five denominations, the Catholic Church had the highest estimated weekly Mass attendance, with 572,000 people representing 44 per cent of all Australian church attenders.³⁰ However, these figures were based on projected trends and have not yet been confirmed by actual counts.³¹ Despite the apparent recovery, the 2024 projections still represent only 92 per cent of the 2016 attendance figures, which was the last official Mass attendance count prior to the pandemic, indicating an overall decline in participation.³²

Previous research indicates that the decline in attendance can be attributed mainly to Australian-born Catholics.³³ Between 1996 and 2016, the attendance rate of this group fell from about 17 per cent to nine per cent, while that of Catholics from other English-speaking countries fell from 26 per cent to 14 per cent in the same period.³⁴ In comparison, the attendance rate of Catholics born in non-English-speaking countries remained consistent at around 23 per cent.³⁵

The age of Mass attenders is also concerning for the future of the Church. In 2021, just over one-quarter of Mass attenders (25.8%) were aged 70 and over, while only 9.5 per cent were aged 18 to 29.³⁶ While the comparison with earlier years suggests that the group aged 18-to-29 increased proportionally in 2021, the differences in data collection in the different years may obscure the full story.³⁷

²⁶ Dantis et al., *The Australian Catholic Mass Attendance Report 2021*, 7.

²⁷ Dantis et al., *The Australian Catholic Mass Attendance Report 2021*, 1; Trudy Dantis et al., *The Australian Catholic Mass Attendance Report 2016: A Report Based on the National Count of Attendance, the National Church Life Survey and the National Catholic Census Project*, rev. ed. (Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, 2021), 1, <https://ncpr.catholic.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Mass-attendance-in-Australia-2016-Revised-July-2021.pdf>.

²⁸ Dantis et al., *The Australian Catholic Mass Attendance Report 2021*, 3-4.

²⁹ Ruth Powell et al., *Church Pulse Check 2021 to 2024: Estimates of Australian Church Attendance, Faith Commitments and Churches Across Denominations* (NCLS Research, 2025).

³⁰ Powell et al., *Church Pulse Check 2021 to 2024*, 10.

³¹ Powell et al., *Church Pulse Check 2021 to 2024*, 11.

³² Powell et al., *Church Pulse Check 2021 to 2024*, 11.

³³ Dantis et al., *The Australian Catholic Mass Attendance Report 2016*, 7.

³⁴ Robert Dixon et al., *Mass Attendance in Australia: A Critical Moment* (ACBC Pastoral Research Office, 2013), 4, <https://ncpr.catholic.org.au/pdf/Pastoral%20Research%20Office%20-%20Mass%20attendance%20in%20Australia%20-%20a%20critical%20moment%20-%20December%202013.pdf>; Dantis et al., *The Australian Catholic Mass Attendance Report 2016*, 7.

³⁵ Dixon et al., *Mass Attendance in Australia: A Critical Moment*, 4; Dantis et al., *The Australian Catholic Mass Attendance Report 2016*, 7.

³⁶ Dantis et al., *The Australian Catholic Mass Attendance Report 2021*, 8.

³⁷ Dantis et al., *The Australian Catholic Mass Attendance Report 2021*, 8.

Factors Affecting Mass Attendance

The decline in the Australian-born Catholic population can largely be attributed to religious disidentification (synonymously termed as ‘disaffiliation’ by some studies). In a detailed analysis of Census data, Dixon estimated that in 2016, about 356,000 people aged 15 and over, who had self-identified or had been identified by their parents as Catholics in 2011, did not identify this way in 2016.³⁸ In the same period, the number of people aged 35 to 74 who ceased to self-identify as Catholic, grew from 31,000 in 2006 to 162,000, or 45 per cent of the total of people disidentifying in 2016.³⁹ Stolz, de Graaf, Hackett and Antonietti have identified that religious decline appears to occur in three stages.⁴⁰ The first stage involves a lack of participation in public ritual (i.e. attending Mass); in the second stage, the importance of religion to a person decreases, and finally, in the third stage, people disaffiliate from a religion altogether.⁴¹

The period following the Second Vatican Council had a significant influence on Catholics in Australia.⁴² Declines in Australians' affiliation with Christian denominations and with Catholicism were observed, although some sources noted that these were partially offset by immigration.⁴³ The number of vocations to the priesthood and religious life have also declined since the Council.⁴⁴ Corresponding declines in the same period were also noted in weekly Mass attendance, attendance at confession and in religious practices such as prayer and saying the rosary,⁴⁵ and other sacraments such as baptism and marriage.⁴⁶

Living in regional and remote areas also poses additional challenges to regular Mass attendance. While two-thirds of the Australian population live in major cities,⁴⁷ those who live in regional and remote areas face unique challenges such as older populations, lower education levels and incomes, and less access to health care, employment, telecommunication and financial services.⁴⁸ During the consultations for the Fifth Plenary Council of Australia, respondents identified several issues pertinent to rural and regional communities, including limited access to Mass and the sacraments, an ageing

³⁸ Robert Dixon, "Australian Catholicism in the Third Phase of Globalization: Demographic Shifts and Unceasing Challenges", in *Asian Pacific Catholicism and Globalization: Historical Perspectives and Contemporary Challenges*, ed. José Casanova and Peter C. Phan (Georgetown University Press, 2023), 205, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.2307/jj.2458923.14>.

³⁹ Dixon, "Australian Catholicism in the Third Phase of Globalization", 206.

⁴⁰ Jörg Stolz et al., "The Three Stages of Religious Decline Around the World", *Nature Communications* 16 (2025): 1, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1038/s41467-025-62452-z>.

⁴¹ Stolz et al., "The Three Stages of Religious Decline Around the World", 1.

⁴² Robert Dixon and Ruth Powell, "Vatican II: A Data-Based Analysis of Its Impact on Australian Catholic Life", in *Vatican II: Reception and Implementation in the Australian Church*, ed. Neil Ormerod et al. (Garratt Publishing, 2012), 293.

⁴³ Dixon and Powell, "Vatican II: A Data-Based Analysis of Its Impact on Australian Catholic Life", 298-99.

⁴⁴ Dixon and Powell, "Vatican II: A Data-Based Analysis of Its Impact on Australian Catholic Life", 299.

⁴⁵ Dixon and Powell, "Vatican II: A Data-Based Analysis of Its Impact on Australian Catholic Life", 301-07.

⁴⁶ National Centre for Pastoral Research, "Baptisms, Communion, Confirmations and Marriages in Australia—1991-2021", *Pastoral Research Online*, no. 68 (2025), 3, <https://ncpr.catholic.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/Pastoral-Research-Online-Edition68-Mar25.pdf>.

⁴⁷ Jennifer Baxter et al., *Families in Regional, Rural and Remote Australia* (Australian Government, 2011), 2, <https://aifs.gov.au/research/research-reports/families-regional-rural-and-remote-australiaStudies>; "Rural and Remote Health", Australian Government, updated April 30, 2024, <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/rural-remote-australians/rural-and-remote-health>.

⁴⁸ Australian Government, "Rural and Remote Health"; Baxter et al., *Families in Regional, Rural and Remote Australia*, 3.

and diminishing community, attracting and forming young people, and cultural differences between the congregation and the clergy, if clergy members were available at all.⁴⁹

Since the 2007 study into *Catholics Who Have Stopped Attending Mass*, four other external factors have been identified that may have contributed to the decline:

- Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse.
- The Australian Marriage Law Postal Survey.
- The COVID-19 Pandemic.
- The Voice Referendum.

Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse (2012-2017)

The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse was announced in 2012, leading to the establishment of the Truth, Justice and Healing Council to coordinate the Catholic Church's response and that of its agencies.⁵⁰ The Royal Commission invited testimonies from affected individuals and conducted extensive public hearings and research.⁵¹ Of those survivors of child sexual abuse who shared their stories with the Royal Commission, 62 per cent related abuse that had occurred in Catholic institutions.⁵² The Royal Commission highlighted not only the prevalence of abuse but also the substantial institutional failures in addressing such disclosures effectively.⁵³ The findings of the Royal Commission resulted in improvements in management practices and victim responses;⁵⁴ however, they also adversely affected the trust that Catholic Mass attenders had in some Church authorities.⁵⁵

The Australian Marriage Law Postal Survey (2017)

In 2017, a voluntary postal survey assessed the Australian public's support for amending the Marriage Act to permit same-sex marriage. Despite its voluntary nature, 79.5 per cent of Australians

⁴⁹ Dantis et al., *Listen to What the Spirit is Saying*, 58-9, 62-3, 144.

⁵⁰ "Royal Commission", Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, accessed January 21, 2025, <https://www.catholic.au/s/article/Royal-Commission>.

⁵¹ Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, "A Brief Guide to the Final Report" (2017): 1-3, https://www.childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au/sites/default/files/a_brief_guide_to_the_final_report.pdf.

⁵² Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, *Final Report: Religious Institutions, Volume 16: Book 2* (Commonwealth of Australia, 2017), 75.

⁵³ Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, *Final Report: Religious Institutions, Volume 16: Book 1* (Commonwealth of Australia, 2017), 11.

⁵⁴ Katie Wright et al., "The Australian Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse", *Child Abuse & Neglect* 74 (2017): 5, <https://doi.org/http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2017.09.031>.

⁵⁵ Robert Dixon and Stephen Reid, *Mass Attenders' Responses to the Clergy Sexual Abuse Crisis: A Report to the Truth Justice and Healing Council on Questions Included in the 2016 National Church Life Survey* (Pastoral Research Office, 2018), 7; Robert Dixon, "Growing Dissatisfaction: Mass Attenders' Attitudes to the Sexual Abuse Crisis in the Catholic Church", in *Encountering God: Practical Theology and the Mission to Heal*, ed. Robert Dixon and Mary Eastham (Coventry Press, 2023), 50-51.

participated,⁵⁶ following weeks of intense public debate.⁵⁷ During this period, the Bishops Commission for Life, Family and Public Engagement issued a statement summarising Pope Francis's teaching on marriage, affirming marriage as a unique relationship between a man and a woman.⁵⁸ Ultimately, 61.6 per cent of respondents supported the legislative change, allowing same-sex couples to marry.⁵⁹ However, many reported that the debate had a negative impact on LGBTQI+ Australians and their allies.⁶⁰ Prior to the survey, research suggested that Catholics in general (as distinct from Mass attenders) held views aligned with the broader population. A 2014 study commissioned by Australian Marriage Equality found 72 per cent of Australians, and 67 per cent of self-identified Catholics, supported same-sex marriage.⁶¹ These societal shifts, alongside the Church's opposition to the change in marriage law, may have influenced Catholic's perceptions of the Church and affected levels of engagement, including Mass attendance.

The COVID-19 Pandemic (2020-2021)

On 11 March 2020, COVID-19 was designated a 'Public Health Emergency of International Concern'.⁶² In response to rising case numbers and the severity of the illness, Australian state and territory governments implemented several measures to reduce transmission and ease pressure on the health system. These included lockdowns, physical distancing, mandatory mask-wearing, church closures, limits on gathering sizes, contact tracing registers and restrictions on congregational singing.⁶³ The application of these measures varied across jurisdictions, with some only recommending physical distancing measures, while others implemented strict density limits, mask-wearing and bans on congregational singing.⁶⁴ As indicated earlier, national Mass attendance figures from 2021 noted a sharper decline over the five-year period, primarily attributed to these restrictions, even in areas where the measures were less stringent.⁶⁵ At the same time, there was an increase in the availability of online Mass, which many people accessed as an alternative to in-person attendance.⁶⁶ Recent

⁵⁶ "1800.0 - Australian Marriage Law Postal Survey, 2017", Australian Bureau of Statistics, updated November 15, 2017, <https://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/1800.0>.

⁵⁷ Saan Ecker et al., "Impact of the Australian Marriage Equality Postal Survey and Debate on Psychological Distress among Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex and Queer/Questioning People and Allies", *Australian Journal of Psychology* 71, no. 3 (2019): 285, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1111/ajpy.12245>.

⁵⁸ Family and Public Engagement Bishops Commission for Life, *Pope Francis, Marriage and the Plebiscite* (Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, 2017), <https://s3.ap-southeast-2.amazonaws.com/acbcwebsite/Articles/Documents/ACBC/Pope%20Francis%2C%20Marriage%20and%20the%20Plebiscite.pdf>.

⁵⁹ Australian Bureau of Statistics, "Australian Marriage Law Postal Survey".

⁶⁰ Ecker et al., "Impact of the Australian Marriage Equality Postal Survey", 285.

⁶¹ Crosby|Textor, *Same-Sex Marriage Research 2014: Summary Results* (2014), 4, 6, <https://www.aph.gov.au/DocumentStore.ashx?id=5dd06af1-9b2d-45b0-8956-599645426e6a&subId=299074>.

⁶² "Coronavirus (COVID-19) Pandemic", Commonwealth of Australia, updated November 20, 2023, <https://www.health.gov.au/health-alerts/covid-19>.

⁶³ "What We Did About COVID-19", Commonwealth of Australia, updated February 27, 2024, <https://www.health.gov.au/topics/covid-19/about/what-we-did>; Dantis et al., *The Australian Catholic Mass Attendance Report 2021*, 3-4.

⁶⁴ Dantis et al., *The Australian Catholic Mass Attendance Report 2021*, 3-4.

⁶⁵ Dantis et al., *The Australian Catholic Mass Attendance Report 2021*, 3-4.

⁶⁶ Dantis et al., *The Australian Catholic Mass Attendance Report 2021*, 20-22.

research suggests a possible reversal of this trend in some areas, particularly among individuals who regularly attended before the closures.⁶⁷

The Voice Referendum (2023)

In 2017, numerous Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples gathered together at Uluru to discuss their future.⁶⁸ This assembly produced the *Uluru Statement from the Heart* which recommended two actions:

1. A First Nations Voice to be permanently included in the Constitution.
2. The establishment of a Makarrata Commission to supervise agreement-making and truth-telling about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples' history.⁶⁹

The Australian Government committed to implementing the *Uluru Statement*, leading to a referendum on 14 October 2023. This referendum aimed to assess the potential constitutional recognition of the First Peoples of Australia and the establishment of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice to Parliament.⁷⁰ Public discourse preceding the referendum was frequently characterised as heated, 'divisive' and 'toxic'.⁷¹ In September 2023, the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference issued a statement encouraging Australians to engage with the Uluru Statement and partake in meaningful debate ahead of the referendum.⁷² Several bishops and prominent Catholics issued statements encouraging Australians to support a 'Yes' vote.⁷³ The referendum failed to pass despite these appeals.⁷⁴ Subsequent analysis identified several factors impacting a 'No' vote, including trust in social media, sentiments toward the Prime Minister, concerns about land title legislation, and attitudes toward Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples.⁷⁵ The failed referendum had a significant negative impact on First Nations people, with many viewing it as a setback to reconciliation efforts.⁷⁶

⁶⁷ Philippa Martyr, "Factors Affecting Australian Catholics' Return to Mass After COVID-19 Church Closures", *Journal of Religion and Health* 61 (2022): 4252-5, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1007/s10943-022-01618-1>.

⁶⁸ "Uluru Statement from the Heart", accessed February 13, 2025, <https://ulurustatement.org/the-statement/view-the-statement/>.

⁶⁹ "Culture and Empowering Communities", Australian Government, accessed February 13, 2025, <https://www.niaa.gov.au/our-work/culture-and-empowering-communities>.

⁷⁰ Australian Government, "Culture and Empowering Communities".

⁷¹ Jonathan Pearlman, "Australian PM's hopes for Unifying Aboriginal Referendum Dashed as Debate Turns Toxic", *The Straits Times*, November 14, 2024, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/australianz/australian-pm-s-hopes-for-unifying-aboriginal-referendum-dashed-as-debate-turns-toxic>.

⁷² "Messages from Bishops and Religious Leaders", National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholic Council, accessed February 13, 2025, <https://indigenousvoice.church/messages-from-our-bishops-and-religious-leaders/>.

⁷³ National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholic Council, "Messages from Bishops and Religious Leaders".

⁷⁴ Australian Government, "Culture and Empowering Communities".

⁷⁵ Nicholas Biddle et al., *Detailed Analysis of the 2023 Voice to Parliament Referendum and Related Social and Political Attitudes* (Australian National University, 2023), iii, <https://csrcm.cass.anu.edu.au/research/publications/detailed-analysis-2023-voice-parliament-referendum-and-related-social-and>.

⁷⁶ Praveen Menon et al., "Australia Rejects Indigenous Referendum in Setback for Reconciliation", *Reuters*, October 15, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/voting-begins-australia-landmark-indigenous-voice-referendum-2023-10-13/>.

Recent Discussions on Declining Mass Attendance

In preparation for the Fifth Plenary Council of Australia, the first consultation phase ran from May 2018 to March 2019. During this time, 17,457 individual and group submissions were received, representing over 222,000 people.⁷⁷ Respondents ranged in age from 13 to over 80 years and came from all over Australia. They raised a wide range of topics, including concerns about declining Mass attendance.⁷⁸ While some respondents wanted the matter investigated further, others made suggestions for change that included:⁷⁹

- The inclusion of divorced and remarried Catholics.
- An overhaul of the annulment process.
- Expanding the reception of the Eucharist to all, including non-Catholics.
- Focusing on the sacred.
- Acknowledging Christ's presence in the Eucharist.
- Greater opportunities for Eucharistic Adoration.
- Making Mass more appealing to youth and children.
- Greater attention to the music at Mass.
- Providing better homilies.
- Changes to the translation of the Mass.
- Returning to the Traditional Latin Mass.
- Returning to traditional pre-Vatican II ways.
- Providing better formation for liturgical ministries and sacramental programs.
- Providing lay-led liturgies, particularly in regional and remote areas.
- Providing greater access to Mass and Reconciliation, including cultural Masses.⁸⁰

In 2021, the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops was announced on the topic of Synodality and Bishops Conferences globally were tasked with consulting with the Church on the key themes of Communion, Participation and Mission.⁸¹ In the initial 2022 Australian consultation, 1,084 individual and group submissions were received.⁸² While the focus of the consultations was on the topic of becoming a more synodal Church, many respondents shared their concerns for the future of the Church, including concerns for engaging with those who were disconnected or alienated from the Church,⁸³ improving the liturgy to make the Mass more attractive,⁸⁴ being more welcoming and inclusive, particularly to those on the margins,⁸⁵ increasing the engagement of the laity particularly

⁷⁷ Dantis et al., *Listen to What the Spirit is Saying*, 16.

⁷⁸ Dantis et al., *Listen to What the Spirit is Saying*, 44-45.

⁷⁹ Dantis et al., *Listen to What the Spirit is Saying*, 44-45.

⁸⁰ Dantis et al., *Listen to What the Spirit is Saying*, 45-60.

⁸¹ Dantis et al., *Synod of Bishops: Australian Synthesis*, 1, 5, 7, 9.

⁸² National Centre for Pastoral Research, "Synod on Synodality: The Journey to the Second Assembly", *Pastoral Research Online*, no. 66 (2024): 4-5, <https://ncpr.catholic.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/Pastoral-Research-Online-Edition66-Sep24.pdf>.

⁸³ Dantis et al., *Synod of Bishops: Australian Synthesis*, 5.

⁸⁴ Dantis et al., *Synod of Bishops: Australian Synthesis*, 6.

⁸⁵ Dantis et al., *Synod of Bishops: Australian Synthesis*, 7.

women,⁸⁶ and a recognition of a call to the faithful to evangelisation.⁸⁷ Subsequent consultations in late 2022 and 2024 reiterated these ideas and deepened their understanding.⁸⁸

Australian Research on Disengagement and Disaffiliation

Investigating disidentification in the broader Australian population, Hughes examined whether the results of the 2018 and 2009 AuSSA (Australian Survey of Social Attitudes) surveys supported one of five competing hypotheses for why people reported ceasing attendance and identifying with religious institutions:

- People were no longer looking to religious institutions to make meaning of life and therefore were rejecting that provided by churches.
- People were rejecting the concept of a 'sacred cosmos'⁸⁹ which did not fit with their current experiences in pluralistic and complex societies.
- Religious socialisation of children was weakened due to parents having different religious identities.
- Pro-fertility values of many religions were becoming superseded by personal fulfilment values, leading to disaffiliation with those religions.
- People were rejecting religious institutions based on moral failures of the institutions, such as those related to child sexual abuse.⁹⁰

Hughes' findings revealed that the strongest factor in ceasing attendance and affiliation with a religion was due to a lack of confidence in religious institutions and a belief that religious institutions were too powerful.⁹¹ The second strongest factor was a rejection of religious beliefs.⁹² The factor related to finding one's own meaning of life was also strongly correlated with ceasing attendance, but not with rejection of a religious identity.⁹³ Examination of the factor relating to whether parents had a similar or different religious identity appeared to be relatively strong but did not achieve statistical significance with either church attendance or religious identity.⁹⁴

Examining Christian religious identity as a singular group, Hughes concluded that the hypothesis suggesting that people would reject religion because of a clash in values, such as pro-fertility values,

⁸⁶ Dantis et al., *Synod of Bishops: Australian Synthesis*, 7.

⁸⁷ Dantis et al., *Synod of Bishops: Australian Synthesis*, 10.

⁸⁸ Trudy Dantis et al., *Synod of Bishops: Australian Synthesis, Continental Stage* (Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, 2022), <https://s3.ap-southeast-2.amazonaws.com/acbcwebsite/Articles/Documents/ACBC/FINAL%20Australian%20Synthesis%20Report%20-%20Continental%20Stage.pdf>; Trudy Dantis et al., *Synod of Bishops: Australian Summary, 2024 Consultation* (Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, 2024), <https://ncpr.catholic.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/Australian-Summary-2024-FINAL.pdf>.

⁸⁹ Philip Hughes, "Why People are Ceasing to Attend Churches and to Identify with Religious Institutions", *Journal of Contemporary Ministry* 9 (2024): 118.

⁹⁰ Hughes, "Why People are Ceasing to Attend Churches and to Identify with Religious Institutions", 118-19.

⁹¹ Hughes, "Why People are Ceasing to Attend Churches and to Identify with Religious Institutions", 134-35.

⁹² Hughes, "Why People are Ceasing to Attend Churches and to Identify with Religious Institutions", 135.

⁹³ Hughes, "Why People are Ceasing to Attend Churches and to Identify with Religious Institutions", 136.

⁹⁴ Hughes, "Why People are Ceasing to Attend Churches and to Identify with Religious Institutions", 136.

was not supported significantly, as there was not a significant difference in values between those in the 'no religion group' and others surveyed.⁹⁵

A smaller study by Mullen in 2018, based on interviews with 15 young people aged 19 to 27 in Western Australia who were associated with the Baptist Church, explored the reasons behind their decisions to stay in or leave the church.⁹⁶ The study found that those who remained, despite experiencing negative relational dynamics, often did so because of a deep spiritual connection or a sense of contributing to meaningful change—such as influencing church culture.⁹⁷ In contrast, those who chose to leave cited concerns about religious dogmatism and a perceived lack of spiritual benefit from continued involvement.⁹⁸

Recent targeted studies on Australian Catholics were conducted by Martyr and Bullivant (2024) and Westmore-Peyton and Webber (2025).⁹⁹ Martyr and Bullivant surveyed a self-selected sample of Catholics in 2022, most of whom were Mass-going Catholics, with a subset of 571 participants who said they attended Mass 'less than weekly to almost never' or 'not at all'.¹⁰⁰ The researchers referred to these groups as the 'Irregulars' and the 'Nevers'. Participants were asked to rate a range of possible reasons for their infrequent attendance on a three-point scale from 'Very Important' to 'Not important'. The most commonly cited 'Very Important' reasons included:

- I don't see it as sinful to miss Mass (52%)
- I don't hold the beliefs of the Catholic Church (51%)
- Sermons are of a poor standard (30%)
- I feel judged by the Church (26%)
- Work/family responsibilities (24%)
- My family don't enjoy going to Mass (24%)
- I have commitments which conflict with the Mass schedule (18%)
- I'm too busy (18%)
- It's boring (18%)
- I'm just not a religious person (13%)
- Health reasons (10%).¹⁰¹

The top two reasons echoed findings from the Dixon et al. (2007) study.¹⁰² However, as the survey only offered pre-determined options based on previous research, other reasons for non-attendance

⁹⁵ Hughes, "Why People are Ceasing to Attend Churches and to Identify with Religious Institutions", 139-40.

⁹⁶ Timothy A. Mullen, "Why are Young Adults in Western Australia Leaving the Church?", *Journal of Contemporary Ministry* 10 (2025): 89, <https://www.journalofcontemporaryministry.com/index.php/jcm/issue/view/19/17>.

⁹⁷ Mullen, "Why are Young Adults in Western Australia Leaving the Church?", 90.

⁹⁸ Mullen, "Why are Young Adults in Western Australia Leaving the Church?", 90.

⁹⁹ Philippa Martyr and Stephen Bullivant, *The Catholics in Australia Survey 8: Irregulars and Nevers, August 2024*, (The University of Notre Dame, Australia, 2024); Christina Westmore-Peyton and Ruth Webber, "Australian Generation X Disconnected Catholics: Engagement on Their Own Terms", *The Australasian Catholic Record* 102, no. 1 (2025), <https://doi.org/10.3316/informit.T2025020400017900550899012>.

¹⁰⁰ Martyr and Bullivant, *The Catholics in Australia Survey 8: Irregulars and Nevers*, 7.

¹⁰¹ Martyr and Bullivant, *The Catholics in Australia Survey 8: Irregulars and Nevers*, 15.

¹⁰² Martyr and Bullivant, *The Catholics in Australia Survey 8: Irregulars and Nevers*, 7; Dixon et al., *Catholics Who Have Stopped Attending Mass*, 39-43.

were not captured. Open-text responses revealed three recurring themes: a disconnect between the Catholic Church and Jesus or Christianity; concerns that the Church was too conservative; and dissatisfaction with the Church's handling of clergy sexual abuse.¹⁰³

Westmore-Peyton and Webber's study, conducted between 2018 and 2020, investigated 28 Generation X-born Australian Catholics who no longer engaged with Catholic practices.¹⁰⁴ They identified five types of religious affiliation: Fully-Affiliated, Affiliated, Semi-Affiliated, Disaffiliated and Switchers.¹⁰⁵ The first four types described the level of affiliation with the Catholic Church, while the Switchers were affiliated with another Christian denomination.¹⁰⁶

While participants generally did not express bitterness toward the Church, many conveyed a sense of nostalgia.¹⁰⁷ Most agreed with core Church teaching—such as belief in God, Jesus, the Trinity, the Creed and the existence of heaven and hell—but disagreed with the Church's stance on women's roles and the ordination of married priests.¹⁰⁸ Particularly among the disaffiliated, the Church was viewed as outdated, rigid and resistant to change, and concerns were raised about Church authority and the expectation of unquestioning acceptance.¹⁰⁹ Despite these criticisms, most participants expressed a willingness to return to the Church if meaningful change was evident.¹¹⁰

Overseas Research on Disengagement and Disaffiliation

A study by St Mary's Press in collaboration with the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) examined the factors influencing young people's disaffiliation from the United States (US) Catholic Church. The research involved a quantitative survey of 204 former Catholics aged 15 to 25, followed by in-depth interviews with 15 participants.¹¹¹ Key findings from the survey included:¹¹²

- The most common religious affiliation among those who left the Church was no religious affiliation, often referred to as 'Nones'.
- Former Catholics were less likely than current Catholic youth to have received both First Communion and Confirmation, and were also less likely to have attended Mass weekly.
- The median age of disaffiliation was 13, with 39 per cent indicating they left between the ages of 13 and 17.

¹⁰³ Martyr and Bullivant, *The Catholics in Australia Survey 8: Irregulars and Nevers*, 9.

¹⁰⁴ Westmore-Peyton and Webber, "Australian Generation X Disconnected Catholics", 17.

¹⁰⁵ Westmore-Peyton and Webber, "Australian Generation X Disconnected Catholics", 23.

¹⁰⁶ Westmore-Peyton and Webber, "Australian Generation X Disconnected Catholics", 23-24.

¹⁰⁷ Westmore-Peyton and Webber, "Australian Generation X Disconnected Catholics", 25.

¹⁰⁸ Westmore-Peyton and Webber, "Australian Generation X Disconnected Catholics", 26-27.

¹⁰⁹ Westmore-Peyton and Webber, "Australian Generation X Disconnected Catholics", 29.

¹¹⁰ Westmore-Peyton and Webber, "Australian Generation X Disconnected Catholics", 30.

¹¹¹ Robert J. McCarty and John M. Vitek, *Going, Going, Gone: The Dynamics of Disaffiliation in Young Catholics* (Saint Mary's Press, 2017), 38.

¹¹² McCarty and Vitek, *Going, Going, Gone*, 41-3.

- Twenty per cent cited a loss of belief in God or religion as their reason for leaving. Other reasons included familial and parental issues (16%), personal changes of faith (15%), and opposition to the Catholic Church or religious institutions in general (11%).¹¹³
- Half the participants responded that ceasing to believe in Church teachings was ‘somewhat’ or ‘very’ important to their decision, and another 50 per cent also reported feeling restricted or judged by the Catholic Church as similarly important.
- Forty-five per cent indicated that a conflict with the Church on political issues played at least a ‘somewhat’ important role in their decision.
- Only 13 per cent said they would consider returning to the Catholic faith.

The researchers identified three distinct categories of disaffiliated individuals.¹¹⁴

- The *Injured* – Those whose faith was disrupted by life events such as divorce, significant illness, frequent moving, or the death of a loved one. Some felt ‘forced’ into Church participation and described experiences of unfavourable judgement or unanswered prayers.¹¹⁵
- The *Drifters* – Individuals with limited understanding of the faith who gradually disengaged over time.¹¹⁶
- The *Dissenters* – Those who consciously rejected the Church, often due to disagreements with its teachings, frustration over unanswered questions, or a lack of opportunity to explore their doubts.¹¹⁷

Davis and Graham, with researchers Ryan Burge and Paul Djupe, conducted a three-phase study on ‘dechurching’ in the US, with a ‘dechurched’ person defined as an individual who once attended church monthly but now attended less than once a year.¹¹⁸ The Phase 1 survey of 1,043 US adults confirmed a significant rise in dechurching over the past 25 years.¹¹⁹ In Phase 2, a survey of 4,099 unchurched adults found that dechurched Catholics, Protestants and other Christians were evenly represented.¹²⁰

Dechurched Catholics were more likely than others to cite political friction, misogyny and a desire for more sexual freedom as reasons for leaving.¹²¹ Common reasons included competing priorities for time and money, disagreement with clergy or congregational politics, feeling out of place within the

¹¹³ McCarty and Vitek, *Going, Going, Gone*, 42-3.

¹¹⁴ McCarty and Vitek, *Going, Going, Gone*, 13.

¹¹⁵ McCarty and Vitek, *Going, Going, Gone*, 14-7.

¹¹⁶ McCarty and Vitek, *Going, Going, Gone*, 18-20.

¹¹⁷ McCarty and Vitek, *Going, Going, Gone*, 21-4.

¹¹⁸ Jim Davis et al., *The Great Dechurching: Who's Leaving, Why Are They Going, and What Will it Take to Bring them Back?* (Zondervan Reflective, 2023), xix-xi.

¹¹⁹ Davis et al., *The Great Dechurching*, xxii.

¹²⁰ Davis et al., *The Great Dechurching*, xxiii.

¹²¹ The mainline Protestant churches were mainly comprised of seven denominations: American Baptist Churches, Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), the Episcopal Church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the Presbyterian Church (USA), the United Church of Christ, and the United Methodist Church; Davis et al., *The Great Dechurching*, 104.

congregation, relocation, a loss of faith, clergy scandals and family changes such as divorce or remarriage.¹²²

Catholics and mainline Protestants also showed less acceptance of Church doctrines, such as the divinity and humanity of Jesus (believed by 53 per cent of dechurched Catholics) or that the Bible is the literal word of God (believed by 13 per cent of dechurched Catholics).¹²³ When asked what might encourage re-engagement, dechurched Catholics highlighted the Church's potential for positive social impact—through outreach, community activities, and spiritual formation.¹²⁴

In *Mass Exodus*, Bullivant analysed theological, sociological and historical factors contributing to Catholic disaffiliation since Vatican II, particularly the sharper decline in affiliation observed after that event.¹²⁵ His research, focused on disaffiliated Catholics in Britain and the US, identified complex, interrelated factors that impacted the decline in disaffiliation, with many being societal factors that existed before Vatican II, such as the Baby Boom, town planning and suburbanisation, and increased education.¹²⁶ Vatican II's sweeping reforms appeared to have significantly impacted Catholic life, contributing to various factors leading to decline.¹²⁷ Bullivant observed particular distinctions between the British and American experiences of disaffiliation, noting that Americans were more likely to switch denominations, while Britons tended to leave religion entirely.¹²⁸

Complementing this, a 2023 survey by the Public Religion Research Institute of 5,627 US adults investigating attitudes toward religion, attendance at worship services and reasons for disaffiliation from faith traditions, revealed that the only major religious category experiencing growth was those identifying as 'unaffiliated'.¹²⁹ The Catholic Church was reported to be losing more members than any other major religious group, with the decline more pronounced among white Catholics than Hispanic Catholics.¹³⁰ Key reasons cited for disaffiliation were a loss of belief, difficulties with religious teaching on LGBTQI+ and clergy sexual abuse, with Catholics being nearly twice as likely as others to cite clergy abuse as a reason for leaving.¹³¹

A 2025 survey conducted by the Pew Research Center examined the reasons people give for staying in or leaving their childhood religion.¹³² Among the former Catholics, the most common reasons that were reported as being extremely or very important were no longer believing in the religion's teachings (46%), scandals involving clergy or religious leaders (39%), and dissatisfaction with the religion's stance on social and political issues (37%).¹³³ For Catholics who switched to another faith,

¹²² Davis et al., *The Great Dechurching*, 107-8.

¹²³ Davis et al., *The Great Dechurching*, 106.

¹²⁴ Davis et al., *The Great Dechurching*, 108-9.

¹²⁵ Stephen Bullivant, *Mass Exodus: Catholic Disaffiliation in Britain and America since Vatican II* (Oxford University Press, 2019), 2-3.

¹²⁶ Bullivant, *Mass Exodus*, 253-5.

¹²⁷ Bullivant, *Mass Exodus*, 255-6.

¹²⁸ Bullivant, *Mass Exodus*, 212.

¹²⁹ PRRI, *Religious Change in America* (2024), 3, 44, <https://prri.org/research/religious-change-in-america/>.

¹³⁰ PRRI, *Religious Change in America*, 3.

¹³¹ PRRI, *Religious Change in America*, 4.

¹³² Becka A. Alper et al., *Why Do Some Americans Leave Their Religion While Others Stay?* (Pew Research Center, 2025), 5, <https://doi.org/10.58094/52kn-8828>.

¹³³ Alper et al., *Why Do Some Americans Leave Their Religion?*, 29.

the top three reasons were that their spiritual needs were not being met (52%), they felt called to a new faith (20%), and they no longer believed in the religion's teachings (34%).¹³⁴ Former Catholics who were now religiously unaffiliated reported that they stopped believing in the religion's teachings (52%), felt religion was no longer important in their life (45%), and were influenced by scandals involving clergy (44%).¹³⁵ When asked why they remained unaffiliated, the leading reasons were: belief that morality was possible without religion (81%), questioning many religious teachings (67%), and reporting not needing religion to be spiritual (57%).

Stolz, Lipps, Voas and Antonietti conducted a study using data from 8,213 parent-child pairs in West Germany to identify predictors of declining church attendance across generations.¹³⁶ They investigated attendance in relation to four other variables: denomination, education, value liberalism, and secular leisure-mindedness.¹³⁷ Their findings revealed that attendance declined with each generation, except for the 1991-2000 cohort, where the anomaly was likely due to the continued influence of parental attendance patterns.¹³⁸

Parents with higher education levels and those engaged in more leisure activities tended to have children with comparable attendance rates, narrowing the generational gap.¹³⁹ Parental liberal values and relationship closeness had little impact,¹⁴⁰ however, parental separation or divorce—especially among highly religious parents—was linked to a more sharper decline.¹⁴¹ The study compared Catholics, Protestants, Evangelicals and mixed-denomination families, finding a slightly greater decline among Catholics. However, denomination itself was not a significant factor.¹⁴² The authors concluded broader societal changes, rather than specific parental attributes, were driving generational shifts in attendance, and recommended further research in other Western contexts.¹⁴³

Emerging Insights and the Contribution of the 2025 Study

The Australian and international studies reviewed present a nuanced and multifaceted understanding of why Catholics, particularly younger generations, disengage from religious practice and weaken in identity. Common themes include the early onset of disengagement and/or disaffiliation, loss of belief, disagreement with Church teaching, and a growing distrust in religious institutions—often linked to the Church's moral failures and the perceived irrelevance of the Church to contemporary life. Some individuals gradually decrease, then stop attending due to limited exposure to religious practices growing up, or because other aspects of life take priority. Others make a more deliberate decision to leave, often because they find Church teachings too rigid or feel that their spiritual and intellectual

¹³⁴ Alper et al., *Why Do Some Americans Leave Their Religion?*, 30.

¹³⁵ Alper et al., *Why Do Some Americans Leave Their Religion?*, 30.

¹³⁶ Jörg Stolz et al., "Can We Explain the Generation Gap in Churchgoing?", *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 63, no. December 2024 (2024): 809-10, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1111/jssr.12923>.

¹³⁷ Stolz et al., "Can We Explain the Generation Gap in Churchgoing?", 813.

¹³⁸ Stolz et al., "Can We Explain the Generation Gap in Churchgoing?", 819.

¹³⁹ Stolz et al., "Can We Explain the Generation Gap in Churchgoing?", 822.

¹⁴⁰ Stolz et al., "Can We Explain the Generation Gap in Churchgoing?", 822.

¹⁴¹ Stolz et al., "Can We Explain the Generation Gap in Churchgoing?", 822.

¹⁴² Stolz et al., "Can We Explain the Generation Gap in Churchgoing?", 821.

¹⁴³ Stolz et al., "Can We Explain the Generation Gap in Churchgoing?", 825-6.

needs are not being met. Across the research, it is clear that a single issue rarely causes disengagement; instead, it tends to result from a combination of intersecting personal and institutional reasons, such as a crisis of faith, family dynamics, dissatisfaction with Church leadership, and feeling excluded by Church rules.

While these studies provide valuable insights into patterns of disidentification and declining religious practices, they also reveal limitations in how well they reflect the current Australian context. This current study builds on this foundation by exploring both personal and Church-related reasons why many Catholics do not attend Sunday Mass regularly—or at all. It also looks at participants' views on the Eucharist, how these individuals might still engage with the Church in other ways, and what this means for Catholic identity and community life today. This is especially important in Australia, where questions about Mass attendance and the role of the Eucharist are becoming more pertinent.

Furthermore, this study presents an opportunity to revisit the kind of pastoral response initiated after Dixon et al.'s 2007 research, which led to the development of practical pastoral recommendations.¹⁴⁴ By focusing on the lived experiences of non-attending Catholics in today's context, the 2025 study contributes to ongoing efforts to respond pastorally to the realities of faith and practice in a changing religious landscape.

Building on this foundation, the following sections of the report present the findings from both phases of the study. These findings offer a deeper understanding of the beliefs, practices and perspectives of Catholics who do not attend Mass weekly, as well as broader implications for Catholic identity and community life. Through a combination of survey data and in-depth interviews, the report explores the complex interplay between personal faith, Church engagement, and the evolving religious landscape in Australia. What emerges is a nuanced portrait of contemporary Catholic experience—one that invites reflection, dialogue and renewed pastoral attention.

¹⁴⁴ Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, *Catholics Who Have Stopped Attending Mass: Pastoral Strategies*.

PARTICIPANTS IN THE STUDY

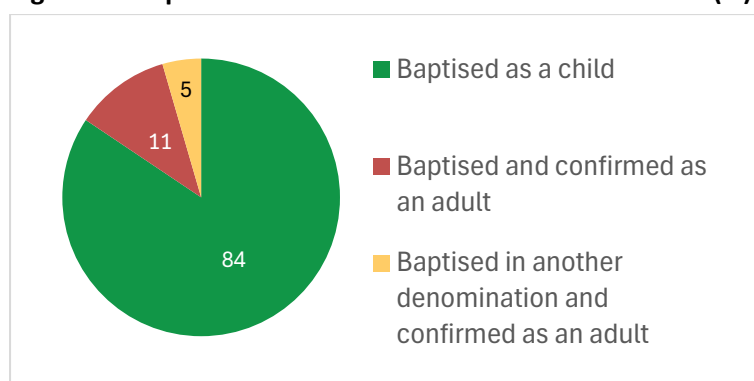
As previously stated in the report, 1,963 completed responses were received in Phase 1 of the study. The demographics of the survey participants are detailed in the subsequent sections. The participants of Phase 2 are described in detail at the close of this chapter.

Phase 1 Survey Respondents

Catholic Initiation

A majority of survey respondents (84%) indicated that they were baptised into the Church as a child. A further 11 per cent stated that they were baptised and confirmed in the Catholic Church as an adult, while the remaining five per cent were baptised in another Christian denomination and confirmed in the Catholic Church as an adult.

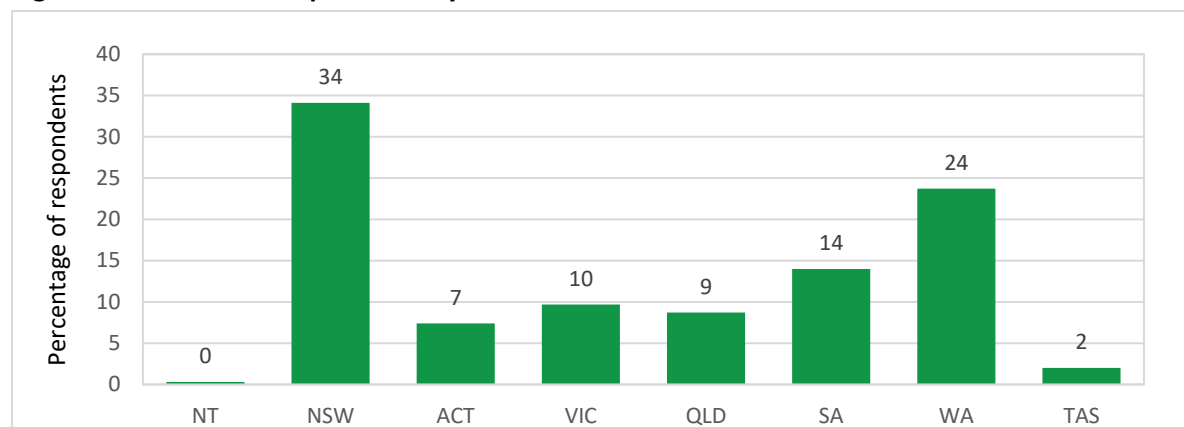
Figure 1: Respondents' Initiation into the Catholic Church (%)



Location

The demographics section of the survey questionnaire asked respondents for their postcode, which was assigned to a state or territory. As shown in Figure 2 below, just over one-third of respondents (34%) were from New South Wales, while just under one-quarter (24%) were from Western Australia. Fourteen per cent of respondents came from South Australia, and one in ten were from Victoria. Smaller numbers of respondents came from Queensland (9%), the Australian Capital Territory (7%) and Tasmania (2%). Less than 0.5 per cent came from the Northern Territory.

Figure 2: Location of Respondents by State



Age and Sex

Respondents were also asked to identify their age group. As Figure 3 shows, almost one-quarter of respondents (24%) were aged 40-49, while a further one-fifth (20%) were in their 50s. Sixteen per cent of respondents were aged in their 60s, 15 per cent were aged in their 70s and 13 per cent were aged in their 30s. Those in their 80s accounted for seven per cent of respondents, while slightly fewer (6%) were aged in their 20s. One per cent of respondents were 18- or 19-year-olds.

Figure 3: Age Group of Respondents (10-Year Groups)

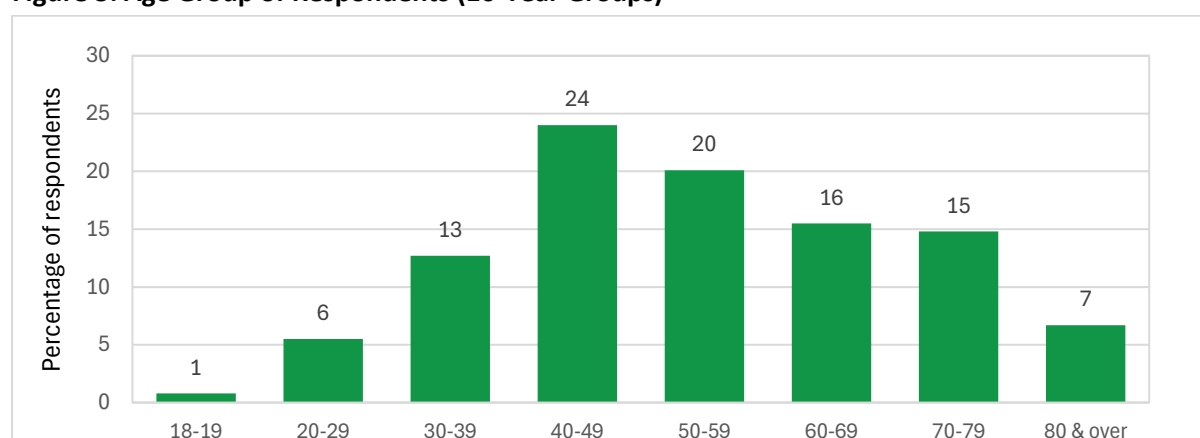
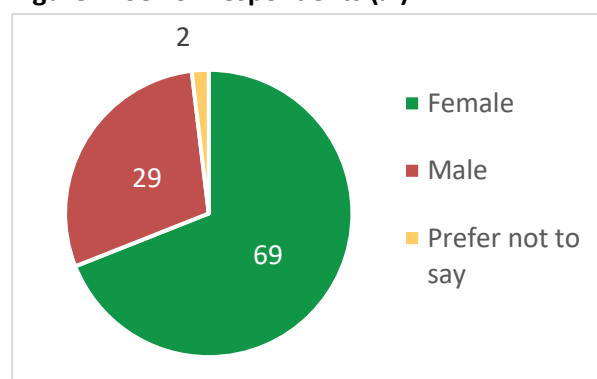


Figure 4: Sex of Respondents (%)



Overall, 69 per cent of respondents were female, while around 29 per cent were male. Two per cent of respondents declined to provide their sex.

Ethnicity

A set of survey questions asked respondents about their ethnicity, beginning with their country of birth. The first question listed seven countries—selected based on the most common birthplaces of Catholics recorded in the 2021 Census—along with an eighth option labelled ‘Other’, allowing respondents to write in a different country if theirs was not listed. Eighty per cent of respondents were born in Australia. The other eight most common countries of birth were:

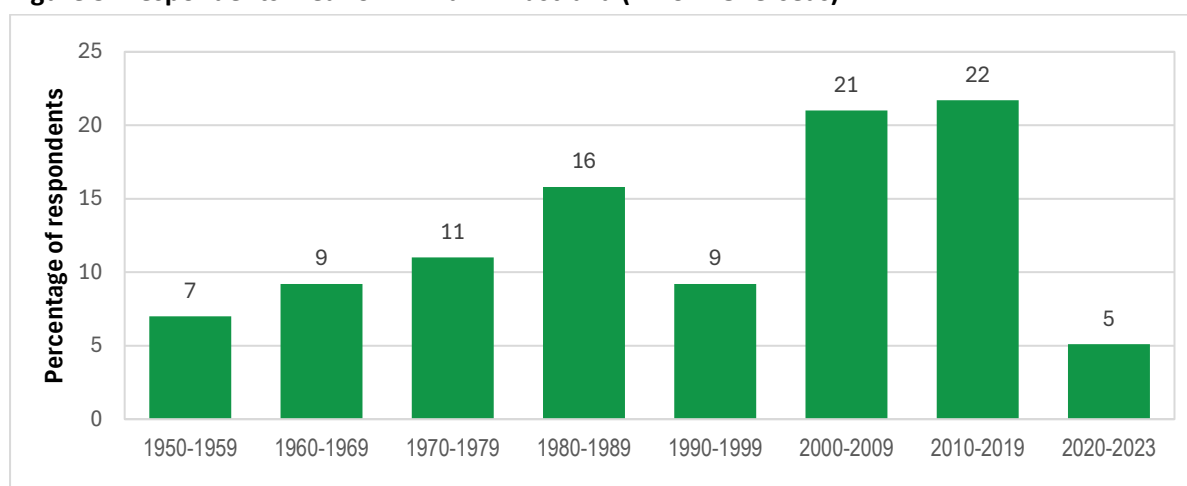
- United Kingdom, excluding Northern Ireland (5%)
- India (3%)
- Ireland, including Northern Ireland (2%)
- Philippines (1%)
- New Zealand (1%)
- Malaysia (1%)
- Sri Lanka (1%)
- United States (1%)

The remainder of respondents (just over seven per cent) were born in 47 other countries.

The next question asked respondents to indicate the birthplace of their mother and father. For each parent, respondents selected one of four responses: *Australia*, *Other English-speaking country*, *Non-English-speaking country*, or *Don’t know*. Two-thirds of respondents stated that their mother was born in Australia, while 63 per cent had an Australian-born father. Seventeen per cent indicated that their mother was born in another English-speaking country, and 19 per cent said that their father was. Seventeen per cent of respondents stated that their mother was born in a non-English-speaking country, and 19 per cent reported this for their father.

The final question in the ethnicity section asked overseas-born respondents to indicate the year they arrived in Australia. As shown in Figure 5, nearly half (48%) had arrived since 2000. A further quarter arrived in the 1980s or 1990s, while 11 per cent arrived in the 1970s, nine per cent in the 1960s, and seven per cent in the 1950s.

Figure 5. Respondents’ Year of Arrival in Australia (If Born Overseas)



Marital Status

Respondents were also asked to indicate their current marital status. As shown in Figure 6, the majority (68%) reported being married, while four per cent were in a de facto relationship. Around six per cent were divorced, and two per cent were separated. Fifteen per cent had never married, and five per cent were widowed.

Figure 6. Respondents' Current Marital Status

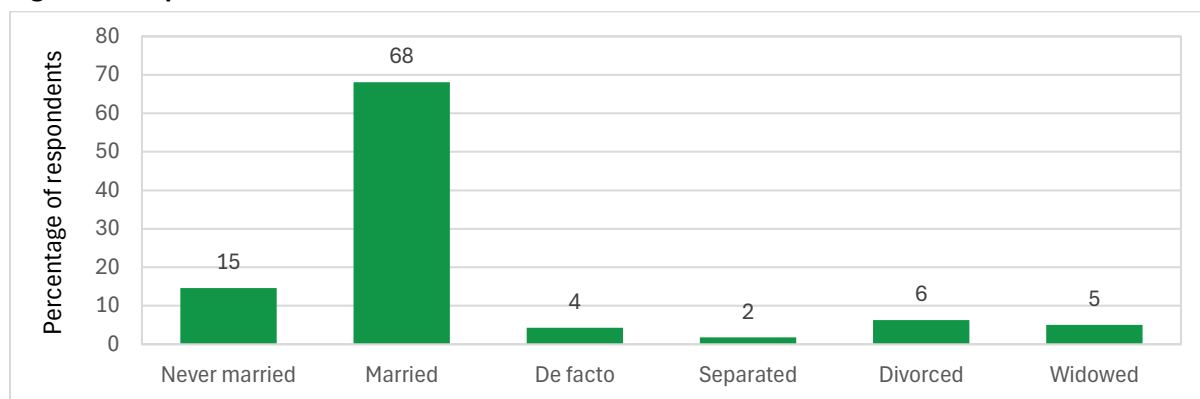
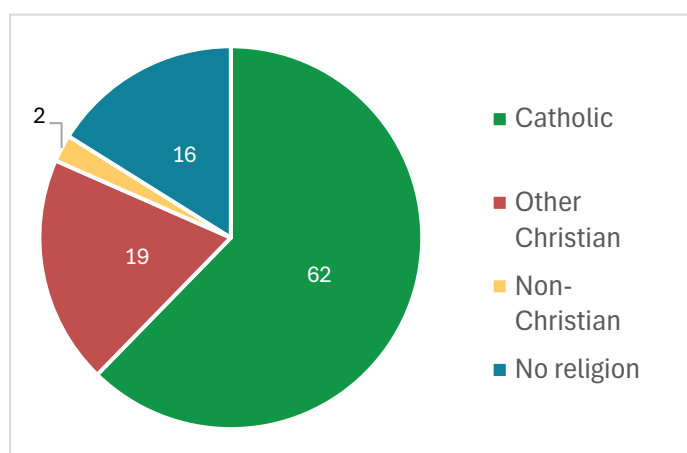


Figure 7. Religion of Spouse or Partner (Percentage of those with a Spouse/Partner)



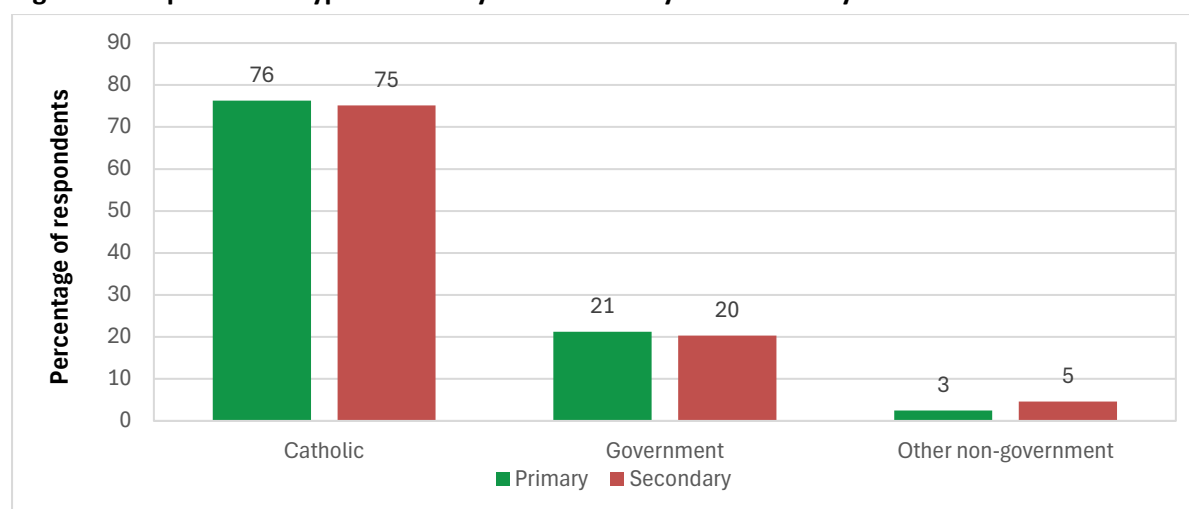
Respondents who indicated they had a spouse or partner were also asked about their partner's religion. Sixty-two per cent said their spouse or partner was also Catholic, while 19 per cent said they belonged to another Christian denomination. Around two per cent had a spouse or partner who followed another religion, and around 16 per cent said their spouse or partner had no religion.

Education and Occupation

Survey respondents were then asked about the types of primary and secondary schools they had attended, as well as the type of schools attended by their children, if they had any. Additional questions were asked about educational levels and general occupations.

As shown in Figure 8, approximately three-quarters of respondents had attended a Catholic primary school (76%) and a Catholic secondary school (75%). In comparison, 21 per cent had attended a government primary school and 20 per cent a government secondary school. Only a small proportion of respondents had attended other non-government schools—primary (3%) and secondary (5%).

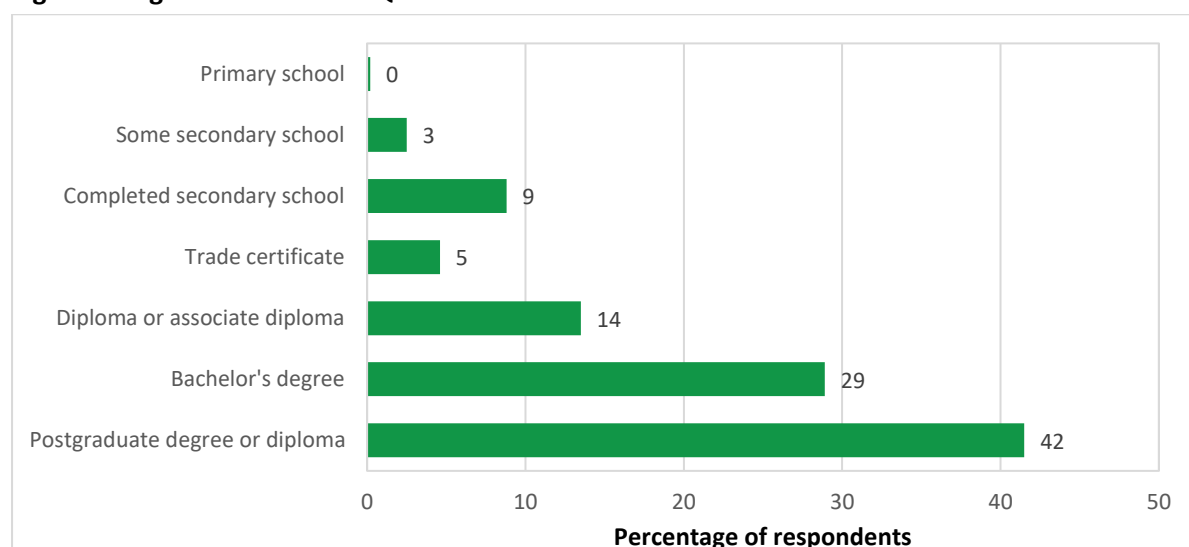
Figure 8. Respondents' Type of Primary and Secondary School Mainly Attended



The types of schools attended by respondents' children were generally similar to those the respondents had attended themselves. However, slightly higher proportions of children attended Catholic schools (83 per cent primary and 81 per cent secondary), while fewer attended government schools (13 per cent in both primary and secondary).

Respondents were also asked to indicate the highest level of education they had completed. All respondents had attended some form of education, and the majority—around 90 per cent—reported holding a tertiary qualification, as shown in Figure 9. Most respondents (71%) had either a postgraduate degree or diploma (42%) or a bachelor's degree (29%). An additional 14 per cent had a diploma or associate diploma, and five per cent had completed a trade certificate. Nine per cent had completed secondary school, while a small proportion had some secondary (3%) or primary school education (less than 1%).

Figure 9. Highest Educational Qualification



The final question in this section asked respondents to identify their general occupation from a list of nine broad categories, based on the Australian and New Zealand Standard Classification of Occupations. Respondents who were not currently in paid employment were asked to select the 'Not applicable' option, which applied to 28 per cent of respondents.

As shown in Figure 10, nearly half of the respondents (48%) identified as professionals. The next most common occupations were managers (9%) and clerical or administrative workers (7%). A further eight per cent of respondents were employed in one of five occupational groups: community or personal service workers (4%), technician or trade workers (2%), sales workers (1%), labourers (1%) and machinery operators or drivers (less than 1%).

Figure 10. Respondents' Current Occupation



Phase 2 Interview Participants

Catholic Initiation

Sixty-seven participants from Phase 1 of the project volunteered to take part in interviews for Phase 2. Reflecting similar trends from the earlier phase, the majority (84%) reported being baptised Catholic as infants. A smaller proportion were baptised as adults (8%), while eight per cent had been baptised in another Christian denomination and later confirmed in the Catholic Church as adults. One participant in the 'Other' category explained that they had been baptised in another denomination but were confirmed in the Catholic Church during their teenage years.

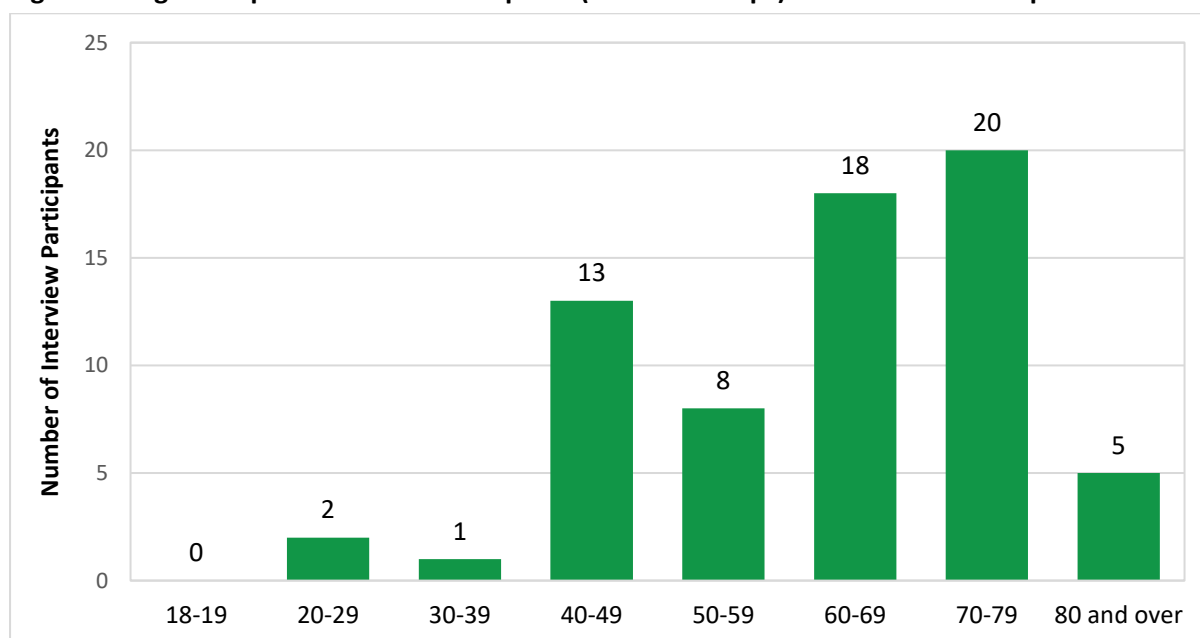
Location, Age and Sex

Interview participants were located across Australia in all states and territories except the Northern Territory. A significant proportion (40%) came from NSW, with smaller numbers from South Australia (18%), Victoria (12%), and Western Australia (12%). Nine per cent of participants were from Queensland, six per cent from the ACT and 3 per cent from Tasmania.

Compared to the survey respondents—most of whom were female—the gender balance among interview participants was more even. Fifty-three per cent identified as male, 43 per cent as female, and 3 per cent chose not to identify.

The age profile of interview participants also skewed older than that of survey respondents. As shown in Figure 11, the majority were over 40 years of age, with a significant number aged over 65.

Figure 11. Age Group of Interview Participants (10-Year Groups) – Number of Participants



Ethnicity and Education

Participants were asked to indicate their country of birth, as well as the birthplaces of their mother and father. Nearly three-quarters (75%) of interview participants were born in Australia, with slightly smaller proportions reporting that their mothers (69%) and fathers (67%) were also born in Australia. Other countries of birth included India, Ireland, Italy, New Zealand, the Philippines, the United Kingdom, Trinidad and Tobago, Portugal, Kuwait, Malta, Seychelles, Mauritius, Germany, the Netherlands, Bosnia and Burma/Myanmar.

Interview participants were also asked to share the highest level of education they had attained. Nearly 60 per cent reported holding a postgraduate qualification, while fewer than 10 per cent had completed only Year 12 or less.

What Drew Participants to this Project

The question, 'What drew you to this project?' was posed exclusively to Phase 2 participants, offering valuable insights into their motivations and perceptions of the project's relevance. Their responses reflected a diverse range of experiences and emotional connections to the Church.

Many participants were motivated by a desire for change and saw the project as a meaningful opportunity to contribute to the Church's future. Those actively involved in parish life felt a sense of responsibility and were eager to share their insights and experiences. Others participated simply out of goodwill, expressing a general willingness to help.

There was a similar desire from some who did not attend Mass at all, though slightly differently motivated. They wanted to share their personal stories or explain their absence, sometimes highlighting a continued sense of belonging. Others who had left and felt unable to return valued the opportunity to be heard, believing their perspectives were essential and valid.

Another group of participants voiced frustration and pain stemming from long-term involvement in the Church. Their responses revealed feelings of anger, heartbreak and disappointment, often linked to poor treatment or lack of support. These experiences had not only affected them personally but had also driven away their children and close community members.

Concerns about declining engagement were also prominent, particularly regarding the absence of young people and families. Participants felt a duty to help shape the Church in ways that would foster renewed interest and participation.

Finally, a few participants used the project as a space to reflect on their personal faith journeys. Some were struggling with their beliefs, while others shared stories of returning to the Church after a long absence, now attending more regularly and seeking deeper connection.

PARTICIPANTS' FAITH: A PROFILE OF BELIEFS, PRACTICES AND PERSPECTIVES

Faith plays a profound role in shaping personal identity, values and life choices. For many Catholics, it is a dynamic and lived experience that evolves over time, often influenced by family, community and personal reflection. This chapter explores the multifaceted nature of faith among participants, sharing findings of foundational beliefs in God and Jesus to the significance of Catholic identity and ritual practice. It explores how participants' faith was nurtured during childhood, how personal faith journeys unfolded, and how individuals engage with Catholic communities and other denominations or religious traditions. The chapter also examines diverse perspectives on the Catholic Church and its practices, offering insight into the complex relationship between belief and participation, particularly in the context of declining Mass attendance.

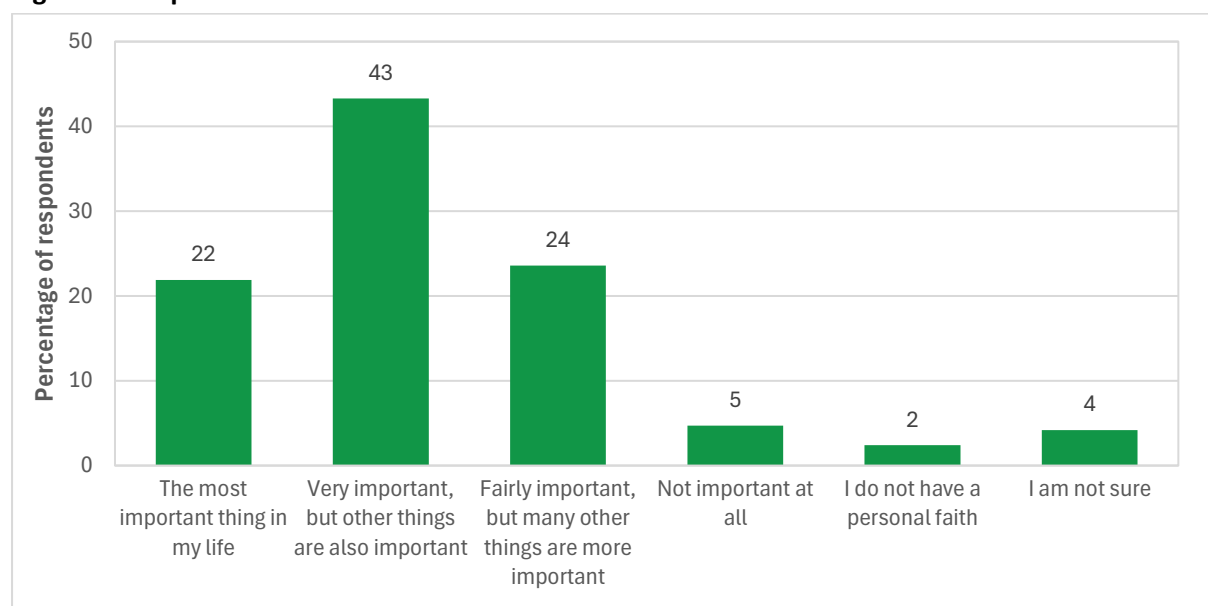
Foundations of Faith

Importance of Faith

Survey respondents were asked a set of six questions about their faith and religious beliefs. The first question of this section asked respondents 'How important is faith in your life?'

As shown in Figure 12, just over one-fifth of respondents (22%) indicated that faith was the most important thing in life, while 43 per cent said it was *very* important, but other things were also important. A further 24 per cent said that faith was *fairly* important but that many other things were more important. Five per cent said that faith was not at all important, while two per cent did not have a faith and four per cent were unsure.

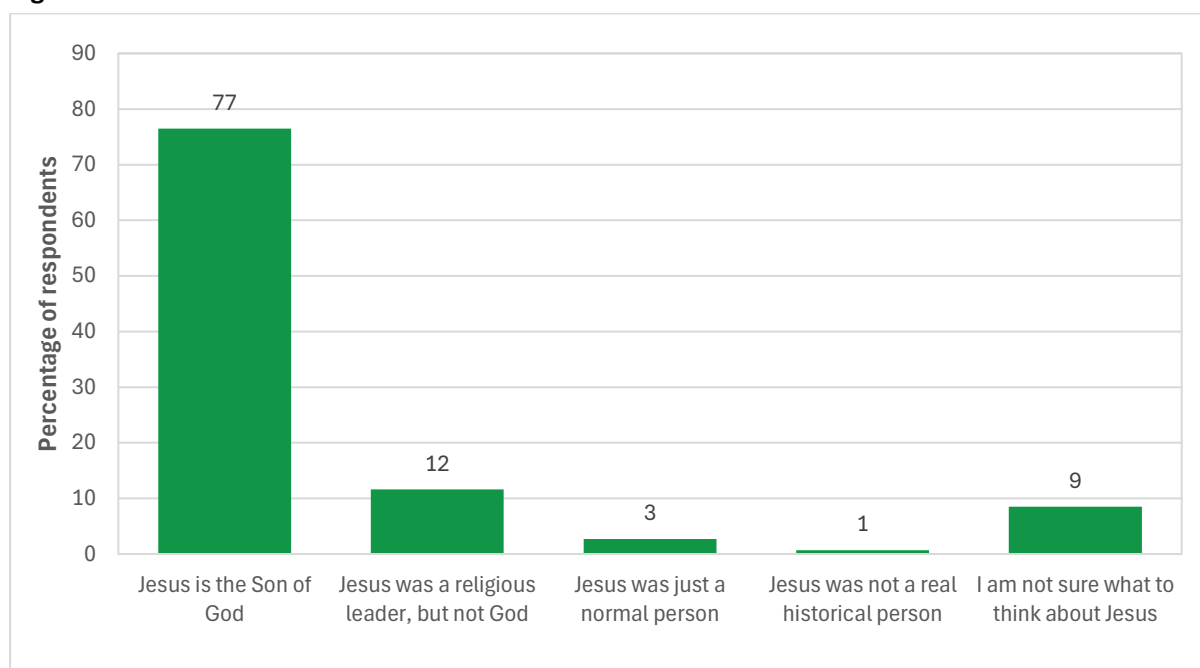
Figure 12. Importance of Faith in Life



Belief in Jesus

The second question asked respondents about their belief in Jesus, and they were invited to choose one of five responses. Just over three-quarters of respondents (77%) said that Jesus is the Son of God, as highlighted in Figure 13. For 12 per cent of respondents, Jesus was considered a religious leader, but not God, while three per cent said Jesus was just a normal person. Only a few respondents (1%) said that Jesus was not a real person and the remaining nine per cent were unsure what to think.

Figure 13. Belief About Jesus

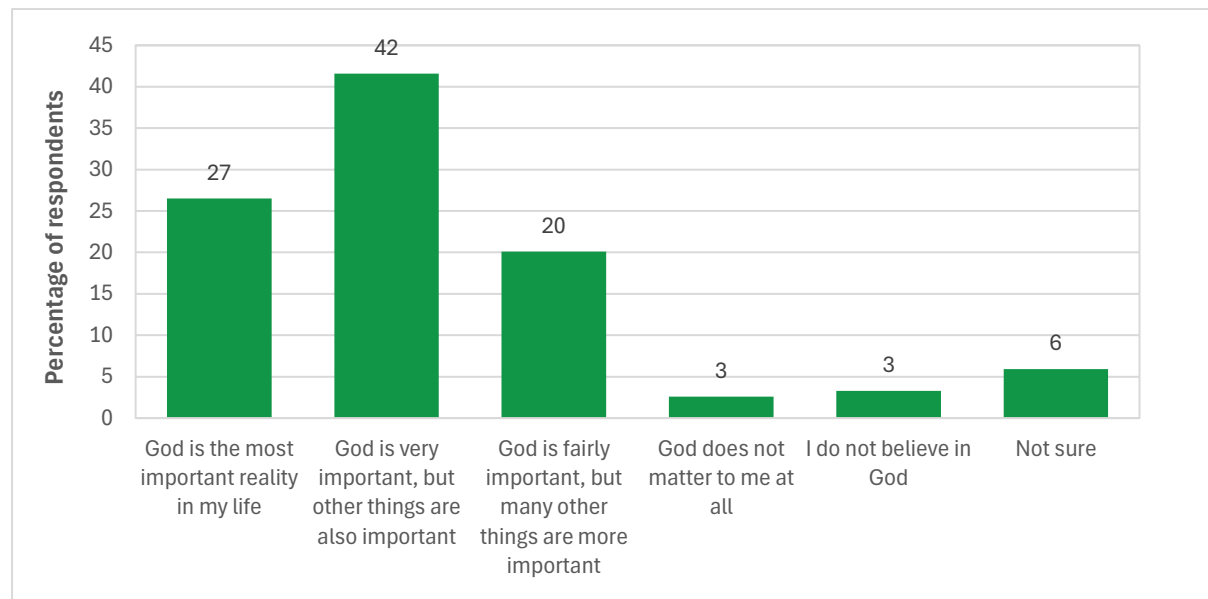


The Importance of God

Another question asked respondents how important they considered God to be in their life and invited them to choose from one of five responses or to indicate if they were unsure.

Figure 14 shows that more than one-quarter (27%) said that God was the most important reality in their life, while 42 per cent said that God was very important, but other things were also important. For one-fifth of respondents, God was considered fairly important, but many other things were more important. A small proportion indicated that God did not matter at all (3%), that they did not believe in God (3%), or that they were unsure (6%).

Figure 14. Importance of God in Life

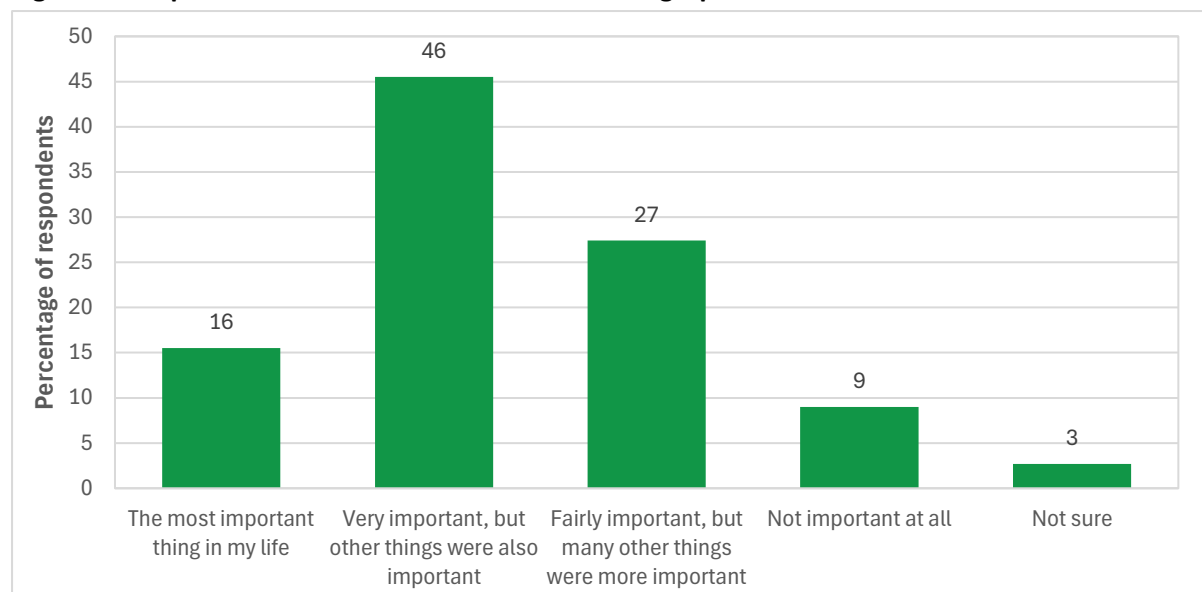


Faith in the Life Stages

The Importance of Faith When Growing Up

To understand the role that the Catholic faith played during their formative years, respondents were asked, ‘When you were growing up, how important was the Catholic faith to you?’ As shown in Figure 15, while 16 per cent said the Catholic faith was the most important thing in life when they were growing up, just under half of respondents (46%) said it was very important, but that other things were also important. More than one-quarter said that when they were growing up, the Catholic faith was fairly important, but that many other things were also important. Nine per cent indicated it was not at all important, and three per cent were unsure.

Figure 15. Importance of Catholic Faith When Growing Up



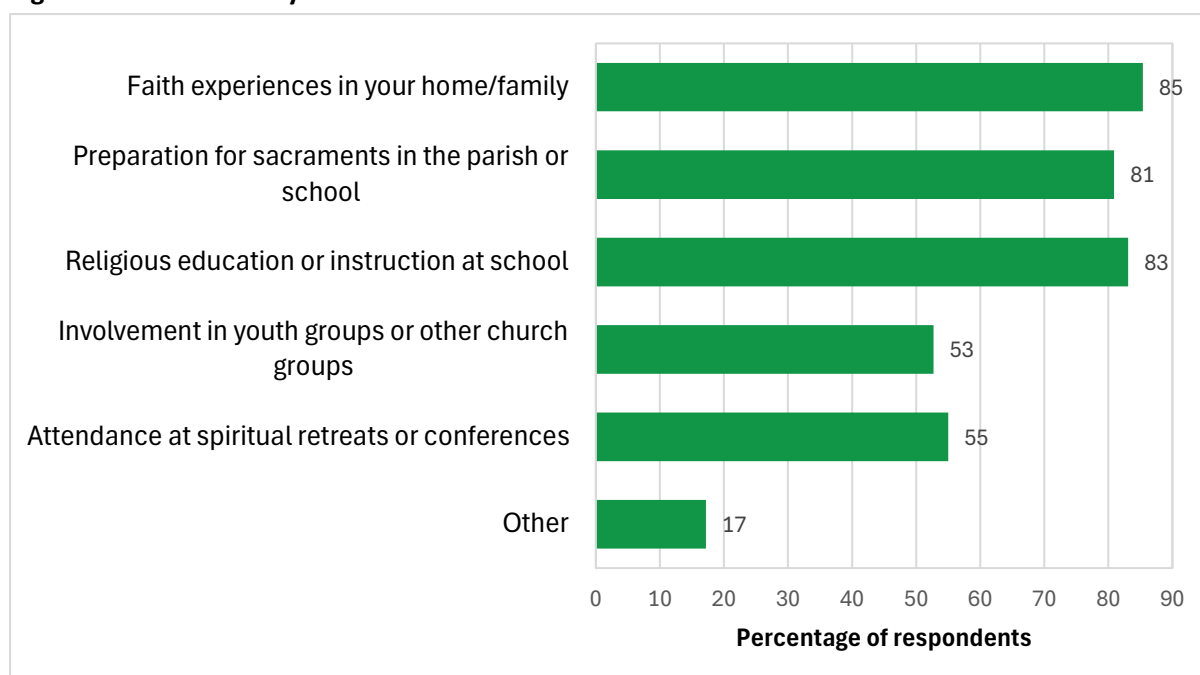
Faith Journeys

Another section of the survey asked respondents to reflect on influences on their faith journey and to select all that applied among the following options, with an open text box to complete if they chose 'Other':

- Faith experiences in your home/family (e.g. prayer, Catholic traditions, other faith activities)
- Preparation for sacraments in the parish or school
- Religious education or instruction at school
- Involvement in youth groups or other church groups
- Attendance at spiritual retreats or conferences
- Other (please describe)
- None of the above

As shown in Figure 16, the three most common influences of faith among the respondents was in the home and family (85%), at religious education or instruction at school (83%) and in preparation for the sacraments at the parish or school (81%). Over half of the respondents (53%) had participated in other activities such as youth or other church groups, and a slightly higher proportion (55%) had attended spiritual retreats or conferences.

Figure 16. Faith Journey Influences



Around 17 per cent of respondents described 'Other' faith journey influences, which can broadly be categorised into the following three groups:

1. Family relationships and small groups
2. Catholic employment, volunteering and faith formation
3. Personal spiritual experiences and relationships

Family relationships and small groups

Some shared that the examples of faith shown by their parents or grandparents had been important, while others shared that preparing their own children to receive the sacraments influenced their faith journey. Some noted that in addition to sacramental events, their children's education in a Catholic school influenced their own faith journey. Several respondents shared various types of church groups they had been involved in such as Christian Life groups, Neocatechumenal groups, Marriage Encounter, family groups, Bible study groups or lay Catholic reform groups:

My in-laws have a strong Catholic faith, and they influence our family to attend Church more often. (F, 40-44)

Bible based discussion groups. Group socials. (F, 80+)

I sent my daughter to a Catholic school from year 5 after she had been bullied in a mainstream school. (F, 55-59)

Catholic employment, volunteering and faith formation

Many respondents reported that their work in a Catholic agency or school had a significant impact on their faith journey. Others shared that work, whether paid or voluntary, in parishes, dioceses, or

Catholic charities, or for social justice causes, was significant to their faith. A number of people spoke of the value of adult faith formation through online courses, Lenten studies, podcasts, reading books, RCIA, or spiritual direction, attending seminary formation, or undertaking other tertiary study. Still others discussed engagement with religious institute communities, whether as a lay member, a former member, or a novice. Many respondents shared that participating in World Youth Day, Cursillo and other retreats influenced their faith:

I choose to work in a Catholic school. (F, 50-54)

I taught in Catholic schools for 24 years and was always actively involved in the spiritual life of the school. (F, 75-79)

I was at a seminary for 4 years. (M, 80+)

Studying at Master's level Theology and Religious Education. (F, 65-69)

Personal spiritual experiences and relationships

Several respondents shared their personal spiritual experiences, which ranged from time spent in nature and personal devotions to experiences of answered prayer, vocational discernment, undertaking pilgrimages, and involvement in 12-step programs. Finally, respondents spoke of their relationships with other people that impacted their faith, including priests, religious men and women, other faith-filled Catholics, members of other Christian faiths, friends and colleagues:

Most recently (last 10 years), conversations with friends who were on the same quest and path as me—finding a meaningful intersection between life and faith. (F, 55-59)

Some respondents shared negative faith experiences, talking about religion being imposed on them or being manipulated. Others took issue with the doctrine imposed by some groups being supported by the Catholic Church, while others shared negative experiences in Catholic organisations:

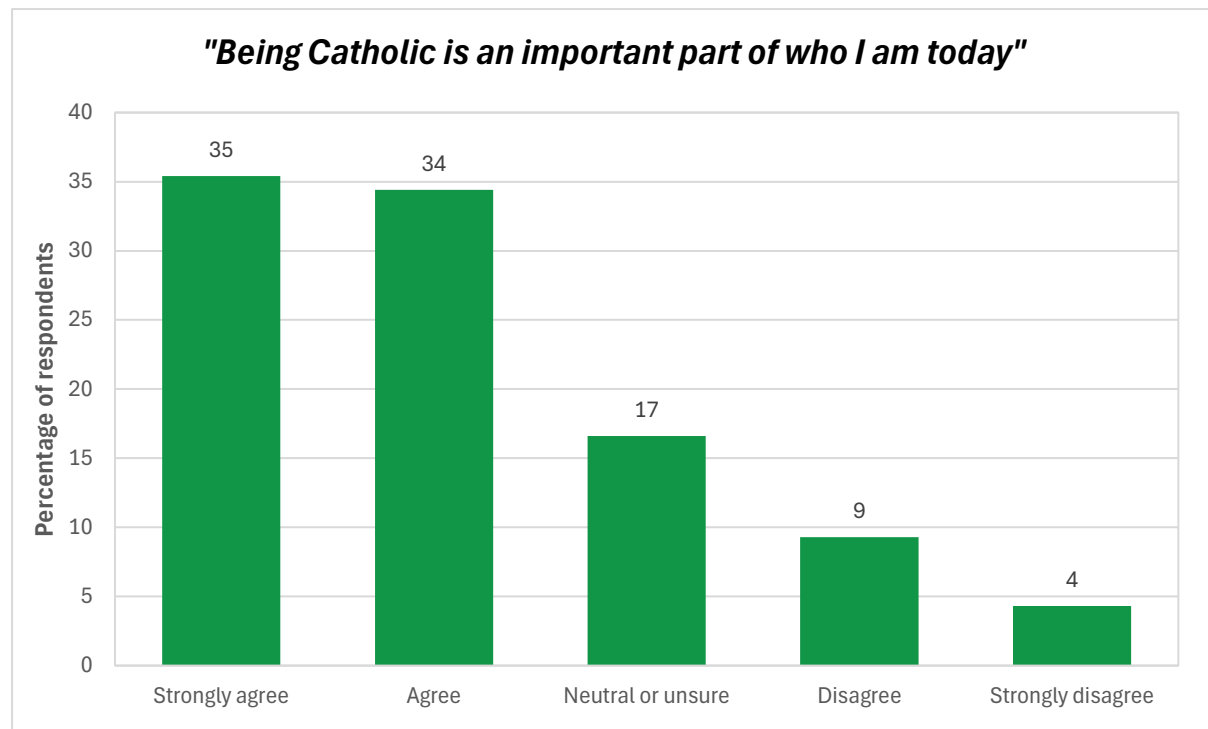
The above experiences have not all necessarily been positive. Catholic boarding school was largely negative. (M, 70-74)

The Importance of Being Catholic

Another question asked respondents the extent to which they agreed with the statement 'Being Catholic is an important part of who I am today'.

Overall, as shown in Figure 17, 69 per cent of respondents *agreed* to some extent with the statement. In contrast, 13 per cent *disagreed* to some extent that being Catholic is an important part of who they are today, while the remaining 17 per cent were neutral or unsure what to think.

Figure 17. Importance of Being Catholic Today



Catholic Identification

Interview participants were also asked whether they still identified as Catholic, regardless of how often they attended Mass. Among those who attended in the category less than weekly, most responded very definitely that they still considered themselves Catholic. Many reflected on their deep personal connection to the faith, saying things like ‘I grew up with it’, ‘it’s been there forever’, or ‘I’m a baptised Catholic’.

Some participants who attended Mass occasionally or monthly also affirmed their Catholic identity, though several felt the need to qualify it in some way:

I identify as being culturally a Catholic ... I can't get it out of my system because ... It's been there forever. And at times, I'm resentful that I'm Catholic. That you can't de-identify ... That they're my people, probably, and I don't really like that fact. (F, 65-69)

I'll call myself an unorthodox Catholic because I've been brought up with the Catholic Church, in the Catholic Church, it sort of, is there. It's ingrained, but I don't believe absolutely anything. (F, 65-69)

I would identify maybe as a cradle Catholic or a non-practicing Catholic, depending upon the context. That's how I would self-describe in different ways. (Sex unknown, 75-79)

A defective Catholic ... because ... I gave up on the Catholic Church and now I attend a different church, but I consider myself like a refugee of the current church that I'm attending ...

I'm now attending a Latter-day Saint church ... I sort of left all religion aside for about a year or so, and just recently I've started going there. (M, 25-29)

Others still struggled to define their identity or now had an identity that was different altogether:

I say I am Catholic. Catholic in my DNA, but I'm more than my DNA ... [On a census form] ... I tick both. That is Catholic and ... Uniting Church. (F, 65-69)

I prefer to call myself a Christian without borders. (F, 80+)

Catholic Beliefs and Practices

Beliefs about the Eucharist

The final question in this section presented respondents with three statements from which they could choose one that expressed their personal belief about the consecrated bread and wine at Mass. For over half of the respondents (55%), as revealed in Figure 18, the consecrated bread and wine truly became the sacred Body and Blood of Christ. For just under one-quarter (24%), the bread and wine at Mass remain just bread and wine, while the remaining 21 per cent were unsure what to believe.

Figure 18. Belief About the Consecrated Bread and Wine at Mass



Interview participants were invited to share more deeply about their beliefs about the Eucharist. Some shared that the Eucharist itself was meaningful to them, even if they did not have the opportunity to partake of it every week:

What I miss about being part of the congregation I am [with] is that Eucharist is only one Sunday a month. Eucharist ... is meaningful to me. So, I miss that and when I'm on retreat, you know, or facilitating retreats or what have you, that's always a rich experience for me.
(F, 65-69)

I think the communion, to me, is really important, and it's something I think I miss. It's a moment of reconciliation and forgiveness and starting again. And I think that it has so much to be treasured in it. (M, 65-69)

A few expressed personal concerns about receiving the Eucharist when they had disagreements with other teachings of the Church:

I think there is something incredibly powerful about the Eucharist, and that is why it saddens me that when ... you know that the people at the front ... I just don't want to be this anti-male, but ... [the Church's] views about the world are so not in line with mine. It's difficult, yeah. And that's why it's hard, because if you're steaming because you've listened to a homily that has

things that you don't agree with, and then you have to go and take communion, it's a bit difficult because I do believe that it's a very holy [thing] ... It's incredibly sacred. (F, 60-64)

I no longer see the Catholic Church as having exclusive rights on this, on the Eucharist. Everyone should be welcome at the table, and I've seen too many instances at funerals where Catholic priests have stood up at a funeral of beautiful families and made it very clear that only if you've been to confession or something in the last six months, should you be at the table. I just think that's so hypocritical. It's not what Jesus Christ taught. (M, 75-79)

Several participants shared that 'Eucharist' meant something more to them than just the consecrated bread and wine:

I suppose my general view is that it just comes with church ... it's like this ritualistic thing that you know what you're going to get. So, it's more just that entire sort of familiar ritual of the Mass as opposed to the Eucharist itself. (F, 40-44)

I guess it's not so much the actual consecration of the host and the actual actions going on at the altar that really affect me. I think it's more the experience of everyone walking to the table, that is probably the most moving for me. And participating in that. Yeah ... I don't really think very much actually about what's going on at the table in terms of the actual consecration and the actual words being said or who can say those words. (F, 45-49)

Some people felt that the focus on participating as a community was more important:

A meal is coming together, people breaking bread and having a bond. People that sit down to eat together are in community and are open to each other. That could be a level of a Sunday lunch ... If you get caught up in, is this actually the body of Christ and the blood of Christ? ... Or is it just a memorial, and this is actually a form of bread because Jesus said, 'Do this in memory of me' ... If a meal is a sit-down, graced moment, we're all on one level, I can see the Eucharist having sacramental healing value. (M, 70-74)

Regarding the Eucharist, although I see that as the body of Christ, I also understand that Christ is tougher than [what people make him out] to be. God is everywhere. And I think that if we're having, like, a meal with people, that's another Eucharist in itself, because that's what the Eucharist is about. It's, you know, Jesus had his meal with his friends. He had meals with lots of friends, and that was about bringing people together and feeding them, nourishing them physically and spiritually. And I think we do that with a really good, a well done, sort of a dinner gathering. (F, 65-69)

A few expressed doubts about the doctrine of transubstantiation:

I've never liked the whole idea of transubstantiation, and I've read books on it ... but I've never come to a comfortable sense about it, I think 'cos I've had this thing growing up of like ... a thing, God present in a piece of bread or something, it's a bit of a block. So, that's one reason why the Mass has not been a strong part of my spirituality. (M, 70-74)

The Eucharist, okay. I can't accept transubstantiation anymore. But I do think Jesus left that to us as a communion. It brings the community together. We're all part of Jesus. If you're receiving the sacrament, you're saying that you want to be part of that community, and you want nourishment to act in a way that Jesus instructed us. That's my view of it at the minute.
(F, 40-44)

For a few others, the Eucharist appeared to have no impact whatsoever:

Look, I could take it or leave it. I don't really care that it's the body of Christ. I just ... get up and do it because I ... just go with the group, stand up, get a wafer. It wouldn't bother me if I never, ever went to communion ever again. I'm just doing it to be compliant when I'm there.
(F, 65-69)

Views about Mass Attendance

In a related question, interview participants were also invited to share their general views on Mass attendance, and a range of views was expressed among those who were not regular attenders. Some had positive experiences of Mass attendance, despite their own attendance patterns:

I think it's absolutely lovely that people go to Mass every week. I really think it's such a beautiful thing that because it's about really prioritising something and saying this is meaningful to us as a family or an individual, and I really love that people make it a priority.
(F, 40-44)

Yeah, it's probably, well, something I think is a good thing I should be doing more of, but I'm not sure if that's out of obligation or out of recognising my faith, and I need to celebrate the Eucharist. And I know that's something I might be missing out on. (M, 45-49)

Others had negative views around Mass attendance and saw it as a duty to perform. Several expressed their own philosophies around the role of Mass attendance in their faith:

Well, my mother would say that if I didn't go every week, that that was a mortal sin, that that was very bad. (F, 55-59)

I think a lot of people get the summit part of the Eucharist, but they don't get that it's also meant to be the source. And if it's the source, then that implies that ... it's meant to be a starting point for something else, as opposed to just the thing that we're aiming towards each week. (M, 40-44)

I remember when I did this course, all those years ago. I remember the nuns saying that if the priest gathers at the church and no one turns up, it's not church. If the people are gathered at the church and the priest doesn't make it for some reason, we're still church. (F, 65-69)

Several people expressed a desire to attend Mass regularly, provided that changes could be made, while others viewed non-attendance as a means to express their dissatisfaction with the current

Church teachings. A number commented about a change in attitude towards Mass attendance that they had observed since COVID:

Since the COVID lockdown, I actually started to realise, you know, I haven't been struck down with lightning ... but it's kind of made me think differently about Mass and the importance of attending Mass. So, I think I was going in order to go to the Mass. Now I go to be a part of a community. God is a part of it as well. God's everywhere, even outside of Mass. So, I don't see it quite as important now that I've had that opportunity to be elsewhere. It's changed my perspective, I think. (F, 65-69)

Some participants expressed their displeasure with current Mass practices, particularly those that were perceived as quite conservative:

My general view about [Mass attendance] is that it can often be a frustrating experience for people. So, dissatisfying. You look at all the men and all that, and I think, come on, you know. And now we see Mantillas and pre-Vatican II styles, and no longer accepting communion in the hands and all that stuff. I find that really something that irks me. (M, 65-69)

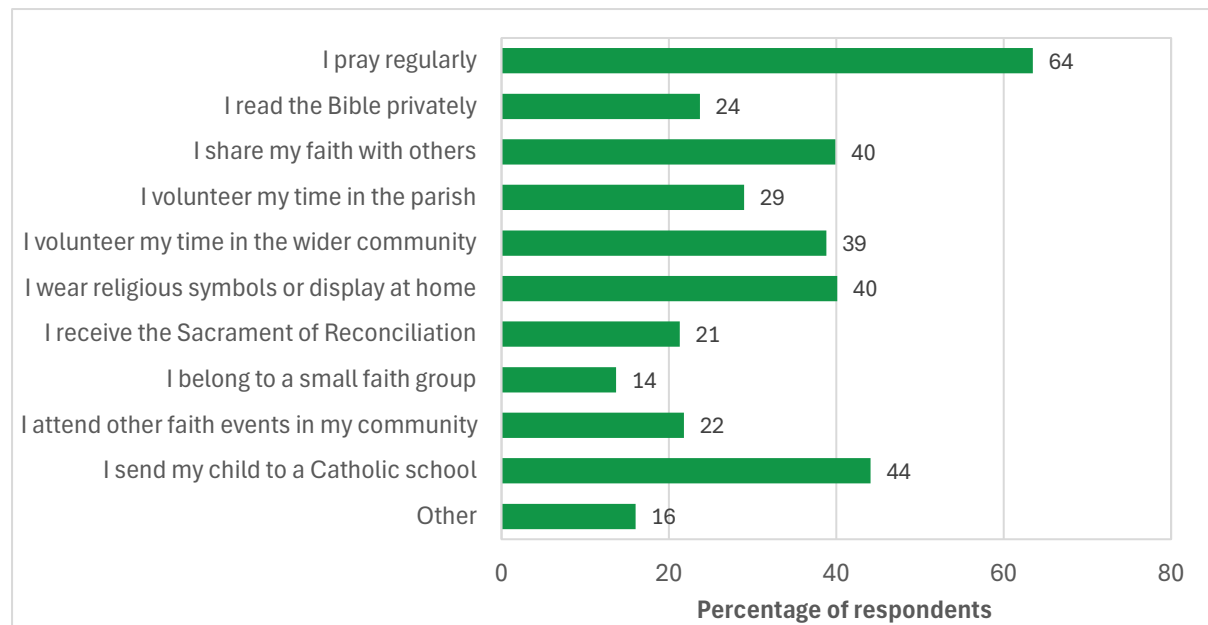
It seems to me that the people I know who attend their services regularly are very fundamental ... [One of my former priests] started writing the newsletters out [that] everyone had to attend Mass, and everyone had to do this, and they had to do that. And I was thinking, well, in my language 'Eff you. I can do what I want.' Which I did. (F, 60-64)

Current Expressions of Faith

All participants were invited to share about the other ways that they expressed their faith in their lives. Survey respondents were offered the ten options below with an eleventh option to choose 'Other' and write in their response:

- I pray regularly
- I read the Bible privately
- I share my faith with others
- I volunteer my time in the parish
- I volunteer my time in the wider community
- I wear religious symbols or display them at home
- I receive the Sacrament of Reconciliation
- I belong to a small faith group
- I attend other faith events in my community
- I send my child to a Catholic school

Figure 19. Other Ways in which Faith is Expressed



As Figure 19 shows, nearly two-thirds of respondents (64%) prayed regularly, and around 44 per cent sent/send their child or children to a Catholic school. Four in ten (40%) wore religious symbols or displayed them at home, while the same proportion shared their faith with others (40%). Thirty-nine per cent volunteered their time in the wider community, while nearly one in three respondents volunteered their time in the parish (29%).

Other spiritual activities were practised by fewer respondents, e.g. reading the Bible privately (24%), attending faith events in their community (21%), receiving the Sacrament of Reconciliation (22%), and belonging to a small faith group (14%).

Those who chose the 'Other' option provided a wide variety of responses. A similar broad range of responses was elicited from interview participants who were asked this question. Some chose to provide further information on their earlier responses, such as the specifics of their involvement with their parish, volunteering in the community, attending small faith groups, sending their child to a Catholic school, or receiving the Sacrament of Reconciliation:

I assist in running a Bingo night for fundraising for the parish. (M, 70-74)

I attend a charismatic prayer group. (M, 30-34)

I did send my children to Catholic schools and was very involved with my parish and school community in those days. (F, 80+)

Yes, we do the garden at the parish. We've continued to be the gardeners at the parish because that's about God's creation and there's six or seven of us who do that every month. (M, 75-79)

I like to welcome now. I've sort of made that my thing because I don't want anything to do with priests. So, I will stand at the door. (F, 65-69)

Numerous responses related to work or volunteering in a Catholic school or another Catholic organisation. Some shared their Catholic commitment through their employment in other organisations:

I volunteer with charities and donate to worthy causes; I volunteer for and support minority and disenfranchised communities and people. (F, 45-49)

My teaching in Catholic Education is a lived vocation. (M, 55-59)

St Vincent de Paul active member, but not at my local parish. (M, 65-69)

I attended Masses and liturgies with my school community when I'm at work. (F, 35-39)

I work for the Catholic Church, but do not express my faith much. (F, 50-54)

I commit my work in service of God. (M, 60-64)

Several related their involvement in other Church groups or ministries such as pastoral care, running book clubs, supporting refugees, campaigning for Indigenous rights, pro-life organisations, environmental advocacy, or social justice work:

I ... feel really strongly that ... being a nurse is a vocation, and you really are called to this profession. I mean, yes, there are plenty of nurses who just tick the box and do whatever, but I feel very ... strongly called to this life of service ... You know that is the expression outwardly of my faith ... like doing good for the world is what I think is my purpose. (F, 40-44)

I advocate for environmentalism, sustainable communities and social harmony. (M, 70-74)

I mentor a young family who have no family of their own in Australia. (Sex unknown, 50-59)

A handful reported their involvement with non-Catholic churches or organisations. This included attendance at other churches, Scouts and youth groups, ecumenical groups, and sending children to schools of other Christian denominations:

I identify more broadly as 'Christian' now, rather than Catholic, and I regularly attend a Christian church. I also send my children to a Christian College. (F, 40-44)

I attend a Lutheran church for their music on average, roughly, every 6-8 weeks. (F, 70-74)

I practice yoga and lean towards Buddhism. Spirituality is important. Religiosity not at all important. (F, 55-59)

A number of respondents expressed their faith through the way they lived their lives. Many talked about living a life with Christian values:

I live by the example of Jesus and endeavour to be kind, give my time when I can, take care of my family, I support the community when I can. (F, 50-54)

I express my faith during my day-to-day activities including work and recreation through respecting and supporting my local environment and its inhabitants. Through volunteering and while at my job. I believe we are guardians first and that is how I show my love for God. I believe in prayer through actions and feelings as much/if not more than church attendance. Although I do believe I should attend more. (Demographics unknown)

Yeah, we do raise funds sometimes; we have an occasion once or twice a year. And, like I said, I love doing paintings, so I put that up for auction. So, all of the money is contributed towards whatever the Church needs. (F, 45-49)

Some reported engaging in prayer and meditation. Several talked about studying or learning about religious topics. Many interview participants mentioned regular prayer, saying grace before meals, reading the Bible or other religious information, or using religious apps such as *Pray as You Go* or the *Hallow* app:

Through prayer and meditation, particularly in open outdoor spaces. (F, 55-59)

I listen to podcasts, read, reflect and keep trying to grow in my faith trusting in God's promise 'Seek and you will find'. (F, 60-64)

And to prayer; I meditate every day, half an hour. I've never depended on the institutional church for my spiritual input. I've started reading Psalms again. That used to be my habit every night. Because I have crap sleep and I keep thinking, 'Well, maybe if I could focus on that, I might be more relaxed.' (M, 70-74)

Relationships with other Catholics or Christian people were important to some respondents:

I meet with like-minded friends. (F, 80+)

I hang out with Christians my age in my area. (M, 25-29)

A few shared that they were ordained clergy or members of a religious community. Others shared an affinity with music, engagement with social media or homeschooling:

Make comments on Facebook defending the Church. (M, 80+)

Sing when I can reach the notes. (F, 80+)

It's how I live my day-to-day, really. I help people; if somebody asks for help, I give it; I do whatever I can. (M, 70-74)

Some recognised that they were no longer involved but expressed that all the options had been present in their lives when they were younger:

Most of the above when I was younger. (F, 80+)

I have done all of the above [expressions of faith]. (F, 65-69)

Interview participants particularly reflected on activities that they used to be involved with in their parish, including as Eucharistic ministers, teaching children's liturgy, maintaining or cleaning the church, playing music, reading, assisting with the liturgy, assisting with sacramental programs, being a member of the parish pastoral council, leading marriage education, and altar serving:

Helping with liturgy and doing maintenance around church. Cleaning the church. (M, 65-69)

I used to be a reader, and I was also a eucharistic minister before COVID. That's a while ago. (F, 65-69)

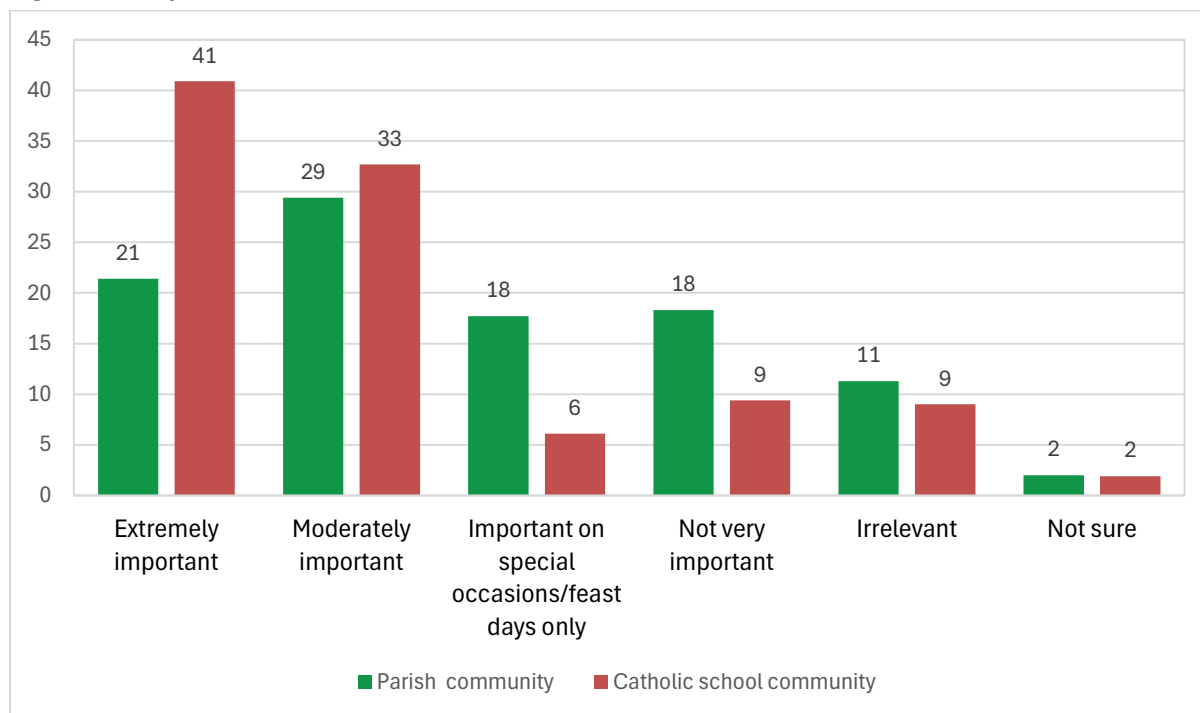
Yeah, I've done ... done most things. I've ... I've been a reader, but I've also been on parish pastoral councils. (M, 75-79)

Involvement in Catholic and Religious Communities

Importance of Catholic Communities

The first question in this section asked respondents to identify on a five-point scale the importance of two Catholic communities in their lives: the local parish and the Catholic school. The scale ranged from 'Extremely important' to 'Irrelevant', with additional options for 'Not sure' and 'Not applicable'.

Figure 20. Importance of Parish and Catholic School Communities



Respondents placed more importance in Catholic school communities compared to the parish as shown in Figure 20, with close to three in four (74%) rating the importance of the former as 'extremely important' or 'moderately important'. Just over half (51%) gave the same rating for the local parish. Eighteen per cent of respondents placed importance on the parish community on special occasions or feast days, compared to the school (6%). Respondents were much more likely to rate the parish community as 'not very important' or 'irrelevant' (29%) compared to those who rated the school community similarly (18%).

Interview participants were invited to share their views about the local Catholic community. Some expressed their admiration for the people in their parish:

Wonderful people. Wonderful, wonderful people. I love Catholics, I really do. Wonderful people that have been let down by their Church in all aspects of it. But no, Catholics are wonderful people. They are, yes. (M, 25-29)

We actually got to know a few good people from [my former parish], and that's probably one of the sad things because by not going to church and joining in the ritual, I had ... I miss out on seeing these people. Good people. And that's a shame. (M, 65-69)

Others raised concerns about poor behaviour and a lack of community in their local parishes:

Our local one here, all the backbiting and backstabbing and things like that, it doesn't seem to me like a very kind thing. We've got one woman, she's heavily involved in the parish, and she dominates everybody else; it's got to be her way or no way. (M, 70-74)

The parish community ... I've never really experienced it to be a community. And that's sort of varied based on who the pastor is, but you know, in reflecting on it, it's always been, that was a great parish because the pastor is really good. But as soon as the pastor leaves, anything that had gotten going usually stops. (M, 40-44)

Several shared insights about the makeup of the local church community, including the age of its members and the increase in the migrant population:

It's good, but it's elderly. Aging rapidly ... there's a church here and one in [a neighbouring town] which is a tiny church. The one priest covers both churches. I could see [the church in the neighbouring town] closing down in the next five years. There's not enough people to maintain two churches. (M, 65-69)

It's ... a community of mostly [Asians]. I think, therefore, their structure is different from my understanding. So, probably a little bit different when going for concepts of Divine Mercy and all that. It doesn't appeal to me at all. I mean, to each their own. I'm not knocking people who are going for that. That's not the case. It's just that you can only have one view, whereas if it's synodal ... it would be everybody would have a view. That would appeal to them. (F, 80+)

Several participants expressed concerns that their local community was not taking sufficient action to improve the Church and its interactions with the congregation:

I think there's not a strong sense of community there. And Mass—it tends to be more of a sacramental community, taking all of the sacraments rather than having a lot of community events that might bring people together or give people a chance to share various views on things. So, I think it's losing numbers; I think it's slowly dying, in a sense. (M, 70-74)

Our local community is very much stuck in the old world of the Church. They're not moving forward enough. They're trying, but it's like they're held back by some of the people who are in leadership in the Church. They don't want to change things. ... And I think the music probably needs to update a bit. (F, 35-39)

Participating in Catholic Rituals

Interview participants were asked how they felt about participating in Catholic rituals. Most stated they were happy to attend events for others, such as baptisms, weddings or funerals, to which they were invited. A number commented on it being a meaningful experience for them:

Yes, it still means a lot to me. Sometimes when I'm sitting there, I'm thinking, 'Why aren't I going to Mass on Sundays when I believe that these sorts of things are important?' But that's where I'm at the moment. (F, 35-39)

Some commented that Catholic rituals were cultural experiences. A few people pondered on the relationship between rituals and the religious beliefs underpinning them, while several lamented the decline of religious rituals in society:

Working in Indigenous communities, you see how things are—and I'm talking about remote communities where you have ritual and there are rites of passage. And for me, weddings, baptisms and funerals are part of that, and I think unfortunately we've lost that. And I do know that there are people who manage to, like some of my friends, they [have religious ceremonies], but they have no faith. Whereas I know in my family, that doesn't happen. We are either committed or not. (F, 60-64)

I believe in [participating in Catholic rituals]. I'm sort of disappointed that my sons don't want to get there. Only one of them's got their kids baptised. But I understand totally why. (M, 65-69)

Several people commented that they would participate in Catholic rituals for themselves, regardless of their patterns of Mass attendance, whereas others had strong feelings against the Church and stated that they would not participate in any rituals for themselves, Catholic funerals in particular:

Oh, well, I guess because I don't know any different—that's just the way that I've been brought up, my husband as well, that they are important to us. Our children have done their sacraments up to what's appropriate for their age, and we were married in a Catholic church. My sister was actually married in a Catholic church, as well, even though she married someone who wasn't Catholic. (F, 35-39)

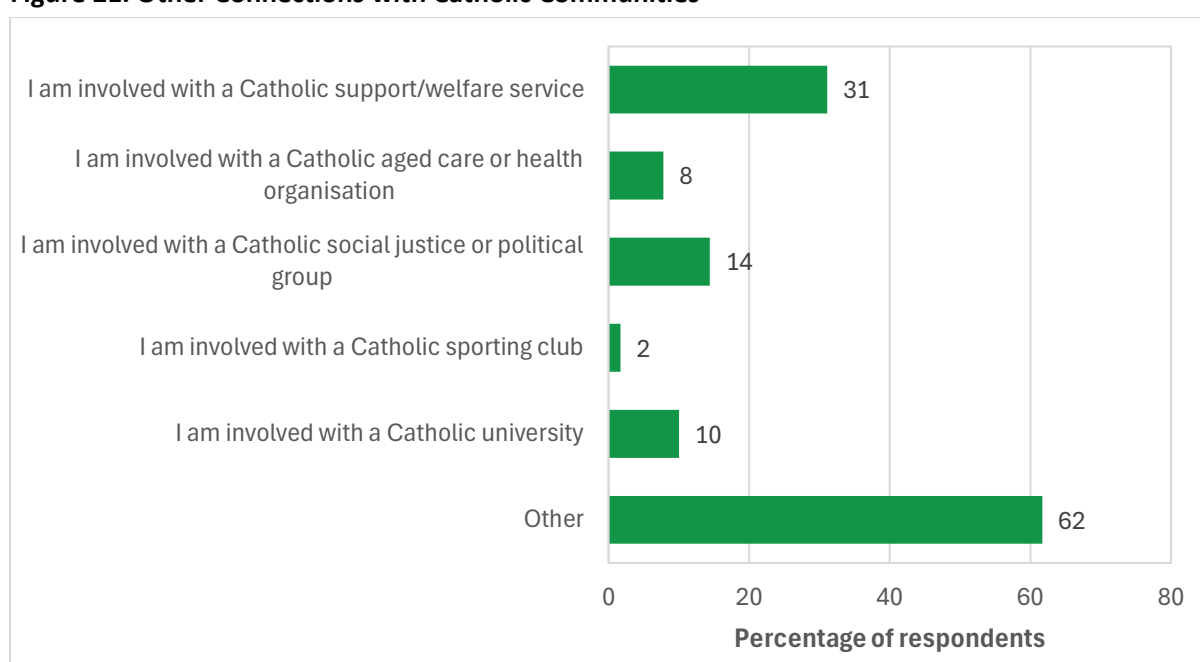
Yeah. And I mean, it's interesting, I wouldn't have a Catholic funeral ... well, I definitely wouldn't have a Catholic requiem Mass. Because it excludes those who are ... as is frequently announced, if you are in good standing with the Catholic Church, you may receive communion. And that would just not ... who are we to judge who is? Who are we to exclude from the table, from the spiritual nourishment that can come through communion, because of whatever criteria we put in place. (F, 65-69)

Other Connections with Catholic Communities

The second question asked, 'Aside from attendance at Mass, are there other ways in which you connect with the Catholic community?' Respondents were invited to choose all that applied from the five options below, along with a sixth option of choosing 'Other' and writing in their response:

- I am involved with a Catholic support/welfare service
- I am involved with a Catholic aged care or health organisation
- I am involved with a Catholic social justice or political group
- I am involved with a Catholic sporting club
- I am involved with a Catholic university

Figure 21. Other Connections with Catholic Communities



As Figure 21 indicates, of the listed connections, nearly a third of respondents (31%) were involved in a Catholic support/welfare service, while 14 per cent were involved in a Catholic social justice or political group. Ten per cent were involved with a Catholic university, while eight per cent were connected to a Catholic aged care or health organisation. Only a small number (2%) were involved in a Catholic sporting club. The majority of respondents (62%) reported having connections with other Catholic communities beyond those listed in the survey as explained in the sections below.

Numerous respondents reported that they were working or volunteering with a Catholic organisation:

I work for a Catholic agency. (F, 40-44)

I'm involved in a Catholic retail store. (M, 50-54)

Several shared other connections such as through a Catholic school or the Catholic Education Office, Catholic aged care or other health organisations, study at a Catholic university or other tertiary education provider or engagement with the parish newsletter:

My children attend a Catholic school, and we are very connected to the community. (F, 40-44)

Birther children at a Catholic Hospital. (F, 40-44)

Have weekly newsletter dropped into letter box by volunteers. (F, 75-79)

Some respondents reported connections with other social and spiritual groups such as religious communities, Catholic social clubs, youth groups and events, and other Church study, prayer and interest groups:

I'm involved with a religious oblate group. (F, 55-59)

Small group sharing. Promoting an adult Catholic spirituality and theology. (M, 75-79)

Book club, Church history group. (F, 80+)

When younger involved in Antioch. (F, 40-44)

Various respondents shared their personal experiences of spiritual connections, including through Catholic devotions, personal prayer and worship, Catholic arts, and spiritual direction. A number also reported engaging with Catholic social media, watching Catholic Mass on television or online, listening to Catholic podcasts, and attending Catholic seminars:

I listen and watch lots of Catholic podcasts and media. (F, 45-49)

I pray the hours. (M, 25-29)

A handful talked about negative experiences they had had which were barriers to engaging with the Catholic community, including negative experiences with priests, experiencing cliquey behaviours or being rejected by Church communities, issues with Church leadership, and issues with Catholic schools. Others shared other factors that impacted their involvement such as health and age issues:

I was deeply involved in the local Church, volunteered for everything, I was a Catechist, Eucharist Minister plus a whole lot more. My faith in the Catholic church was shattered and now I'm not involved at all, barely attend Mass. My faith in God remains stronger than ever, though. (F, 60-64)

I have been very involved in my life in every aspect of my faith. Now my health prevents me from full involvement. (F, Age unknown)

A few commented that they would like to be more involved in the future:

I should get involved again. (M, 45-49)

Attendance at Other Denominations or Religions

To gauge the extent to which Catholics are involved in other Christian churches or religious groups, a simple question was asked: whether they attended worship services of another church or religion. Overall, the vast majority (96%) reported not attending other services, with only four per cent indicating that they did.

In the interviews, participants offered some deeper insights. Most shared that they chose not to attend other denominations as a general rule, although would do so for an ecumenical event or another special occasion:

Only on odd occasions. I'm not against going there on a special occasion or whatever else, but I'm not looking to attend another religious organisation, or another parish, even though there's a fairly good pastor up at the parish just up the hill from where we are now. (M, 70-74)

Some expressed visiting non-Catholic churches as an occasional event:

We used to go camping over Christmas and be away for Christmas Day, and we attended the local church there, which was not Catholic. I can't think what denomination it was, but they still had communion. So, we attended that for Christmas quite regularly. (F, 50-54)

Some participants shared a desire to have more contact with other denominations:

It has crossed my mind though to go and visit all the other churches. There's about 20 or so in [our location] of a Christian nature/faith. And I've always thought it's absolutely crazy that we're all believing in the same thing and going to different church buildings every Sunday. And yeah, it's always been a passion of mine to somehow bring those together. But, no, I've never actually attended any of them other than going to funerals or weddings. (M, 45-49)

I guess, at the end of the day, I'm like, it's all Christianity; there's differences between denominations, but the general thing is to be nice to one another, and that's all that matters. (M, 45-49)

However, a few expressed that choosing to attend another denomination was a substitute for them when they had felt unable to attend the Catholic Church:

We have a gay son, and so, the whole Catholic Church stand on homosexuality. So, I was looking for a congregation that was one, inclusive, and that included gender and sexual identity inclusivity. And the other was progressive, where I didn't need to leave my brain at the door ... and yeah, a whole lot of Catholic doctrine that could be espoused in homilies ... isn't congruent with where I am. (F, 65-69)

Perspectives on the Church and Its People

Phase 2 of the study included a set of questions asked exclusively of interviewees, aimed at capturing a richer understanding of their current relationship with the Church and its practices.

Current View of the Catholic Church

When asked about their current views of the Catholic Church, some interview participants reflected on the global Church, while others reflected on the Church in Australia. Their views were broad and diverse, some very brief and simple, while others were quite long and theologically perceptive. Some focused their responses on views of the previous or current Popes, the bishops in Australia or other leaders, rather than the Church in more general terms.

Other participants expressed their views of the Church as being very hierarchical and patriarchal, while some suggested it is too centralised, with very little openness to lay people's input in decision-making, for example, in appointing priests or bishops.

Many participants struggled with some aspects of the Church and noted that it often strayed from its mission. For example, a few mentioned that the Catholic Church's global wealth had shaped their views, suggesting that it was contrary to the Gospel of Jesus and detracted from the work it should be doing:

I went into the Vatican, and the Vatican just oozes money, and it was just like, this is just amazing—it's grand, and it's amazing and that, but one thing that got me is that there was a homeless lady out on the street that was begging for money. (M, 45-49)

Quite a few participants noted the Catholic Church's slowness in enacting any change:

I think the church needs a reboot for the 21st century. It's just old fashioned. It wants to keep doing things the same way. (M, 65-69)

I feel that the church moves so slowly. Pope Francis seems to want to get things going, but it takes a lot to move something so big. You can't just turn the directions. (M, 65-69)

Relatedly, many participants felt that the Church's lack of women in all leadership positions had shaped their current views of the Catholic Church:

I think we've still got a very long way to go to ensure that some of those bigger questions are addressed . . . leadership of women in in the church, I know there's been a little shift, which is great, but I feel that there's a long way to go there. (F, 55-59)

But for me, where I really started to really have problems with the organisational part of the Catholic Church is the treatment of women, basically. And like, you think about a new pope has been elected, but there was no woman at the table. There's the highest-ranking nun doesn't get a say in what happens or occurs in the Catholic Church. Like I know she does, but not at those high levels. (F, 40-44)

Some other participants struggled with the Church's attitudes more broadly, and this had constricted their view of the Church:

It's still living in the you know, I think 18th century. It's moved along a bit from the medieval times but it's still in the 18th century. In its attitude towards women, its attitudes towards sex, its attitudes towards anything that isn't, you know—I mean anyway most probably go along with it. (F, 80+)

Other participants viewed the Church as too focussed on Mass attendance, which meant it was less focussed on the mission of Jesus and evangelisation:

So, I think we are far too focused on the Mass because we're still stuck in a worldview where the culture was Christian or Catholic, and so the only thing the church needed to do was supply the sacraments. So, all of the church's solutions it seems are all Mass oriented . . . However, it's not ... the Mass doesn't make disciples. The Mass is not designed for non-Catholics. (M, 40-44)

A few participants were ambivalent about their views of the Church:

I think it's led the way in social justice. I think a lot of the early documents were very, very good. I think it falls down with married people. I don't think it understands marriage at all. . . But I think the church falls down on its mission. It's got so much richness that it could be passing on in a meaningful way to where people are actually at. And they're not doing that. (F, 40-44)

What I do love about "church" is our organisations, like Vinnies. They are living and breathing the action of church. I think that is a beautiful example of what I would imagine Jesus would want us to be doing today. [But] that hierarchy, formality, church, that part of me finds that very frustrating. So, I have a conundrum going on. (F, 55-59)

On the other hand, a number of participants were somewhat positive about the Catholic Church, with some expressing their approval of leaders, including Pope Francis and Pope Leo:

Yeah, the Catholic Church has done a good job at appealing to the modern world. Pope Francis really led it into the future. Coz there was a time where they hated people like me. You know, no homosexuals, you know, they don't even call you gay, they use the proper term homosexuals. You know, they used to say that you're mentally disorientated. They, Pope Francis got rid of all that, which is, and thank God. (M, 25-29)

A few participants expressed other views, stressing the need to return to earlier 'traditions':

I'm a bit torn. I think if they did, if they did establish, which I don't think they'll ever do, if they did establish the traditional Latin Mass far and wide, I think that they would gain astronomical numbers of youth and young families back . . . Yeah. So, I think that's their only hope if they want numbers back. (M, 25-29)

Current View of Catholic Clergy

There were many and varied responses from participants when asked about their current views of Catholic clergy. For many participants, their views were shaped by the individual priests or bishops with whom they had connected, so could not share more broadly about their views.

However, many participants noted their priest and bishop to be the ‘best guy in the world’ or ‘outstanding’ men. Others praised priests for their dedication to their work amidst the ongoing concerns in society arising from the Royal Commission:

I'm really always very heartened about how really devoted they are to their work, and you know, with all this hardship around them, they're very devoted, like 99 percent of them, are great ... really lovely, lovely men, you'd be so grateful to have them as your parish priest.
(F, 40-44)

We've had some wonderful priests in our local parish, some really, really fabulous priests. Really lovely. Quite different than each other, but very, very nice. (F, 55-59)

There's only one deacon around that I know, and he's very good; he's a lovely guy. I think he's fine; I think all the priests are fine; I think that they've got their heart in the right place.
(M, 45-49)

Some participants suggested that a few priests and bishops seemed a bit disconnected from their people:

When I think about church, as in parishes, I find that they're still way too disconnected from what we're really doing on the ground depending on the priest. I don't like to say that, but it is a reality . . . If you have a priest that is pedantic about the way a Mass is said, the way children are sitting, who is negative and doesn't engage with them . . . that for me is not church. (F, 55-59)

Some of the bishops I haven't been too impressed with. I just feel that they seem a little bit disconnected from their people. But I do [think] some of the priests are really lovely. (F, 60-64)

Generally speaking, it feels that the relationship is very distant compared to what I remember as a child. I remember as a child families would welcome their clergy into their homes and lives and vice versa. I don't see that. I see a real divide between parishioners and particularly nonregular attendees and the church and the clergy. (F, 55-59)

A number of participants talked about priests on loan from overseas, and often participants emphasised their views— both positive and negative—stemmed from struggles they had experienced in the difference in cultures, the difficult accents when priests said the homilies, conflicting views of the roles of women, or the divergent theological differences:

So culturally I feel they've come from a country where perhaps women are treated differently and they're deep seated, they've got cultural, you know, they've been brought up in a different era and that's understandable. I don't have any problem with that but it's just hard for them

and to come and understand the way that we've been brought up to is totally different.
(F, 60-64)

Obviously, we have a lot of clergy that Australia is bringing in from other countries, which is excellent for not only for the church in Australia because we need it, but also for providing opportunities for people from different backgrounds and lifestyles and things like that to come and actually influence Australia, our church and relatability as well. (F, 40-44)

In the city, where we have a lot of, where we have [international] priests. One to one, friendly, cheerful, great, good people. But when they do that ... when they do their Mass thing, not so ... not so easy to relate to . . . their sermonising is very different than what we're used to, I think. (M, 75-79)

Some participants' views of clergy focused on the training and life experiences that some clergy lacked. For other participants, their views centred on how to support priests who may be feeling downhearted or overworked:

I don't know whether the young fellows going through the seminary have enough life experience . . . If somebody comes to my help and I want to be able to talk, I want them to be able to understand my back story. Whereas I don't know whether the young priests, the young deacons who may have come from overseas know our Australian culture as well as they could. And the young fellows who are leaving straight from school and going straight into the seminary. I think maybe they need to be parish workers first as part of their as part of their study. (F, 65-69)

I think there are some priests who are really good at being priests. Like, this guy should be a priest and not do any of the financial things. His role would be better as an assistant priest. Having someone else do the paperwork or the book work. That shouldn't be a priest's role. But some want to be the manager of funds, manager of properties. It should just be priests.
(M, 65-69)

Oh, they're good guys, really. There's a few of them that aren't good guys, and I think mental health and burnout and the pressure to ordain and to have new priests coming through the seminaries is huge. I think they have a lot on their shoulders . . . I think that thinking about clergy as you would about a nurse or an ambulance officer or doctor, like you're a frontline worker and absorbing that vicarious trauma through your work constantly, and they bear it so bravely, but the thing is your body's gonna crack eventually. (F, 40-44)

A few participants raised the lack of respect they had for some priests and bishops, having had negative experiences with some in the past. These included experiences of priests being too hierarchical in their role, or the conservativeness of some younger priests they had connected with:

But see, the priests are sort of a king in their own little parish; canon law allows them that power. (M, 70-74)

They're a bit of a mixed bag. But I hate to say this, I would say that at least... I want to be generous. A lot of them, from my experience, are very arrogant. Very arrogant . . . And the

other thing too is I think the clergy used to be respected, but they've lost that respect.
(M, 25-29)

They are human. And as a consequence, they are flawed and so yeah. They're flawed like we all are, and so I don't venerate them. I can't venerate them. I don't think they're any more special. (F, 60-64)

Current View of Catholics in General

Interview participants were asked about their views of Catholics in general. A few said that they did not have any specific view, particularly those who identified as not attending Mass at all, while some others related that they were accepting of all people, regardless of their religious beliefs. A couple related that they did not know any other Catholics:

I take people of where they're at, Catholic or not, Catholic, Muslim, whatever. Faith. No faith. Because we are all made in the image of God and that's how I like to see people. (F, 55-59)

Whether people are Catholic or not, whether they believe in things or not. You know, I'm sort of happy with everybody doing you know, like—yeah, I mean, everybody's entitled to their thing, I think. So, that's fine. (M, 50-54)

I don't know many practising Catholics. It's almost unusual, I find, in my social circle, to meet somebody—I'm always surprised when I meet people who are practising Catholics, because I feel like that's something that's unusual. (F, 55-59)

Several participants talked about their observations of the faith of other Catholics, particularly raising concerns of a stagnation of faith development:

They seem to have finished their religious education when they leave school. That's where it seems to stop. Whereas to me, I think it's still developing and that's not being encouraged. They seem to like to keep us as children and do as we're told, and that's not working with a lot of people. (F, 40-44)

I think there are a lot of cultural Catholics; that is, been going to Mass; would always—that's how I was brought up. Still going. Or there's others, maybe cultural Catholics, they've got some sort of belief in God, in the presence of God there in the Mass. They've got a faith; who am I to question their faith, or whatever? But I don't think a lot of them have sought nourishment spiritually outside the framework of the church. (M, 70-74)

I would say a small percentage of Catholics in my age group genuinely have a strong faith. Most Catholics of my age don't. They are Catholic because of being born into it, being taught that as a child, and not knowing anything different and not choosing anything different, really. I don't think they let their faith help them make decisions in their life. (F, 35-39)

Some participants commented that they saw a broad range of Catholicism expressed among others, particularly across the generations:

Oh well, there's a range. There's ... there's some that's sort of like still 1950s and there's ... there's some that are more ... more modern in their approach. (M, 75-79)

I just think we have, there's these different generations, like the Catholic ... Australian Catholicism of the fifties, sixties, seventies, is very different to what it is now. Schools have a different push, and I think the priests feel it too, largely. Some of the priests can be really clerical, which is a bit of a backlash over ... away from that, let's bring it back to the core. So, I think people are just complicated, aren't they? (F, 40-44)

I'm glad that there are Catholics [laughs], but I think it's a broad church. I think ... there's not a sense of knowing the people that we go to Mass with, and I think that other churches sometimes do that better. (F, 45-49)

Some interviewees focused on specific qualities they had observed in Catholics they knew, including a sense of social justice, commitment to their faith or personal piety:

I've got some friends who are Catholic. And what I really like about them is that [they've] got this inherent sense of social justice. (M, 55-59)

... In some ways, I'm sometimes touched by people who go to church on their own, and it's they've married someone who's not Catholic. ... I find that quite moving, the commitment that Catholics will often commit even beyond the attendance with others. I've noted that as something I value. (F, 45-49)

They seem to hold their Catholicism much more strongly than Protestants do. Their cultural identity is very strong, in whatever way that is expressed. (F, 60-64)

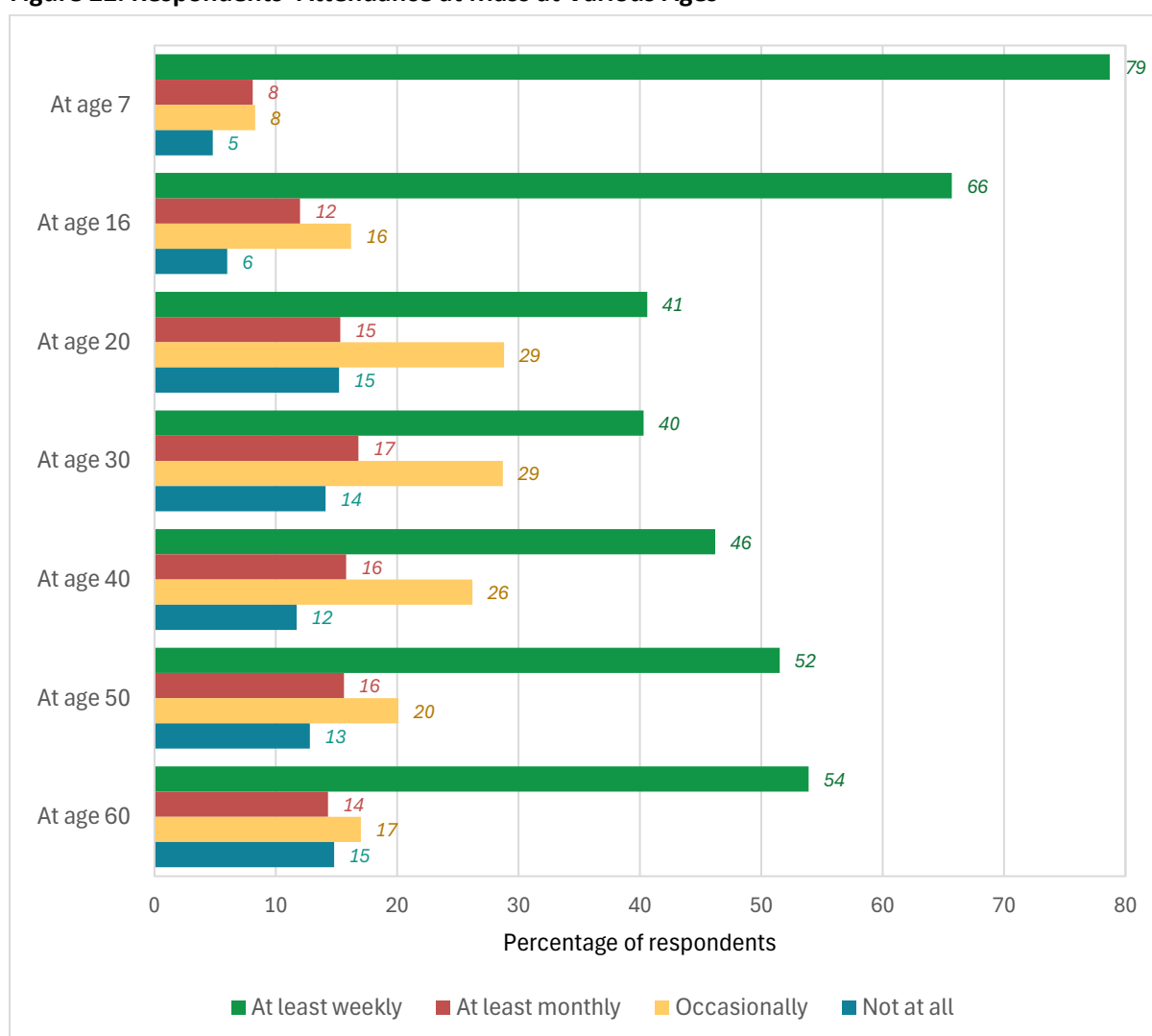
MASS ATTENDANCE PATTERNS

The central part of the Phase 1 survey asked two questions to determine respondents' attendance at Mass, both currently and throughout their lives. There were also further questions to determine their attendance at Sunday celebrations in the absence of a priest if Mass was not available.

Previous Attendance at Mass

The first question on Mass attendance asked respondents to identify how often they attended Mass at the ages of 7, 16, 20, 30, 40, 50 and 60. They were asked to select an option for each age from 'At least weekly', 'At least monthly', 'Occasionally' and 'Not at all', or were advised to select 'Not applicable' if they had not yet reached that age. In Figure 22 and the analysis, the 'Not applicable' responses have been removed in order to provide a clearer comparative analysis of Mass attendance trends at the various ages.

Figure 22. Respondents' Attendance at Mass at Various Ages



Nearly eight in ten (79%) respondents attended Mass at least once a week when they were seven years old. However, the frequency of weekly attendance progressively decreased as they got older until age 40, when weekly attendance increased again. Around 46 per cent of respondents attended Mass weekly at age 40, and slightly more than half of respondents attended weekly when they were aged 50 (52%) and 60 (54%).

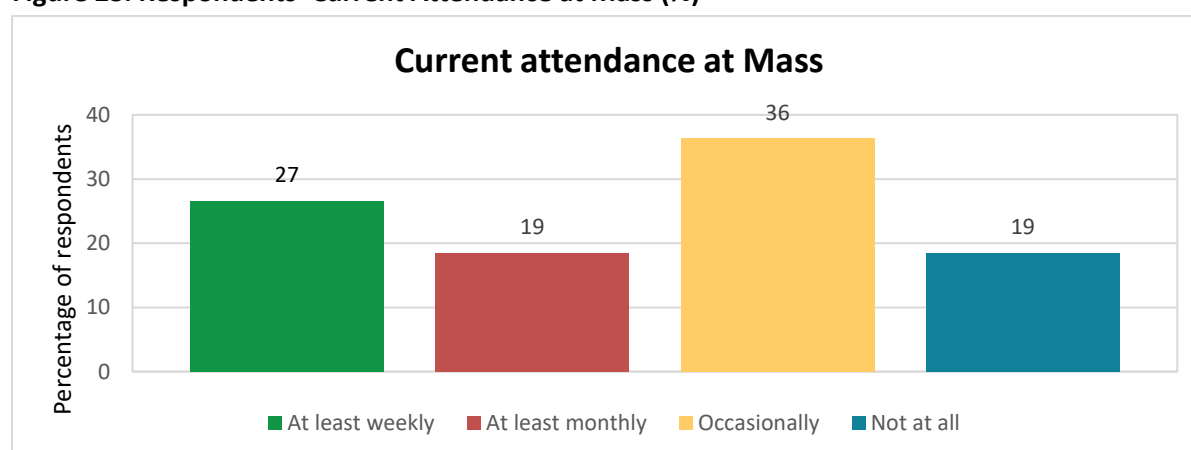
Only a small proportion of respondents did not attend Mass at all when they were aged 7 (5%) or 15 (6%). When respondents were aged between 20 and 60, many said they attended infrequently, while up to 15 per cent of respondents reported not attending at all. The proportion of respondents who said they attended at least monthly (but not at least weekly) increased from eight per cent at age 7 to 17 per cent at age 30, and occasional attendance rose from eight per cent at age 7 to 29 per cent at ages 20 and 30.

Current Attendance at Mass

The next question asked respondents ‘How often do you currently attend Mass?’ As shown in Figure 23 below, 27 per cent of respondents indicated that they attended Mass at least once a week, despite the survey information and introduction clearly stating that the target respondents were ‘Catholics in Australia who do not attend Sunday Mass on a weekly basis’. It was likely, therefore, that individuals in this group had either been sent the survey incorrectly, lacked clarity on the purpose of the survey, were attending weekly during weekdays rather than on Sunday, or wanted to complete the survey nevertheless, while commenting on the views of their family and friends who did not attend or attended less frequently.¹⁴⁵

Nineteen per cent of respondents reported attending Mass at least monthly, while 36 per cent attended occasionally. Nineteen per cent of respondents said they did not currently attend Mass at all.

Figure 23. Respondents’ Current Attendance at Mass (%)



¹⁴⁵ Based on their responses to further questions in the survey, weekly attenders who did not meet the criteria for this project were removed from the main analysis conducted for this study. More information is provided on page 74.

The attendance patterns of those who participated in the Phase 2 interviews were slightly different to those of the survey respondents. A greater proportion (39%) reported being weekly Mass attenders. Some participants had returned to weekly attendance after a while and spoke about their experience over that period. Others who continued to attend weekly provided information on behalf of family and friends who did not attend. Twenty-one per cent of interview participants reported attending at least monthly, 24 per cent attended occasionally, and 16 per cent did not attend Mass at all.

Changes to Mass Attendance Patterns

Interview participants were asked to describe when and how their Mass attendance patterns began to change. Participants who did not currently attend weekly reported both gradual and abrupt shifts. For some, the change unfolded over several years, often linked to life transitions, such as leaving school, starting university or moving to a new parish with a different priest. In several cases, the change was a series of events over time rather than a single moment. Some participants admitted they had never truly enjoyed going to Mass, while others said it became ritualistic and lost its meaning.

Other participants experienced sudden breaks, triggered by events like the COVID-19 pandemic, which closed churches and disrupted routines. While online Mass provided a temporary substitute, it did not restore previous habits. Post-pandemic, many did not return, citing health concerns, loss of routine, and a weakened connection to parish life. For some, this period confirmed that Mass attendance was no longer central to their spiritual identity. Family dynamics also played a role—some stopped going when children grew up and they could no longer attend as a family.

Personal crises also made continuing attendance untenable for some. Broader issues—such as sexual abuse scandals and the resurfacing of personal trauma—were deeply influential, leading some to make a deliberate decision to stop attending altogether. Others struggled with accepting Catholic teaching on certain issues, ultimately concluding that their relationship with the Church had fundamentally changed.

Celebrations in the Absence of a Priest

Another survey question asked respondents whether they attended Sunday celebrations in the absence of a priest when Mass was not available in their area. Eighty per cent of respondents indicated that they did not attend such liturgies.

The remaining 20 per cent were subsequently asked a follow-up question about their frequency of attendance at Sunday celebrations in the absence of a priest. Of those:

- 23 per cent said they attended at least weekly
- 10 per cent attend at least monthly
- 66 per cent attended occasionally or less

REASONS FOR NON-WEEKLY ATTENDANCE

One of the most critical questions posed to respondents in the survey was, 'What is the **main reason** you **do not** attend Mass at least weekly? (Q16)'.

A total of 78 respondents indicated that they attended weekly in response to this question. Some shared information about their past absence from Mass during specific periods of their lives but indicated that they had since begun attending regularly again. Some shared experiences of challenges faced when they missed a week. Others expressed a desire to attend more often (i.e., during the week) but gave various reasons for being unable to do so. A second cohort of 76 weekly attenders responded with 'No', 'Not sure' or 'Not applicable' to this question. The responses from these two cohorts were excluded from the analysis detailed in the sections below.

Previous research has shown that individuals generally name a mix of factors that prevent or discourage them from attending Mass regularly. Consequently, while the survey asked respondents about their 'main reason' for not attending weekly Mass, it also posed a follow-up question regarding 'other factors' that may have influenced their decision (Q17). An additional question (Q18) allowed respondents to submit more information about their previous replies if they wished.

The 'other factors' for non-weekly attendance mentioned in response to Q17 and Q18 were typically comparable to the 'main reasons' listed in response to Q16. For example, where a person had identified their primary reason in Q16, their secondary reasons shared in response to Q17 or Q18 were similar to one or more reasons provided by other participants in response to Q16.

In the subsequent sections, although the main analysis is based on Q16, feedback gathered from Q17 and Q18 has also been incorporated to compile a comprehensive list of reasons for lack of regular attendance at Mass.

To allow an easier comparison with the 2007 study, the primary reasons are organised into two categories:

1. 'Participant-centred' reasons
2. 'Church-centred' reasons

As with the findings of the 2007 study, it proved challenging to categorise the responses distinctly into two groups, as many individuals' personal experiences, attitudes and beliefs intertwined with their responses about the institutional aspects of the Church. For this reason, some overlaps may be apparent. In the following, two figures (numbers) are supplied under each 'participant-centred' or 'Church-centred' reason sub-heading. The first indicates the number of respondents who chose this as their 'Main reason' for not attending Mass in response to Question 16. The second figure represents the total number of respondents who cited this in response to Question 17 or 18 as an 'additional factor' for not attending Mass. The table below summarises the number of responses in both these sections for each of the reasons.

Table 2: Number of Respondents Citing Participant-centred or Church-centred Reasons as a Main Reason or Additional Factor for Non-weekly Attendance

	Main Reason	Additional Factor
‘Participant-centred’ reasons		
1. Going to Mass not a priority	500	298
2. Crisis of faith	137	158
3. Family or household-related issues	91	95
4. Travelling, weather or temporary illness	76	34
5. Chronic illness, infirmity or old age, transport	39	33
6. Attendance at another time or elsewhere	12	10
‘Church-centred’ reasons		
1. Liturgical issues	234	336
2. Challenges with the parish priest and other clergy	109	189
3. The misuse of power and authority in the Church	104	23
4. Structural factors	92	65
5. Concerns related to the parish as a community.	90	173
6. Disappointment in the Church	69	131
7. Lack of inclusivity or a sense of being excluded by Church rules	41	111
8. The irrelevance of the Church to life today	37	63

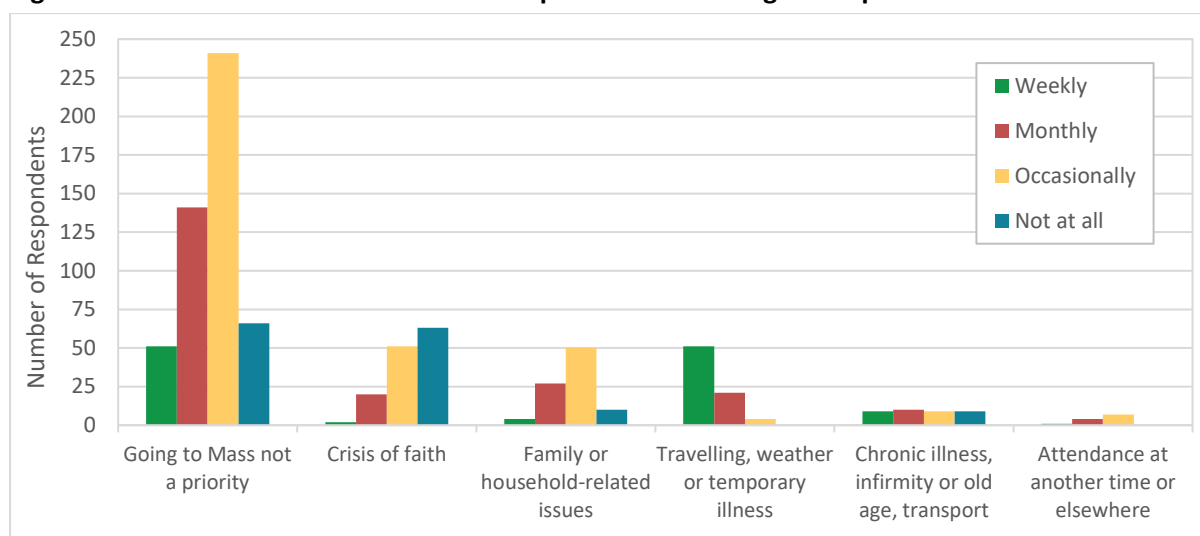
A more detailed analysis was conducted on the demographic characteristics of respondents who answered Question 16. This analysis identified the ‘main reasons’ given for not attending Mass regularly and categorised the results by demographic groups into two tables, shown in Appendices P and Q. Appendix P presents the demographic characteristics of survey respondents and indicates the percentage within each group who cited a participant-centred reason for not attending Mass regularly. Appendix Q shows the corresponding percentages for those who gave Church-centred reasons. The number of respondents in each group is shown in the column labelled ‘N’.

In the interviews, participants also shared greater details on the factors that influenced the change in their own or their family members’ Mass attendance patterns. Their responses are incorporated into the explanation of the various reasons provided in the sections that follow.

Participant-centred Reasons

‘Participant-centred’ reasons are related mainly to personal experiences, attitudes and beliefs. In the responses to Q16, a greater number of respondents provided participant-centred reasons than Church-centred ones. Figure 24 shows the current attendance patterns of all respondents who provided one or more participant-centred reasons. As the chart indicates, participant-centred reasons were most commonly provided by individuals who attended Mass occasionally or monthly. There were also several responses provided by those who attended weekly, although their reasons differed slightly from those in the other groups, and these are explained in the sections below.

Figure 24: Mass Attendance Patterns of Respondents Providing Participant-centred Reasons



Note: ‘No response’ category of current Mass attendance patterns has been removed from the above chart.

There were six main participant-centred reasons, which are numbered in order of numerical responses and described in detail in the sections below:

1. Going to Mass not a priority
2. Crisis of faith
3. Family- or household-related issues
4. Travelling, weather or temporary illness
5. Chronic illness, infirmity or old age, transport
6. Attendance at another time or elsewhere

As shown in the table in Appendix P, ‘Going to Mass not a priority’ was mentioned as the most common participant-centred reason for survey respondents across all demographic groups, with the highest proportions among those aged 30-49 (40%), those with a non-religious partner (37%) and those born overseas who had recently arrived (36%). Respondents born overseas in English-speaking countries (19%) and in non-English-speaking countries (21%) were less likely than those born in Australia (27%) to indicate that going to Mass was not a priority.

Of the other participant-centred reasons, ‘Crisis of faith’ was common for young people aged 18-29 (12%), while those on the other end of the age spectrum (70 and over) listed travelling, weather or

temporary illness (6%) and chronic or age-related illness (7%) as common reasons for irregular attendance at Mass. Travelling, weather or temporary illness was also common as a reason for those born in non-English speaking countries (10%), particularly those who had arrived in Australia between 2004 and 2013 (11%) or more recently (10%). 'Family or household-related issues' were commonly cited by those who did not indicate their sex (11%), those who attended an other non-government secondary school (11%), those whose partner had no religion (11%), those aged 30 to 49 years (9%) and those with a de facto marital status (9%).

1. Going to Mass not a priority

(Main reason: 500, Additional factor: 298)

More than half the respondents who provided participant-centred reasons indicated that their primary reason for not attending was that Mass was not a priority for them. As Figure 24 shows, these were particularly those who attended Mass occasionally, monthly or not at all. This was primarily because respondents faced a variety of competing priorities. Common examples included 'family time', 'weekend commitments', personal or children's 'sporting commitments', household chores and various social events or activities:

I would prefer to spend my time with family. (F, 35-39)

So many weekend commitments with children. They have sports, and as I work full-time, weekends are full of household chores, meal preparation and grocery shopping for the upcoming week. Honestly, it can be hard to fit these into the Mass availability times. (F, 45-49)

Young Children, demanding job, tertiary study, voluntary firefighter. (M, 40-44)

Commitments related to 'work' and 'study', especially among students, shift workers, or small business owners, were often highlighted, along with health concerns and responsibilities for family members. Some respondents did not identify a specific priority but mentioned several urgent 'events' or 'things' that appeared to take precedence:

I am a midwife and work a rotating roster... so I work every second Sunday ... different shifts. (F, 55-59)

I am a full-time carer to my husband, who became a high-level quadriplegic nine years ago. He is totally dependent on me and so find it difficult to commit to attending Mass easily. (F, 70-74)

Visiting children—babysitting grandchildren—looking after elderly mother. (F, 55-59)

Other events (e.g. work, festivals, holidays, big night out the night before etc.) take priority over attending Mass. (F, 30-34)

It does not satisfy a need enough for me to give up other things that might occur at the same time as Mass. (F, 55-59)

A secondary reason why Mass was not prioritised was the demanding nature of lifestyles. Respondents expressed that they were 'too busy' or mentioned having 'not enough time', and others pointed to 'exhaustion' and 'burnout' as concerns:

Burnout from the week of attending Uni and work part-time, cleaning my home, do[ing] chores and school assignments. (F, 40-44)

Life is too busy, and I need time for other duties, for family, for loved ones, or simply to myself. (M, 30-34)

Work and life commitments—sport, teenage son has a casual job, home chores. Exhausted. (F, 50-54)

An extremely busy lifestyle with work, three children, all their sports and we are a FIFO family. (F, 35-39)

Several respondents, particularly among those who never attended, noted that the Church no longer held any significance for them. Many in this group noted that they 'did not feel the need' to attend Mass, while others described the Church as 'uninteresting' or admitted being out of the habit or too lazy to go:

I don't feel the need. I don't identify as Catholic, but I'm unsure if I can rescind my 'membership' given I was baptised as a child? (M, 30-34)

I never seem to allocate the time. I'm just not interested. (F, 50-54)

I do not have a compelling reason to go and am not scared of the prospect of spending eternity in hell. (M, 30-34)

Laziness, time restraints and prioritising other things over attending Mass. (M, 55-59)

The shift in habits following COVID-19 was another factor contributing to why Mass was not prioritised by some respondents:

I attended Mass weekly, and at times daily, until [COVID-19] began. With the closure of Churches, I found it difficult to go to Mass again on a regular basis. (F, 30-34)

I was attending weekly as an altar server. After the churches closed during [COVID-19], I have never been back. (M, 20-24)

[COVID-19] and other infectious disease. I avoid congregations, as people have no sense of obligation to stay home if they are unwell, to avoid infecting others. I see it an inconvenience if I catch any illness and have to take time off work or worry about passing it to my family. (F, 40-44)

N/A. But I have heard extended family say that they don't because the restriction of not attending Mass on Sunday was still in place because the [Archdiocese] archbishop has not issued a statement saying otherwise. (F, 50-54)

William's Story

At the moment [I would attend Mass] probably about once a month. It used to be fairly regular ... three or four times a month, I guess. But I guess I put it on the back burner a little bit for kids moving into teenage years and [having]— I guess a lot more on my plate. So, this might be typical of my age and my working status, where I'm probably overworked, and doing a side hustle, working on a farm, and juggling married life and teenage kids. Yeah, it's all of that.

I couldn't pin it down to anything specifically, rather than just losing my interest in it. Or feeling less connected, perhaps with my local community ... I've known a lot of the older families and people at church for a very long time, and I just never really felt that connected. And as a kid growing up, we were always going to Mass, and they knew us. But we didn't have too many other families the same age or the same situation. I guess that we were always seen to be very much the smaller, more minority demographic, and I still feel that way.

My views on Mass attendance? Yeah, it's probably something I think is a good thing I should be doing more of, but I'm not sure if that's out of obligation or out of recognising my faith, and [that] I need to celebrate the Eucharist. And I know that's something I might be missing out on. But it's a difficult question to answer, to be honest.

I certainly see the need to be part of that community. By believing, sharing that faith, and I'd certainly say that I believe in the Eucharist, obviously. And that's important to me as well, but I'm just not sure why ... well, I guess having a busy lifestyle, not pushing it to the top of the priority list. Then it's fallen away for reasons that I can't quite explain ...

If I had more time, maybe I would [attend Mass more often]. I guess it's certainly a factor. If I was ... a little bit more inspired by the community and the priest, I guess, inspired is probably not the right word, but [I] might be feeling more connected to the community and the priests. I'm not looking for inspiration as such, I'm more looking for connection, and I certainly haven't felt that with my parish priests or community as much as I used to. That, or maybe I'm just thinking more about it and looking for that connection more and not getting it.

2. Crisis of faith

(Main reason: 137, Additional factor: 158)

A significant number of respondents, but particularly those who reported that they currently do not attend at all, pointed to a crisis of faith as their reason for not attending. For many in this group, the Catholic faith no longer held meaning, with some expressing a loss of belief and others citing conflicts with Catholic teachings:

[I] no longer believe in the institution of the Church, I believe in God, but each person can follow their own faith journey. (F, 40-44)

I do not fully identify with Catholic beliefs and rituals but still consider myself 'Christian'. (F, 40-44)

I don't have a personal faith or believe in what Catholicism says. (F, 30-34)

Many reasons: lack of women in positions, sheer volume of child abuse cases by clergy, I believe faith is a personal thing, the Church's interpretation of the bible as a literal document. (F, 65-69)

The Mass has become a rote system of beliefs which for me are no longer applicable. I do not now believe that the bread and wine turn into the real body and blood of Christ. (F, 80+)

Loss of belief in supernatural matters. Do God, Heaven, Miracles, the After Life, etc. really exist? (M, 80+)

At the age of 68, I came to the conclusion that I no longer wished to be part of this organised religion. (F, 70-74)

A number of respondents with varying attendance patterns said they no longer believed that weekly Mass was necessary. Many believed that attending did not make them better Catholics, while others reasoned that they had better alternatives to expressing their faith more authentically:

I did not think it was important or an obligation. I thought I can just pray wherever I was, in my own heart. (F, 35-39)

I now do not feel it's a Sin if I do not Attend. Living a good life. Caring, [compassion] for others is more important. (F, 70-74)

Don't find it improves my relationship with God or the Church and is inaccessible/time-consuming for every week. (F, 18-19)

I object to the concept that it is obligatory to attend Mass every Sunday. Sunday liturgies are often not prayerful, not inclusive, not challenging, not joyful and not consoling. (M, 80+)

It's no longer central to my faith journey. The rituals seem ossified and lacking in contemporary relevance. The Mass serves a point of connection with other seekers, and I

appreciate participating occasionally but as an experience of connection to God is no longer central. (F, 65-69)

Many respondents noted that they experienced a connection with God through various means, often highlighting ‘personal’ connections or those found in ‘nature’:

I go to Mass when I need to connect with my parish community. There are other ways I feel close to God—my prayer life takes on many forms, including being in nature. (F, 50-54)

I regularly attended weekly Mass for 55 years, and assisted in many ways through various ministries, including reading, Eucharistic minister, ... helping with first communion and confirmation organisation etc. It became overwhelming, as less and less people joined the parish roster, and I was doing more and more support jobs each week. My husband and I travelled for 12 months, and during this time away from weekly participation in Mass I found more meaningful and special ways to connect with God in nature and through life experiences. This has become my new way of praying now. (F, 55-59)

I believe in God and maintain my faith, but I don't feel the need to attend Mass to live a good and moral life. My relationship with God is personal, and I can nurture it without the guidance of a priest. (M, 40-44)

At the moment, during full-time work and study as a single parent, I choose to praise and pray at home and at work. (F, 50-54)

Michaela's Story

So, for the last [20+ years], I've been on this journey to try and find out why my faith was destroyed. I guess it would be obvious, but naively I just felt back then that when I was ready, I would just pop into the church that [would be] welcoming with open arms, and my faith would be restored in that environment because that was my experience as a child.

Because I think if you lose something that's just so significant and so precious you never stop searching because faith in God enables you to make sense of the whole world. There is an overarching sense of dread that lives within you; I've felt broken ever since I was [abused as a child], without really knowing it back then.

In terms of faith, in terms of the existence of God, it's as if there was this radical rupture and a death. I don't know how else to describe it. For me, I don't believe in God, I don't disbelieve, I'm not an agnostic. So, there's a hole, there's a nothing there. It's the absence of something that I believe existed and I didn't do anything. I didn't make any decisions because I can't make any decisions. I feel like I've lived my life in Holy Saturday ever since the abuse. I keep trying to find the person I was meant to be.

But for me, [the priest who abused me] was God. We were taught he was the closest person on earth to God. And so obviously whatever he said came from God. I did whatever he wanted me to do because this is what God wanted.

... I wrote him a letter ... And it was awful. He wrote back and he said, "I'm very surprised that you were able to remember my address" and I don't know if there were other things he said, you know, but at the end he said, "please do not contact me again". ... That was when God left, because God told me not to come back, not to contact him. ... I thought that that was the moment. That was the moment that God left, that God died.

... Because people try and tell me, "Oh, you're the only one with the spiritual problems, all the other victims just simply hate God and hate the Church." And I said, "No, they don't." I said, "That is symbolic of the trauma." Underneath all of that anger, there are really broken people. And if you focus on ... the external behaviour, and judge them on behaviour, you're missing the point because you're focusing in on their behaviour, not their true identity which is intrinsically linked to their spirituality.

... And I think it's even worse now due to the fact that I believe many religious and clergy suffer from moral injury. They have watched their Church be razed to the ground literally by horrific stories about how the hierarchy of the Church has mishandled this issue and they just can't bear to hear about it anymore because they're powerless to do anything.

3. Family or household-related issues

(Main reason: 91, Additional factor: 95)

Spending time with family and caring for sick members were previously highlighted as conflicting priorities for Mass. Numerous respondents reported a few additional family or household-related reasons for not attending. The majority of these responses came from individuals who attended Mass occasionally or monthly.

Many young families faced challenges in supervising their children during Mass. Respondents observed that numerous parishes lacked space for children to move around or enforced long periods of absolute silence that were challenging for children to manage. Others mentioned unsympathetic congregations, with parents often feeling embarrassed or needing to apologise frequently for their children's behaviour:

I have a young family and find it challenging going to church with them. It's quite an anxious time as they are little and don't want to sit still, and I'm embarrassed when they run around or yell/scream. (F, 25-29)

As a single mother with two young sons, taking them to a 6 pm service on a Saturday night requires so much work from me to keep them settled and focused and not disrupt the celebration for others, that I do not get anything out of it, and they don't really either. Praying at home together is much more meaningful for them. (F, 35-39)

I have multiple children (including twin babies) and there is no physical space in the local parish for a pram. We wouldn't be able to attend as a family. (F, 30-34)

Some families faced challenges in getting their children to Mass on time, while others indicated that they were unable to attend altogether because their children were 'tired', 'busy' or uninterested:

I used to attend weekly when my children were at the local Catholic primary school. Going to church every Sunday was important to us as a family—it calmed us all down and reset us for the week. However, as my children got to tween/early adolescent years, they changed their views and became more resistant to going. (F, 55-59)

Sometimes my children are very disagreeable, hard to get ready and it's easier to watch Mass on YouTube. (F, 40-44)

Saturday Mass 6:30 pm (October–March) 6:00 pm (April–September) are not convenient times for a young family. When my children were babies, they woke at 5 am every day, 7pm [was] their bedtime, and as they were tired leading up to church time, I wouldn't consider attending church as they were always irritable at that time of the night or required feeding/bathing etc, before bedtime... Now that my boys are older (10 and 6), we can travel up to 2 hours for kids' sports most Saturdays (4-hour round trips) as we live in a small country town, and the kids are often worn out and tired when we return and want to stay home. (F, 35-39)

Respondents also reported difficulties attending when their partner or other family members were unsupportive. Some respondents with non-Catholic partners also shared their challenges:

My adolescent children do not choose to attend with me, so this discourages me from attending. (F, 45-49)

My wife doesn't like to attend weekly, which means that I am leaving my family every time I attend Mass. The compromise is that I go twice a month. I did check this in confession, and this was the priest's suggestion. (M, 35-39)

Sometimes, my extended family have events, and because they don't see my attendance as important, [they] schedule so that it is not possible for me to attend. (F, 45-49)

Other commitments, my wife is not Catholic so [it's] harder to bring the family along. (M, 40-44)

My husband is not Catholic and doesn't share my faith. (F, 50-54)

Other household-related issues included complex living situations, the lack of family members attending, and events, such as moving home, dealing with family breakdowns, or the death of a family member, which were cited as reasons for not attending:

I've moved out of home and it's not convenient for my situation where the household I am currently residing in are not of the same religion as myself and do not share the same morals as myself. Although I would love to go back to Church Masses on Sundays ... it just doesn't seem practical. (F, 25-29)

We moved away from our regular parish when I was a teen. I transferred to a public school when we moved, and we never got involved with the local parish. (F, 35-39)

Ever since my grandma passed away, I have stopped attending Mass in general. (F, 18-19)

I'm a university student living on a college with nobody that goes to Church, so I find it hard to go on my own as opposed to when I went with my whole family and friends every week before I moved. (F, 18-19)

I do not have friends or family who attend. It became quite lonely on my own. (F, 60-64)

Grace's Story

So, I live with three kids, and we have a very strong faith. We go to church every week. I've just found that there's a lot of problems with the Church and particularly with bringing the kids to church. It's hard. Like the Church isn't open armed about the children ... And with the way the Church is structured, like with its scheduling for Masses, it's exactly the same as the day I was born, and I'm [in my fifties], and it's like, "Dudes, you need to move, you need to move faster than what you're doing."

... recently, ... my little kids here, they're like, "No, do we have to [go], you know, we don't want to". And I'm like, "Really? It's just one hour, one hour of your life this week and you know, just to go and be with God, you know, give him one hour." And that's how I sort of put it to them, "Just one hour. What's the big whoop?" But I mean it is hard for them and there's nothing in it for them. Do you know what I mean? Like kids, kids want stuff ... you can't step out the door like "I'm hungry" because they're angling for an ice cream or something like that.

... when people have a breakdown in a relationship, when there's children involved ... the Australian Government believes that all children ... have a right to have a relationship with their mother and their father.

So, every Wednesday, the kids are not going to be in their home. They're going to be at the other parent's home ... And every second week, they're going to be at their other parent's home. So, he's not Catholic. ... He doesn't go to church. He never stopped us from going to church, and he never had any gripe about us going to church. He's not against God or anything like that. He's a nice enough person, but [my daughter] can't get to church that weekend, right?

But Christmas holidays, any school holidays also ... each parent gets half-half. You know that's the rule. ... So, on Christmas, it's split because ... each parent wants to have their kids at Christmas.

But that's where the Catholic Church [says] "Oh, everyone should be at church." ... They're not thinking. Hello, throughout the world, not all marriages last for 60 years anymore ... there's children involved and sometimes multiple children. And the kids don't have the opportunity to go to church because they're abiding by the rules, the court ruling, but the Catholic Church is like, "What? We didn't know they did that!"

4. Travelling, weather or temporary illness

(Main reason: 76, Additional factor: 34)

Several respondents, especially those from groups that usually attend weekly or monthly, cited travel, bad weather, and temporary illness as reasons for missing Mass. For those who attended weekly, this was usually an occasional occurrence:

Illness, or holidaying in a location and don't know the church, holidaying overseas. (F, 75-79)

I do attend weekly, unless illness prevents me from joining. (F, 60-64)

For those who attended monthly or occasionally, these reasons for missing Mass were more common:

I often go away for the weekends and therefore am unable to attend Mass. (F, 40-44)

I always attempt to attend Sunday Mass. But while travelling, which I do a lot, I find it much harder than in the past to be motivated to find a church. (M, 70-74)

The liturgical choir I sing in only sings fortnightly; at other times, I travel. (M, 70-74)

5. Chronic illness, infirmity or old age, transport

(Main reason: 39, Additional factor: 33)

Some respondents across all groups reported reasons of chronic illness, mobility issues, poor health due to old age, or a lack of transport as reasons for not attending Mass:

I am 80 years old and no longer drive. I rely on a walking frame to help me walk. I watch Mass on Sundays at six am and donate to that. (F, 80+)

My wife is very sick with Stage 4 Breast Cancer throughout her body, and I do not want to leave her. (Sex unknown, 65-69)

I attend an average of three times per month. Also, my wife has MS, which limits her ability to be always able to attend as we are now both over 70 years old. (M, 70-74)

Age [87], health and given up driving licence, living out of town [20 kms], no public transport. (F, 80+)

6. Attendance at another time or elsewhere

(Main reason: 12, Additional factor: 10)

Finally, a few respondents indicated that they did not participate in Sunday Mass every week, as they chose to attend on weekdays at different venues and events, including those of other denominations:

I work in a Catholic school-based organisation, and having Mass with a community that knows and supports me is more important than celebrating Mass with strangers in my local parish. (M, 35-39)

Masses other than Saturday vigil or Sunday are not considered meeting our obligations. In this cold weather, midday on Fridays suits me. (F, 75-79)

I go to a different church that isn't Catholic, I attend each week, however. (M, 25-29)

Michael's Story

I'm currently a weekly attender but not in the Catholic Church. ... I'm in four different Catholic reform movements, but [the non-Catholic denomination I attend is] actually doing everything we're advocating for. They've ... restored their married priesthood, they've restored their female priesthood ... and they're very welcoming. We have three of our most active couples in that parish, gay married couples, and they're welcomed. Nobody turns their head. And everybody, they have an average congregation of about 65. Every person sitting in a seat is out doing something. They're putting their face into action every week. And I thought, really, this is the community.

Like last Sunday, I didn't attend. I've been sick over the last week. I wasn't able to attend to get down there. Seven phone calls, "How are you? Are you all, right?" Now, last year, I missed eight weeks in a row at [my former parish]. Only one person rang me up, and I worship with the same group of people every week. The only person who rang me up was the guy I worked with, one of my colleagues I worked with ... No one else rang me up.

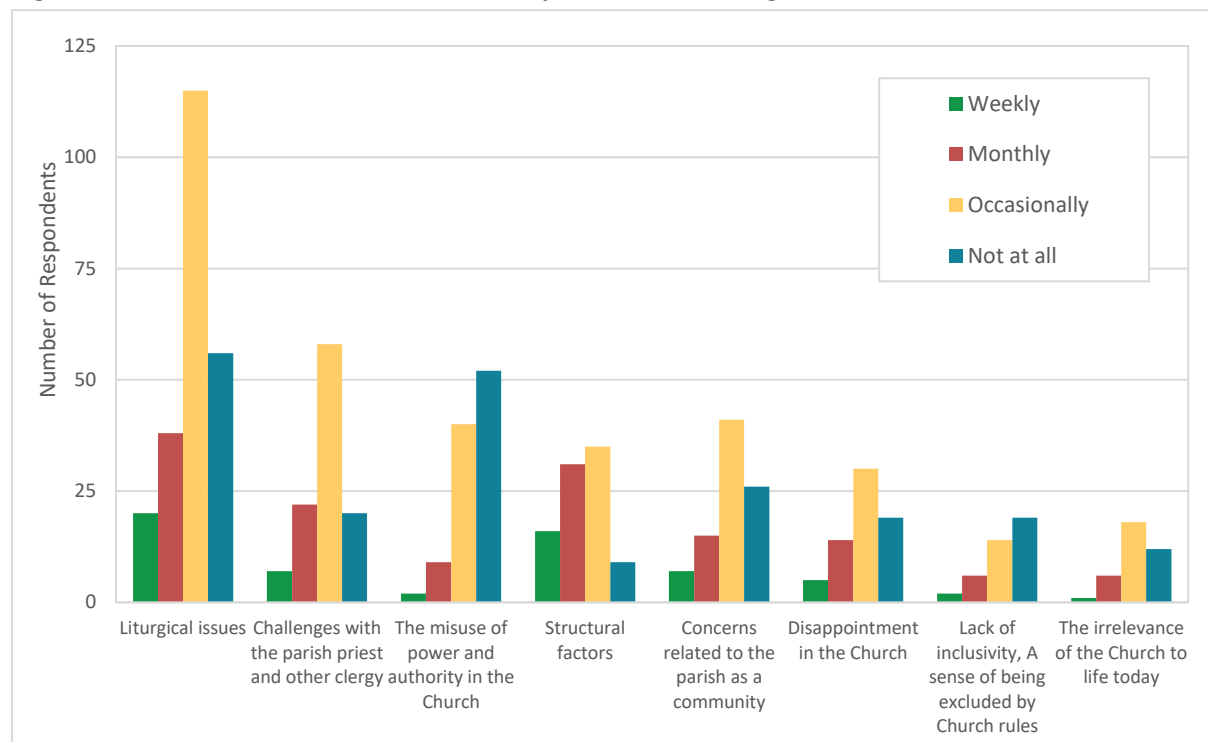
Well, [when I left the Catholic Church] I thought it was an abrupt change. Suddenly, I'm sort of sitting there and I went over and then on Easter Sunday, my female minister [at my current church], said, "Did you feel guilty not being in the Catholic service tomorrow?" And my instinctive answer was, "No, I was with family." And that was when it suddenly hit me. When I went back to talk to one—I have several priest chaplains—and when I went back to talk to them, and I talked to the Catholic ones and said, "Look, I'm going to change my communities." And they said, "It's been happening for a long time. You've been discontent." They said, "This change in you has been coming for the last 14 years."

I've been to Masses for my granddaughter and funerals and stuff since, but one of the last regular Masses I attended, we had an eight-minute video telling us the correct etiquette to receive Eucharist. And we're all looking at each other saying, "We've been receiving Eucharist for 60 years, and you're telling us how we should do it?" And this is the sort of disconnect that's going on. And saying, "by some American?" And theologically, you know, theologically it wasn't correct. In terms of Eucharistic theology, it wasn't correct anyway. So, it's just frustrating. But I had the courage to walk away, but I know a lot of people just stopped going ... and haven't gone to another church.

Church-centred Reasons

‘Church-centred’ reasons mainly relate to institutional elements of the Church that respondents indicated affected their attendance. Figure 25 shows the current attendance patterns of respondents who provided one or more Church-centred reasons in response to Q16. As the chart shows, these reasons were most commonly provided by individuals who attended Mass occasionally or not at all, and others who attended monthly.

Figure 25: Mass Attendance Patterns of Respondents Providing Church-centred Reasons



Note: ‘No response’ category of current Mass attendance patterns has been removed from the above chart.

There were eight main Church-centred reasons, which are numbered in order of importance and described in detail in the sections below:

1. Liturgical issues
2. Challenges with the parish priest and other clergy
3. The misuse of power and authority in the Church
4. Structural factors
5. Concerns related to the parish as a community
6. Disappointment in the Church
7. Lack of inclusivity or a sense of being excluded by Church rules
8. The irrelevance of the Church to life today

Although fewer respondents provided a ‘Church-centred’ reason in response to Q16, a larger proportion named one or more Church-centred reasons as additional factors in Q17 for not attending Mass regularly. Of these, many responses expressed ‘Disappointment in the Church’, had ‘Concerns

related to the parish as a community' or reported a 'Lack of inclusivity, A sense of being excluded'. The responses provided to Q18 followed a similar pattern to those in Q17.

As shown in Appendix Q, within Church-centred reasons, 'Liturgical issues' was mentioned as the most common response across nearly all demographic groups, with the highest proportions among respondents working in trade occupations (15%), those in a de facto relationship (15%) and those with a Christian (not Catholic) partner (15%). Those who listed 'Challenges with the parish priest or other clergy' as a reason were mainly those who preferred not to state their sex (17%), those who were widowed (9%) and those who attended an other non-government secondary school (8%). 'The misuse of power and authority in the Church' was most commonly listed by those in a de facto relationship (13%), while 'Structural factors' was most common for those in a trade occupation (8%). The demographic groups who listed 'Concerns related to the parish as community' as a reason were mainly young people aged 18-29 (10%) and those who had never married (9%).

1. Liturgical issues

(Main reason: 234, Additional factor: 336)

A significant proportion of respondents, especially those who attended Mass occasionally or not at all (see Figure 25), cited liturgical issues as the main reason for their absence from Mass. Many respondents in this category characterised the Mass as 'boring', 'depressing' and 'uninspiring'. Some individuals expressed that Mass was 'not relevant' to them, that they 'don't connect' with it, or that they 'got nothing out of it':

Because I don't always get enough in return spiritually and mentally for the time I invest in Mass. Some of it is very ritualistic and the sermons are totally out of context or boring or long. It doesn't stimulate me intellectually or spiritually. I feel if I spend that time in nature or doing another spiritual practice like meditation or self-reflection, or even charity, I will feel much closer to God. Mass just seems like a social thing to do for Catholics of a certain age, cultural or social background. (F, 35-39)

It doesn't do anything for me in general. I like to go once or twice around Christmas or Easter to make those occasions more special and with the hopes of seeing some community members I am friends with. But the other times of the year, it is boring, and I don't feel connected to the stories. I feel like I have to fake it to take meaning out of the stories. (Demographics unknown)

The Gospel readings have messages that are still relevant today; however, they are often lost in a long and boring homily. Often you walk away from Mass feeling guilty that you haven't lived up to what is expected of you as a Catholic. There is enough sadness and depression in the world without coming away from Mass each week feeling sad. Over time I have made a decision that I didn't need this weekly sadness in my life. (M, 60-64)

I do not feel uplifted or connected to Mass, it is not contemporary and often not relatable. The traditional nature of Mass loses energy and enthusiasm. (F, 40-44)

I was forced to go to Mass every Sunday and every holy day of obligation as a child. It became boring and a chore to me. So, I have grown up with almost a resentment for it. (F, 50-54)

A secondary issue connected to the liturgy related to its structure or specific elements. Several respondents remarked on the quality and structure of the liturgy, describing it as 'bad', 'outdated' or 'rigid', while others felt that the length of the service was 'too long':

Mass in the current format does not always align with how I want to express my faith and connect with my community. (F, 30-34)

I strongly believe that the structure of Mass has served a purpose but is so structured and routine without flexibility to share inspirational stories where God has been seen in their lives. I would love to see a Mass without responses, and where all people can feel welcomed to attend without stressing about when to stand, sit, and respond. (F, 25-29)

Mass takes too long—if Mass only went for half an hour we would be regular attendees. (M, 45-49)

The Mass in this diocese is different. Too much singing and band. Too 'Hillsong'. I like moments for reflection, silence through the Mass. (M, 55-59)

A number of respondents expressed dissatisfaction with the language used during Mass. Other individual concerns included the absence of communion under both species and insufficient sanitisation prior to the priest distributing communion:

I find the revised language used for Mass is discordant with common English. I much preferred the previous version. (M, 60-64)

Mass is no longer energising, engaging or inspiring. Homilies are literal interpretations. Theology is outdated—especially many aspects of the Gloria and Creed e.g. limited images who and where God is, does not take into account the New Science. Stages of consciousness limited to Mythic or Rational levels. (M, 70-74)

The wording of the ceremony (the Mass) is too old-fashioned and some of it I don't understand the meaning. The way some priests speak is too old-fashioned and irrelevant. If I don't understand then how are kids going to get it? (F, 60-64)

The Mass in its current format does not provide me with a spiritual experience. The prayers/texts are formulaic; the language does not correspond with everyday life; the return to 'religious' language as against everyday speech is an irritation. Consubstantiation? Really? If anything, this revised version of the Liturgy places a distance between the priest and congregation. (F, 75-79)

Hand sanitisation and hygiene. I want to see the priest and his helpers to also practice this and see this as an important practice. There are many vulnerable people in the community who can't afford to get sick. Also, I don't like how some people insist on receiving the sacrament in their mouth given by the priest. It's disgusting and promotes cross infection. (F, 40-44)

Inadequate homilies emerged as the third factor contributing to issues surrounding the liturgy, with remarks indicating that the sermon was perceived as too ‘boring’, ‘long’ or ‘outdated’. For some, the content was not Catholic enough; for others, it was too ‘traditional’. Poor formation of priests, the lack of quality in content and delivery were also cited as factors:

The sermons/teachings being delivered by my local parish can be too traditional in a way that is not reflective of the current age and society. They can be discriminatory and out of touch, and whilst my faith is important to me, it is also important to me that I stand by my own beliefs and values and understanding of what is right and wrong. The Church as an institution is not integral to my faith and spirituality when God can be found everywhere. (F, 20-24)

I thought the homily was supposed to connect the message of the gospel/Jesus’ life with everyday life not telling a story of 2000 years ago. Why don’t we discuss the hard issues—homelessness, refugees, wars etc., etc.? How to make the world a better place for those that come after us—that is never spoken about. There is no dialogue—just talking at! (F, 60-64)

Many of the presiding priests’ homilies and approach to the Mass do not engage with me or relate to my past or current experiences. Some of the issues come from the cleric having been formed in a very different culture. However, there is also a tendency among the young ‘home grown’ priests, to be very conservative and tend to rigidity in their interpretation and application of the readings. Conversely, there are some extraordinary clerics whose homilies are inspiring to hear and challenge me to reflect. (M, 60-64)

The discussion highlighted concerns regarding the Mass not being considered ‘age-appropriate’, with several respondents expressing that the service felt ‘outdated’ or ‘old-fashioned’, rendering it unrelatable for young children. The absence of involvement from younger individuals and families was also a contributing factor:

Deadly dull, pre-Vatican II. No spiritual nourishment. Small elderly congregation, no young families, no children. (F, 80+)

It also doesn’t hit the mark with the kids/younger generation. The readings are not at the age-appropriate level and the explanations also don’t hit the mark. Probably should be shorter also. Whilst not Catholic— have a look at the TV series 7th Heaven— that’s what we should be aiming for. (F, 40-44)

My children really dislike going. It is set up for old people, in old ways and is not engaging them. (M, 40-44)

Finally, several respondents expressed concerns regarding the music at Mass, with some feeling that the singing was too outdated, while others thought it lacked a Catholic essence or did not align with their personal preferences:

Went to Mass at our local church—[Parish name]—on Sunday [Date]. Walked out during the opening hymn, which wasn’t even a hymn. It was some kind of worship song or praise song—not at all in the Catholic tradition—and played through a CD player or tape recorder or some

other mechanical thing. Was dreary and insipid and totally off-putting, especially to men. The Catholic Church has 2000 years of musical tradition behind it and yet we're served up this sort of 1970s trek. It's stuff like this that sends people (like me) off to the Latin Mass or away from Mass attendance altogether. (M, 50-54)

I used to enjoy Mass. Now it feels very long; is for and is run by the elderly; too much music that is very unenjoyable and not inspiring—sung by a choir that does not sound pleasant. (F, 50-54)

My kids don't like the singing, so we often go during the week if we can. I feel the same sometimes, I appreciate the volunteers who do sing and play instruments but feel it goes on too long at times. (F, 45-49)

My parish stopped allowing music to be played at my parent's church and we had been heavily involved in the music all my life. I realised I mainly liked it for the music. (F, 50-54)

Other miscellaneous factors included the lack of heating in churches, lack of understanding of the Mass, frequent requests for money, and issues related to the Acknowledgment of Country:

Churches are freezing in winter—very uncomfortable. (F, 60-64)

In many cases, it feels like the Catholic mentality is a 'drive-in' one ... get your piece of 'bread', pray, and go home. There is little understanding of the breadth of Eucharist. (M, 70-74)

Money offering—at my church, this happens twice through Mass. In this current financial climate, twice is too much and makes the feeling of guilt and shame very prominent if you can't offer much. [It] should only be passed around once. (F, 35-39)

The ACBC incorporating Indigenous acknowledgements into everything. Every time this is done, you exclude the majority of parishioners. I am sick of saying sorry for things I haven't done. (F, 60-64)

I think it sad that my parish priest forbids me from providing an Indigenous Acknowledgement of Country before Sunday Mass. I believe that the Australian Catholic Church should be celebrating Indigenous reconciliation action. I would like our parish priest to tell me what part of Catholic social teaching prevents me from acknowledging the dispossession of land and families, and truth-telling about the genocide. (M, 70-74)

Peter's Story

I used to be involved much in the Church playing music every second or third Sunday—I think—a few years' ago—so two or three times a month; gradually brought that down to once a month, but then I stopped that last March, last year. ... That was part of my decision to no longer attend the liturgy in any parish; and that was a big decision that was a long time coming. ... To the extent that when I advised my daughters of my decision last year, I told them "I'd rather not, even though it's your decision, have a funeral in a Catholic Church; I'd like it outdoors somewhere in the environment." I've found not many priests really conduct a good ceremony when it comes to that. They're quite unskilled at it, mostly.

... so, music ministry, it was always a bit of a battle in a sense, because it seemed like most of the priests we had, all they wanted to do was to get through the Mass, whereas I wanted to enliven it with the music, rather than us worry too much that it might add five minutes to the whole thing, you know. To make it more meaningful, more uplifting.

... And when I looked at it, there was a whole range of things that I wrote to the parish priest about ... his leadership style, like coming in and establishing a Parish Pastoral Council and wanting to get rid of everyone, start again. I think he wanted to start with people more like-minded who might not challenge him.

... In essence, I cannot put my time or energies into a liturgy that overall and substantively is not drawing, energising, or inspiring me to continue to attend at this time. I am at peace and relieved that I have finalised this decision about my way forward.

... I think if it could be an enriching, enlivening celebration, and be up-to-date in its theology and its images of God and its cosmology, it could be a roaring success. Although I do tend to think you'll form community more by ... getting back to the first disciples / Apostles; small Masses in houses, you know? And yeah—if you could have that, and you could build on that—once a month, people could come together in a parish sort of thing, but in between, they have all these small groups—and there's a sense of belonging there that's not there in having only the larger group.

2. Challenges with the parish priest and other clergy

(Main reason: 109, Additional factor: 189)

Numerous respondents, particularly those who attended occasionally, reported various issues with their parish priest, including conflicts regarding the priest's demeanour and/or decisions. A few respondents had challenges with clergy in general. Changes in parish priests and an inability to get along with the new priest often prompted individuals to stop attending Mass:

[In the] last few years, [I] saw a dreadful priest—the way he dealt with people, spoke to them publicly in Mass, talked about people by putting them down, would get angry on the altar because the people would not do things his way, then bless the wine and bread in an angry state, etc. I became extremely disillusioned by his dictatorship power. I gave it all up. (M, 65-69)

As a family we would attend Mass most weeks and we were heavily involved in parish life. Sadly, our Parish Priest finished up at the Parish and was replaced. Our new priest (who has since been removed) was extremely conservative and didn't respect or understand our Parish. He in no way acknowledged our baptismal rights and slowly removed the voice from parish life. (M, 50-54)

The Parish Priest upset our family but never came near us for 18 months until we stopped contributing to the Parish Planned Giving program. He has bullied and upset some of our friends in the Parish, especially women who express their opinions. (M, 75-79)

My child had a terrible experience at our local Catholic school, and I sought advice from our local priest who was very rude. (F, 55-59)

I attend as much as possible but avoid when I know a certain priest is celebrating the Mass. Because of their conduct outside the Mass is appalling. (M, 45-49)

The discussion also highlighted cultural differences and language barriers stemming from priests who were born in other countries as a reason for changing parishes or dropping out of attending altogether:

Priest from ESL background is very difficult to understand. I do not feel inspired by the message extrapolated from the Gospel reading. I get more from Liturgy of the Word, where lay people read a reflection that makes sense and is pertinent to everyday life. (F, 55-59)

The priest, I cannot understand him. They are mostly priests from overseas, I can't understand them and they don't have much personality. Not to say they are not lovely people, however. (F, 40-44)

As I have matured in life I have had more and more trouble relating to the priests in our parish. I find the majority of parish priests in our rural area have English as a second language so are hard to understand and also have trouble understanding the parish when communicating with them. Our new parish priest, while English-speaking, seems to have no

idea about the reality and stresses of everyday life. When I attended Mass, he acts very pious and superior to the parishioners while telling everyone they will be going to hell if they do not attend Church every Sunday or pray every day or if they get a divorce. I have no interest in this type of interpretation of being a Catholic which I feel is very old school and not at all in keeping with the times. (F, 45-49)

The two priests in my parish, who had been there for many years, left due to retirement and transfer interstate. They were replaced by a trio of [name of culture] priests who don't live in the presbytery. They come and say Mass, then leave. There is little engagement with the congregation, and they are overtly misogynistic and patronising, as well as controlling and downright insulting. I feel that I am not welcome anymore and all my friends who were parishioners have either ceased attending Mass or moved to other parishes seeking a more inclusive experience. (F, 60-64)

Other issues include a lack of intellectual engagement and an inability to connect with the priest:

Well, the religious and their lives, and the faithful, are also not very inspiring. No-one around me seems to be able to lead by example. A lot of them seem to just be following things out of blind faith. They are unwilling to debate, look within or examine the shortcomings. It's like a cult of churchgoers who cannot see beyond dogma. I feel, often, that it's all a bit insulting to my own (perceived) intelligence. I do enjoy the quiet time I sometimes spend [time] alone in church [having] quite earnest conversations with God, so it's not like I question or am faithless about everything. (F, 35-39)

After three years of being involved in readings, presentation of gifts and choir, [the] priest doesn't even know my name. (F, 75-79)

It is hard to form a relationship with the priests when they change weekly, and you may not see the same priest for 6 weeks or more. (F, 30-34)

Emilia's Story

I feel very strongly about the Church. About things at Church driving people away, because that's what's happened. My children were driven away, I've been driven away, ... Because there are so many people who are out there, who are absolutely heartbroken, who just can't come to church anymore.

I'm going most weeks, but every so often I think no, I just can't cope with this, I might walk out. In fact, I walked out during a homily, one day. ... It's kind of made me think differently about Mass and the importance of attending Mass. So, I think I was going in order to go to the Mass. Now I go to be a part of a community.

... we got this ... priest who was a total dictator. He was parish priest suddenly. Whose decision was it that we suddenly have a parish priest and not a parish team? Nothing was explained. That was just the way it is, he's parish priest. And he didn't want any committees. He didn't have a liturgy committee. He didn't have a pastoral council, he didn't have anything. It was all him. ... Then this missionary priest came in and took over ... And he was doing things ... the same way. There's never any transparency about anything. I would e-mail him and say, "Where's the transparency? Stop mopping the floor with us," and things like that. Eventually, he said, "I could do with one less e-mail, thank you." And I thought, that's it. If [you] don't want to hear from people, I'm not going to send you any more emails, I'm not talking to you unless it's really necessary. So, it was basically the lack of transparency.

Absolutely, communication [has been the issue]. If we had female priests, they'd probably be much better [at] communication, but you know what men are like. ... Not to generalise too much. There's just been so much clericalism. It's really strong in our parish.

But somehow all of those loving people can't make up for a priest or a deacon who is rude and who excludes you. And that's what I found with my children, because I would say [to] them, "These people were saying the other day, Why aren't you coming back to Mass? They missed you there, they really want you there." And it wasn't enough to bring them back. They said, "You know, if you can get better priests or whatever, that'll be fine." I think that was it. Then it dawned on me that we are heavily affected by those who call themselves parish leaders.

If the priests had a bit more faith in the ability of laypeople, that would help a great deal. ... And that's not just me, I mean, it's everybody. Laypeople are suddenly dumb sheep to be led by this wonderful shepherd. So, then we have to build that priest's trust in what we can do. If we had priests who were even interested in finding out what we're capable of doing, that would help a great deal.

3. The misuse of power and authority in the Church

(Main reason: 104, Additional factor: 23)

A large number of respondents, particularly those who did not attend at all, cited the misuse of the Church's power and authority as a key reason for their absence. Many members of this group identified various concerns regarding clergy child sexual abuse, including the 'mishandling' of the situation, insufficient support for victims, a 'lack of accountability', a 'loss of trust', and overall dissatisfaction with the Church's response. Some recounted their own experiences or those of a family member regarding abuse:

I do not support the Catholic Church because of their actions regarding known perpetrators of child sexual abuse and their failures to make amends to the victims. I am ashamed to have been raised Catholic and their disgusting approach to survivors of child sexual abuse has made me question my entire faith. (F, 25-29)

Loss of trust of Church due to worldwide child abuse by Catholic priests and continuing systemic cover up by Church and poor treatment of victims. (F, 70-74)

Disillusioned with my experience with parish priests who have been convicted paedophiles. I trusted these men and feel my siblings and children were put at risk by bishops and a diocese that protected criminals at the expense of my parish community. I feel gutted and betrayed in a system that was my faith community. (F, 50-54)

I have lost my faith through the sexual abuse I suffered as a child from a priest. (F, 70-74)

My brother was abused by a Catholic priest as a young altar boy. I feel there is a power imbalance and some archaic beliefs still being represented at Mass. I feel that I am still as close to God now as I was as a child, and I do not need to attend Mass or listen to a priest's sermon to feel this closeness to God. I encounter God in my daily life in many ways that feel more authentic to me—the people I come into contact with. I still stand by my Catholic beliefs and live my life according to the way I am called to. (F, 55-59)

Because of the Church's response to sexual abuse survivors. The Church leaders have disappointed me greatly with their response to survivors. Their lives are ruined and the Church [has] not done enough to support these people and their families. It is devastating how they are treated when seeking compensation for the destruction these offenders have made to their lives. How can I sit in Mass and pretend it hasn't happened? They talk about compassion, yet they have none for these people. It is a disgrace. (F, 50-54)

Multiple respondents pointed out perceived hypocrisies and contradictions within the Church, while others expressed their general lack of trust in leaders. Clericalism was identified as a contributing factor:

Organised religion is hypocritical—we are lectured to about kindness and charity but the actual Church in my opinion does not exhibit any of those traits. (F, 45-49)

When actions in your diocese don't align with Catholic teaching, it is hard to keep practising the faith. (F, 60-64)

The hypocrisy of Church leaders and the corporatisation of Catholic education has destroyed my faith. My experience of the Church is of dishonest money grabbing ego maniacs who think they are untouchable. (F, 50-54)

For much of my life, there has been misplaced societal and congregational trust in the wisdom and probity of the Church, its leaders and ministers, yet many Church leaders seem to think that somehow that trust will be restored over time—on the contrary, the breach of trust evidenced by the abuse has been so fundamental that other elements of the Church (including its doctrines and teachings) are rightly being questioned or challenged—fundamentally, I think the relevance of the Mass needs to be redefined and explained in ways that are both inclusive and relevant to the lives people live. (M, 70-74)

I haven't lost my faith; I've just lost faith in the men standing at the front. I don't believe in them anymore. Their views are outdated, misogynistic, cruel at times, and hypocritical. (M, 50-54)

Clericalism and arrogance of priests—not showing genuine care or concern for [the] congregation. (F, 40-44)

A few respondents recounted experiences of mistreatment and unprofessional conduct by Catholic employers:

In two separate parishes (I left one to try another), I experienced verbal abuse and harassment; when I tried to report this to diocesan authorities and safeguarding, it was explained to me that only sexual abuse of minors and vulnerable people was being addressed. In 2017, I met with my local bishop and explained what had happened; I met with another bishop in 2021. Both priest perpetrators are still in active ministry and continue their abuse. Such behaviour mocks the sacramentality of the Church. (F, 50-54)

In my involvement with the Catholic Church, both personally and professionally, the wielding of spiritual abuse has been a common theme in my encounters. I have been verbally abused, received comments detailing my capacity as a young women professionally will be reduced and redundant if I have a family. I have been called names, I have been told I am not good enough, I am not Catholic enough, I have been told I am too loud, or I am too vocal. I have been reduced to tears on far too many occasions, it has impacted my mental health, exacerbated my stress and disability. In all this, I find it incredibly difficult to sit in Mass and hear about a God of unconditional love, when in the name of God I have experienced such trauma, and I am not alone in this. (F, 25-29)

In working for a Catholic organisation, I have been experiencing a crisis of faith as I often see people poorly [treated] in [the] Catholic community by both the people they serve and the people they work for. Maintaining faith in an environment that fails to respect the dignity of the human person is challenging when some people use their position as a source of power rather than as [a] service for the common good. (Demographics unknown)

I have lost faith in the 'hierarchy' of the Church, which is supposed to be the leadership, right? I did some interim work for the [Diocese Name] a few years ago. My expert advice was completely ignored ... I also witnessed firsthand how terribly you treated the people that worked for you. Restructure after restructure, each time a new Bishop starts, wanting to make his mark with people and their work discarded along the way. I have also seen how they treat some of their very dedicated priests ... Those that have served for many years with talent and dedication appear to be a threat to each incoming Bishop rather than a fabulous source of information and history ... [Diocese Name] appears to me to be a stepping stone for ambitious men. This is not a community I wish to be a part of. (F, 50-54)

Susan's Story

I used to be a very, very, very good Catholic ... practicing Catholicism and going to church, and parish life was my life, our life as a family. And it all stopped. And except for my work with [a Catholic charity], that's my real engagement.

Well, the first thing that happened ... didn't change my Mass attendance initially, but my youngest son disclosed that he'd been sexually abused. And it was years after the abuse. It was awful, awful, awful, awful. And so, I had to take him out of school because I wasn't satisfied with the process. I was advised to do that by the department of [the Government]. We had to change schools. That didn't work out. He was lost. Completely lost.

And they said he needs to go back to the school. So, I'd taken him out and then I had to beg for him to be taken back because [of] all of his friends ... so, I thought I'll do whatever I have to do. So, I made the appointment, went and saw the principal, and I just thought whatever I'm going to say, it's going to be truthful and honest, but it'll be vague so he can interpret it whatever way he wants. So, I just basically begged to take [my son] back. And [the principal] abused me, he yelled at me, "How dare you bring the police to this school like you did, what were you thinking, how dare you ... blah blah." I just had to take it. I just had to sit there, and the social worker was in the room with me. She's crying and I'm just sitting there, I'm thinking I've got to hold it together, hold it together.

I thought it's just some people, mm-hmm, it's not the Church. It's just some people are just horrible, yeah, and shouldn't be where they are and as long as I'm protecting my kid, that's all I've got to worry about. But then I watched the Royal Commission, and I got so angry because people appeared before the Royal Commission who I know ... And I've watched them, and I'm thinking you've become liars. You're liars. ... I thought this is not a church that meets my values. I am not being true to myself by ever being a member of this church. ... So, consequently, that's when I stopped, and I didn't go for 10 years.

Until... but I missed it. I missed aspects of it. And I know my husband really wanted to go.

We moved to a new area and there's this church that's up the road that was holding a healing Mass. And I thought he would want to go, you know, and he's not going because of me, because I was still really angry. And I thought I've got [to], it's time to just let go of the anger and if [my husband] wants to go.

It was a very beautiful healing Mass and [my husband] got something out of it. And then we thought the parish might contact us because we're new to the area, and we registered as new parishioners, but no one made any contact with us. No welcome—just crickets. So, I thought, "Oh, forget it". We deserve better. If we're going to go to church, we deserve better. I just don't want to be associated with the clergy because I think they're such a failure. They've failed us all. There's no real leadership.

4. Structural factors

(Main reason: 92, Additional factor: 65)

Structural factors were related to diocesan or parish decisions that affected the timing, availability and access to Mass. Respondents who attended occasionally or monthly primarily cited structural factors as a reason for their non-attendance. Mass times emerged as a significant concern, as numerous respondents highlighted conflicts between the timings provided in their parish and their work, family or study commitments:

Time constraints. The 'best' Mass in our parish is 5pm Sunday afternoon, and that is a chaotic time of the week for a mum. Prepping for back to school and work etc. (F, 40-44)

Being in a small town, we are fortunate to have one Mass service during the weekend, but there are weeks when the time doesn't suit. Growing up, there was a Saturday vigil and a Sunday morning service, at times, which gave people the option. (F, 50-54)

I work two jobs and can't make it to Saturday night Mass due to the timing. (F, 25-29)

The Sunday Mass is at 7:30am. I am a Veteran. Have trouble sleeping, too tired to get there. Instead, go to 5:30pm Mass nearby. Not able to do so when dark. Driving dangerous road. Instead, go to online Mass when Daylight Savings ends otherwise go to 5:30pm Mass. (M, 75-79)

The time offered in my community. 10:30 am is too late for folks that run farms. (F, 55-59)

The absence of weekly Mass in local parishes was another factor that hindered attendance. A few respondents expressed a preference for the Latin Mass:

I don't attend weekly Mass as it is not offered at my parish church. I believe if the weekly Latin Mass was stopped and distributed to the two churches out of five who currently have fortnightly Mass to make it three times a month, it would be appreciated. (F, 65-69)

Sunday Mass only offered twice per month and Communion Service on other two. (F, 70-74)

When The Traditional Latin Mass is not always offered. (Demographics unknown)

The proximity to the nearest site where Mass was offered was a consideration in rural and regional areas, as was the shortage of priests available to celebrate Mass:

I am now regularly travelling to a regional location without a church. (M, 60-64)

Because I live on a cattle station which is 56km from my local town/Mass. (F, 45-49)

Our church is under renovation, and we cannot walk to the next closest parish. (F, 35-39)

My local parish has not had a priest for a long time. (F, 30-34)

Two additional factors identified were the limited access or support for individuals with disabilities to attend, as well as the preference of some individuals to participate in Mass online:

I have ASD and struggle to sit quietly. I hate being told off by the old people for moving around. (M, 18-19)

It offers very little. (1) I have a major hearing loss and cannot understand very much that the priest says ... (2) The hearing loop has not worked for years. Much of what I pick up is critical of people rather than uplifting. (M, 80+)

I have a child with disabilities, and sometimes [it] is difficult to keep her sitting during the Mass. (F, 45-49)

The life of our Parish has changed. We sometimes, as a family, watch Mass on a Sunday together as we did during COVID-19 and what our parish still offers. (F, 50-54)

[My] husband is frail and I watch Songs of Praise at home. (F, 75-79)

Mary's Story

I grew up in a family that attended Church weekly. When I got married and had my four children, it was challenging to attend Church on a regular basis as we lived 30 kilometres out of town and also my husband is non-Catholic and a hard-working farmer. He was very supportive of my attendance but often put work before going to church. So, I lost a bit of momentum there for a while and didn't go to Mass as regularly ...

In addition, it was challenging taking four kids to Mass, trying to control them all in church by myself. I found it easier to just stay at home. Then during COVID, because we couldn't go to Mass, I loved online Masses with Father Rob Galea. ... I absolutely couldn't wait to hear the next sermon each week. If I could have someone like him here, I'd go every day to Mass! He's so inspirational. So, when we could start going back to Mass, I found that difficult because we have a priest from another country, and I found it challenging to understand his speech and his message.

Since COVID, I have started going to Masses and Liturgies of the Word more regularly. We have Masses once a fortnight with our priest and lay-led liturgies on the alternate weekend.

The lay-led liturgies, I find, are more inspiring because we can choose to read gospel reflections that make sense and I have taken on preparing the PowerPoints for church where I can include meaningful hymns that enable the congregation to pray more easily. I think music is a huge part of church and we should be using it to help young people connect. The youth are very different compared to our generation. They question a lot, and they're taught to question a lot. Whereas we just accepted ... didn't question. We just went to church because that's what Mum and Dad told us to do.

... People say it's only an hour a week. It takes effort to go to Mass. When I was a registered nurse, I did a lot of shift work which meant I often missed Mass on a weekend... I used to not feel bad about not attending church then, because I believed I was doing God's work in my job. Upon reflection, the effort to go to Mass is making an effort for God—a way of giving back to him.... I think Church is about being a community. Praying together and assisting each other as a community. Jesus wanted us to connect with others.

5. Concerns related to the parish as a community

(Main reason: 90, Additional factor: 173)

Many respondents, particularly those who attended occasionally or not at all, expressed two primary concerns regarding the parish community: the absence of a welcoming atmosphere and the lack of a sense of community. In discussing the absence of a welcoming atmosphere, respondents frequently described parishioners as 'not friendly' or characterised them as 'judgmental' and 'uninviting'. Individuals highlighted the limited opportunities for involvement and mentioned inappropriate remarks made by the priest or other parishioners:

I walk in and walk out, and no-one cares about me whatsoever. People are not friendly in either of the two parishes near my home. (F, 65-69)

I don't feel comfortable attending for the first time; I worry about potentially not being welcomed and have anxiety about other things e.g. what to wear or doing something wrong and feeling judged. (F, 30-34)

Mass does not reach out to the young community. Older Parish members are not inviting and look down at you. You feel like you're not welcomed. (F, 50-54)

... my daughter's youth group leader ... said, "Look, I'd love to come back to Mass," but she's unfortunately gone through a divorce, and she said, "You tell me where you're going to go and I'll come with you," because she's on her own now. But she went to one church where she lived nearby ... And she just said it was just appalling, you know, like again, it was so staid. No-one spoke to her. And she felt very alone ... And so, she said she just felt there was no point going. (F, 60-64)

People are not friendly or welcoming and hold conservative beliefs that do not align with my open-minded approach. My Anglican husband is not allowed to take communion. Another member of the family is gay. And I feel we cannot be ourselves and a part of a community. It saddens me that I enter a church and I'm surrounded by old conservative parishioners. I could turn up on my own and pretend I'm the same as them but it's not being truthful. So apart from attending Mass as a Catholic school teacher while I'm at work, I rarely go otherwise. I raised my children Catholic and attended Mass regularly once but now feel that my family isn't accepted because we are different. (F, 55-59)

A number of respondents expressed feelings of not belonging to the community, primarily due to the absence of peers their age or a mismatch with the typical demographics. Some held the view that those who attended Mass do so without genuine sincerity in their worship:

I am single and find my parish is very 'family' based. I try to locate other parishes where single people are welcome—such as [Parish] or [Parish] in [Suburb]. (F, 65-69)

I find it difficult to connect with other Catholics in my parish. There are very few in my demographic/age bracket (30-50), and I feel as though I have nothing in common with the (mostly) elderly churchgoers. I rarely feel energised by attending Mass, and I usually blame

this on the uninspiring sermon and routine of sitting in the same pew and seeing the same people—sitting in the same pew week after week. It feels like Groundhog Day and doesn't bring me closer to God or give me a better understanding of Jesus' teachings. I get more out of reading the Bible on my own. (M, 45-49)

The ageing congregation of my parish is at odds with my young family. (F, 40-44)

Mass has become similar to the meeting of a social club where during Mass too much focus is on parish finances and social events which are important but belong outside of the Mass itself. (M, 70-74)

The absence of community was experienced for various reasons. A few respondents expressed the view that the parish had become disconnected from the broader community and that participating in Mass had adverse effects. Individuals who frequently relocated or were unfamiliar with the area often struggled to integrate and establish friendships or connections. Several respondents reported having no friends who participated, while others expressed that they had not received support from the community during their times of need:

When I didn't attend Mass weekly, it was because of a number of reasons, including life was busy and it often felt like an extra obligation. Also, I didn't feel a community connection because no one I knew went to Mass. There was also a realisation that other people did not have faith, and that you weren't judged badly for not attending church, which was not the case as child, in fact, it was potentially the case that you were judged badly FOR attending Mass. (F, 55-59)

There is no sense of community. When I started attending regularly at a new parish (over a four-month period), no-one spoke to us or introduced themselves to us. (Sex unknown, 50-54)

I am disappointed with the Catholic Church. There is not a sense of community in my parish. I have done the RCIA to become Catholic, but there is nobody that said hello to me on Sunday morning. (M, 35-39)

After my husband died last year, I realised I had been giving to the Church (involved in running RCIA, teaching SRE, being a reader at Mass) and not receiving anything in return. It was only members of the social justice ministry who reached out to me. The family group to which I belonged for 25 years did not visit me when my husband was dying of cancer. (F, 60-64)

Without a connection to the school community, it is hard to find a social connection in the parish. (F, 60-64)

Alex's Story

I'm retired. I worked in [the Catholic sector] for most of my career ... I've been in the Catholic Church all my life. ... I was a reader for many years. I was ... on committees, volunteered for things. In all that time, I never felt like I was part of a welcoming parish community.

So, while there were no overt cliques, there was a sense of not being part of that. I didn't think the Church, parish, or set-up had the capacity to be inclusive of difference, in the nineties anyway.

I made a deliberate decision to leave rather than just drift away, about 18 months ago. I cut the planned giving thing where I've been a considerable financial contributor over [many years]. ... I'm not giving more money to the Catholic Church and I'm not going to attend the [...] Parish on a regular basis. I haven't been back since.

But I haven't given up on the Spirit of God, the Spirit of Love in our lives. As a community, and as individuals I suspect we can have that Love to come into our lives, less by focusing on various personal sins to repent (the way I was brought up) and more by reflective meditation and looking for ways to be actively loving, listening to the word and spirit of God

There's so much more richness in asking the question, what does this mean, what's the point we can take from this and learn for our own lives? Even though seminarians and people who study in Catholic studies and Scripture learn about exegesis and how to interpret Scripture and how to listen to the spirit through meditative processes ... it's not what happens on a Sunday morning, and it's not what you hear.

To let God take over and the ego to shrink, to be available to see what God is or could be doing in your life. You don't get that at Sunday Mass, and we don't teach it.

We've got to go back to the early church. We've got to become household churches, small communities of believers. Where somebody might do this study and might take the role of priest for two years, and we'll support that family from the collection while the priest isn't at their job.

We have to just take away a bit of the mystique of the priests knowing everything and being the gatekeeper. More communal.

6. Disappointment in the Church

(Main reason: 69, Additional factor: 131)

Several respondents, but especially those who attended only occasionally or not at all, shared that their lack of attendance was due to disappointment in or 'disillusionment' with the Church or its leaders. Many expressed disappointment stemming from the absence of inclusivity, 'outdated' perspectives, attitudes towards women, and insufficient engagement with the broader world. The Church's inadequate response to the sexual abuse crisis and its apparent lack of support for 'The Voice' campaign were prominent issues that caused loss of trust. Some respondents shared personal stories of abuse mishandling, or those of close friends and relatives:

It is hard to come to terms with the Church's mishandling of child sexual abuse in the past. It is hoped that the processes and procedures that are now in place will ensure that this never occurs again, but more assurances along with a willingness to change are needed. (F, 55-59)

I find the tension of a Church that has caused such harm and continues to allow hatred to be spoken, yet a God of unconditional love who would be weeping for every person who has experienced detrimental harm at the hands of people who claim to be doing things in the name of God. The uncovering of the sexual abuse, and the extent of this, not only within Australia, but globally is beyond shameful. Our retributions for this will never cover the extent of harm we have caused. This can be said for the same in our collective harm in colonisation and Missions adding to the trauma endured by First Nations people. (F, 25-29)

I was at a parish as a child with a priest that, only recently I found out, was molesting the altar servers. Some of those children were my classmates and friends. It's very hard to reconcile a Church that tells me as a child that I am a sinner because I say the Lord's name in vain while all the time had priests and higher members destroying the lives of innocent children. My trust has been broken. (F, 45-49)

As a lay woman in the Church the only vote I get is with my feet. So I walked. I've made submissions to the Plenary Council only to see much of what I and many other women think of as important swept off the table right at the beginning. I have zero faith or confidence in the hierarchy. It was beyond shameful that the hierarchy did not stand up for YES to The Voice to Parliament. The Church has to be for people today, not living in some fantasy past, or trying to recreate that fantasy. We're in an era where the hierarchy is akin to the Pope and Galileo centuries ago. Not fit for purpose. (F, 70-74)

The institutional Church has lost meaning and integrity for me. The priests and bishops are locked into pre-Vatican II beliefs and narrow prejudices, especially against women. Signs of reform and renewal are regularly squashed, and priests are imported into parishes who do not share cultural and social values. The Mass, while it inspires and connects with the mysteries, is too often used as a vehicle to push an antiquated Church structure and practice. And outsiders. (M, 75-79)

Some individuals expressed deep concerns regarding the perceived power and affluence of the Church, the marginalisation of the laity, the neglect of Vatican II principles, and the gap between Church teachings and their application:

I don't like the institutionalisation of faith and spirituality that the Catholic Church proliferates. I was very disillusioned by the response of the Australian Catholic Church to the systematic sexual, physical and emotional abuse that occurred at the hands of the Church in this country and around the world. The unequal power balance between the Church as an institution and the people who belong to the faith makes me uncomfortable. So does the Church's intransigence on matters to do with the society it pertains to represent. Its treatment of women, minorities based on gender and sexual orientation and what seems like exploitation of third world countries and racial minorities is not something I can reconcile with the message of Jesus' teachings. I find the hoarding of wealth and protection of Church's interests to be diametrically opposed to the messages we are to believe Jesus preached. And by participating in Mass, I feel like I am advocating for points of view I cannot support just to keep the institution and the men who run it in power. (F, 45-49)

Honestly, I feel the Church is furthest from Christ's teaching. It preaches but rarely practices. We've dethroned God from His rightful place and placed idols which we worship. The Church is a corporation, a profitable business and is out of touch with Christ and His flock, it's controlling, power-driven and relegates women, ignoring the fact that God looks at the sincerity of our heart not our gender. (F, 60-64)

Conversely, a handful of respondents with varying attendance patterns cited the lack of traditionalism in the Church as the main reason for their lack of frequent attendance. Respondents in this group commented on the 'watered-down' teachings, ineffective leaders and progressive ideologies:

We are conservative in our beliefs, and certain new behaviours and beliefs that have been pushed into discussion and acceptance do not align with our faith, morals and values. (F, 25-29)

As stated before, watered-down Catholicism, promotion on non-Catholic/Christian beliefs from pulpit, turning Prayers of the Faithful into political statements—Church, Bishops and Priests not standing up for The Faith—The One True Faith. (Sex unknown, 55-59)

Another factor was dissatisfaction with the clergy, with respondents noting the inadequate quality of leadership and theology, as well as disappointing attitudes and decisions of Church leaders:

Poor quality of leadership, exclusion of 99% of members due to all power being divested in one man. Poor theology being distributed through homilies. Lack of care for the communion of believers. (F, 65-69)

Disappointment in the Catholic leadership and how fake it all is. (F, 50-54)

Other issues that caused disappointment included perceived hypocrisy and issues with the handling of parish and diocesan finances:

It is not possible now to put any great weight in the authority of the Church, given its blatant and heinous hypocrisy. It has become clear to me [that] the Church leadership is no different to any political group with great shortcomings. As such, I cannot suggest the relevance of the Church in my children's upbringing or suggest the Church as a moral authority. (M, 55-59)

Parish priests taking money from collections before it is counted, every week. This being reported and nothing done. How can we place trust in the Catholic Church and clergy when this is our experience?!?! Relationships are always the foundation. Upon this, we need the walls of trust. We do not receive this. (F, 40-44)

The 'business' of the Catholic Church corporation does not support ground roots of community faith. Lack of funding for local churches, yet the Catholic Church is one of the biggest corporations in the world. Total hypocrisy from the institution of the Catholic Church. (F, 50-54)

In some instances, respondents perceived a lack of charitable values in Catholic organisations, including schools, as indicative of the Church's attitude more broadly:

In my experience the Catholic Church is very good at getting rid of the difficult children [from Catholic schools] . . . In some schools, depending on the principal and the teachers, they'll keep some of the kids. But if the Catholic system had to put up with the difficulties that the state system puts up with ... the bottom line is in the state system ... the process of expelling a child ... is so difficult that it doesn't happen very often. ... And that should be what the Catholic messaging is. The Catholic messaging should be that we will take the most spiritually poor children in society. And instead, it's full of examples like [a high-fee Catholic school] and all those people whereby ... I suppose it's just very easy for them to get rid of them. (M, 65-69)

[Catholic] education needs a whole new changeover ... I was working in, like I said, a low socioeconomic Catholic school, but the one that I was specifically working at, it was like, I had to give a uniform note because a girl had a pink hair tie, but the poor girl had police at her house the night before for domestic violence situations ... I'd have a bunch of blue scrunchies in my drawer, and I'd just give the girls to put over their hair ties. But then you'd be told that you were doing too much for the students ... So, that's why I just felt like I wasn't quite where I wanted to go because it's like this push between academicness (sic) versus actual welfare and caring for those that are in your care. (F, 40-44)

A few expressed concerns over the education of clergy in the seminary, specifically stressing the need for an emphasis on pastoral care:

I've talked about using the retired, the really skilled pastoral priests as mentors for the new priests. ... Now the problem with a lot of priests is they're good at ... moving paperwork, but their people skills are zero. So, we need to have priests in the parish who've got great people skills, who've got great pastoral skills. ... In the old days, the priests were expected to get jobs like taxi drivers and other things where they got to mix with the ordinary people. They don't do that anymore. And so, as the rectors will tell you, they don't have this experience of life. (M, 75-79)

Steve's Story

Our parish has gone through a hectic time. We're sort of reluctant to attend Mass anymore with the current priest in residence. It's hard to go to Mass rurally. When you're in the city, you can shop around, but you don't have that choice in the country. We have issues with our priest. Not only me, but the whole parish, unfortunately. He's upsetting a lot of people and nothing ever gets done about it. He yells at people. ... He just has a lot of traits that aren't very good as a priest. He's a bit of a bully, too. You can't get away with these things in the workplace, but in the Catholic Church here, you can.

We went to the Bishop, and he organised a 'Parish cultural survey' with a safeguarding company. But it was a box-ticking exercise. Most of the survey was, 'What do you want done here? Do you need carpet, painting?' There [weren't] any pertinent questions to the issue. At the end of the survey, we could say something, but it felt like we could be charged with libel if we said anything else. We felt stifled in what we could say.

[I stopped attending my local church] virtually straight away after he yelled at me outside the church. ... I rang the diocesan office [about a fundraising effort] and they said, 'That's up to the priest to decide if it goes in the Parish bulletin'. [Our priest] found out about it and he just went berserk. Banned me from any committees ever again. And this was outside. He was yelling loud, it wasn't discreet. He attacks people who try and help him. He wants to be the one to sort it out. ... We packed it in after that.

Out of all these issues at [my old parish], we set up a social coffee group. And we meet with all the ladies that are affected every month. So we've ... started up a community interaction that way. ... We've got this small group, we chat about life matters every third Wednesday. We link up and people share things about what's happening. ... Because having coffee and chatting to all these people. I know it's not the Eucharist, but it's connection with people, which is so important. The Eucharist is a sacrament. You're not talking to anyone, you're not helping anyone going to it. The people doing all the work in the world do better in life than me going to the Eucharist.

I've come to realise the treatment of women in the Church is just shocking, like. Why not women priests? It was definitely after this priest started yelling at women and having a go at them [that my views changed around women in the Church]. The women are running around setting up stuff for church and everything, all that. Women don't get a fair go, really. Even if a new priest came in, we're thinking we probably wouldn't go back to church, anyway. It's just all these issues that come to light when you start thinking about it. So, maybe not.

7. Lack of inclusivity or a sense of being excluded by Church rules

(Main reason: 41, Additional factor: 111)

Several respondents, particularly those who did not attend Mass at all, named the Church's lack of inclusivity as a key reason for their absence. The unequal treatment of men and women in the Church, particularly the exclusion of women from ministry roles, the perceived absence of women's voices, the patriarchal structure of the Church, and the lack of women's inclusion in other significant roles were also key factors:

I am continually dismayed at the status of women in our Church. It is not equal. Many younger Catholic women I work with say openly this lack of equality, Church views on birth control, etc. What are these elderly, single males afraid of? (F, 55-59)

I cannot condone the patriarchy that prevails, the appalling attitude to LGBTQI+ people, those who have remarried following divorce, the exclusion of women from key ministry and governance roles, the hard-to-comprehend and relate to translation of the Mass, combined failure to make Mass a life-giving experience. (F, 60-64)

The disconnect between my life and that of my family and the community to what is preached and displayed at my church does not connect with general life. In addition, I am female and when it comes to attending Mass, I don't see myself reflected there. Sure, doing jobs for the priest or keeping the parish running—females are there. I work for a Catholic agency and all the managers are male even though 80% of the workforce is female. (F, 60-64)

I don't want to raise my daughters in a Church with purely male leadership. (F, 30-34)

A small group alluded to feeling excluded by the Church, mainly sharing personal experiences, expressing concern about the lack of inclusivity for LGBTQI+ individuals, divorced and remarried Catholics, married priests, and other groups:

My daughter is transgender, and, having supported her through this brave and honest transition, I'm left questioning the Church due to its attitude towards LGBTQ people. My faith in God has been tested and is as strong as ever, but unfortunately, I feel I cannot participate in Mass when the Church's views on my own daughter are so hateful. (F, 50-54)

I am a ... gay woman [in my thirties], and don't feel that I would be accepted. (F, 35-39)

Lack of engagement between the reality of my life as a happily partnered gay man and the lack of honest conversation with the hierarchy. My PP is open, honest and supportive—but he admits that he 'fights with one hand tied behind his back'. (M, 60-64)

[I was] accepted as a practicing divorced Catholic by one parish priest but only accepted by a later parish priest if I went up to the altar at Communion time if my arms were crossed and did not receive the Blessed Sacrament. (M, 80+)

I left the priesthood and married outside of the Church and now feel that I let the team down and I'm no longer accepted or wanted. (M, 60-64)

Xanthe's Story

I do identify as Catholic, yes. I identify as a Catholic theologically. I describe myself as a Vatican II Catholic without a Vatican II Church. At the end of the day, I stopped going because that's the only vote that Catholics have ... with your feet. I do not support the hierarchy.

... I realised there really wasn't a place for me in the Church, with my skill set such as it is. ... I became a volunteer with the AIDS Council, as it was then, not anymore. And got to know gay people and how badly they are treated. I didn't have any preconceived ideas, particularly. I mean, I know that they were not approved of, but I couldn't see why, and I still can't ... and that's probably when I started going to church intermittently.

... But something came up there ... something [at] that Mass, and I just sort of thought it's time to bite the bullet. And I said [to my acquaintances], well, I don't sort of go all the time, and partly that's because of the way gay people are treated. That was shock horror at the table, because it was over coffee or something. So, that was probably my first outing of myself as a noncompliant Catholic.

And anyway, so ... when I retired, I got involved with a non-profit organisation that serves LGBTIQ+ people across all ages. I've been involved for a number of years, so I've got a whole heap of gay friends now.

... the gay people thing ... how they were treated was part of the leaving, going to Mass and just increasingly aware that they were going further and further back to pre-Vatican II stuff and really that's not a place to be. And that women aren't included, very much second-class citizens and just over that sort of crap, basically. Yeah.

I've got to tell you, amongst my gay friends, the number [of] Catholics is astonishing. Yes, you know, they'll talk about their days as altar boys and that sort of thing and going to church and singing in the choir. Yes, yeah. You know, for ... a relatively small group of men, a high proportion are ex-Catholics.

8. The irrelevance of the Church to life today

(Main reason: 37, Additional factor: 63)

A different set of respondents—those who attended occasionally or not at all—shared their perspectives on the Church's perceived irrelevance to their daily lives and modern society. They described a loss of credibility, labelling teachings 'outdated' and 'conservative', noting resistance to change and a general sense of stagnation. Some reported changes in their religious beliefs or views:

I feel the Catholic Church is 'stuck in the past' in its thinking, teachings and practices; as an institution it refused to respond to contemporary questions. The Church should be 'the people'— but I feel it separated itself from that very community to the exclusion of others. (F, 50-54)

The Catholic Church has lost touch with modern Australia and Australians. Faith is important; however, it isn't practical to attend church during such busy times. Sunday is no longer a day of rest and is a particularly busy time in our household. (M, 45-49)

I think the Church is too embedded in the past, too rigid in its teaching. I like to feel I can connect with the priest/sermon at a church but find this a hard objective to achieve. (M, 70-74)

I live my faith through the actions I display towards others, this is more important to me than attending church every Sunday. Although I enjoy celebrating Mass, I do see it as the 'conservative' side of the Catholic Church whereby people attend and believe they are 'good' Catholics as a result, but do not stand in solidarity with those marginalised and ostracised such as the LGBTQI community. I do not identify as a 'conservative' Catholic but rather a liberal Catholic ... Catholic Social Teaching is of utmost importance to me. (F, 45-49)

I do value some general teachings of Jesus—love your neighbour as you love yourself, etc. But as I was baptised and confirmed as a child, I didn't choose to become Catholic. Through my own studies in my late teens and especially with studies in Buddhism, I realised that I don't really agree that putting your responsibility for your own actions outside of yourself in an entity (call it God), actually helps people to have compassion for their mistakes and to do better without all the layers of shame [regarding] sinning. (F, 40-44)

Some participants perceived a lack of relevance due to celibacy rules, the exclusion of married priests, and the lack of women clergy:

Limiting leadership in the Catholic Church to celibate (supposedly) men limits the Church's capacity to relate to the wider reality of the world. (F, 65-69)

The Catholic Church was humming in the 70s, but all the priests who were inspiring and faith-filled left the priesthood, as did many religious. Having married priests would have allowed many of these men to still share their faith and remain an active part of the Church. (F, 70-74)

The Catholic Church hasn't moved on with the times. There needs to be priests any gender and they should be able to be in relationships. (F, 50-54)

Anne's Story

I've had a lifelong interest in the Catholic Church ... Being a very conservative Catholic at one point in my life and then feeling very betrayed by the institution.

It was ... about women's ordination. I mean, the statement that always and forever, as a matter—or part of the deposit of faith—women could never be ordained to the ministerial priesthood. So, I said to my husband, 'That's a bridge too far for me. I'm not buying grapes from South Africa at the minute because I object to apartheid, and I don't wish to cross the threshold of the Church because I so seriously disagree with its stance'.

I wrote a long letter [to the Archbishop of Dublin]. I decided I wouldn't leave without saying why. I had become very disenchanted with the Church. Just the rote-ness of it ... And I was living in Ireland at the time and there was a lot of anger at the Church for lots of reasons. And I suppose, some of it, I absorbed. But that led to what in the old days they would have called 'tepidity'. Being tepid. ... It was the old-fashioned word for what happened to peoples' religious sense. You'd become tepid, become warm instead of passionate. And I had certainly become very tepid.

Then, I did this course in feminist theology, and it suddenly became clear to me that the problem wasn't actually in me. The problem was in the Church. There wasn't any place for me in the Church. I was not—my baptism was not—complete. The sacrament of baptism is incomplete for females. Because you just do not get to participate in the life of the Church. You cannot live out the fullness of your baptism because you are precluded from full participation. It's as simple as that. ... I see absolutely no reason why women can't be ordained. I find that outrageous.

And when I wrote my letter to the Archbishop of Dublin, I got a long letter back on the meaning of 'in persona Christi'. But that's where my theology would just not align with the Church's teaching. It happened, initially, as a matter of principle. I mean, I didn't have the slightest desire to become a priest myself. But I objected very strenuously to being excluded, in fact, so strenuously that I had to leave the Church.

And it was a loss of me. But ... I just found it completely unacceptable that women were excluded from full participation, for no other reason than being women. If I looked at a 30-year-old priest now, I just want to shake him. 'What are you thinking? What do you think you're doing? I mean, what right do you think you have to walk through a door that's closed in the face of your sister?'

RE-ENGAGEMENT WITH THE MASS AND HOW THE CHURCH CAN HELP

The final sections of the survey and the interview offered respondents an opportunity to express their thoughts on what might help them reconnect with the Mass, and to offer any final comments. The survey included three open-ended questions, each without any limit on the number of words they could use.

Reconnecting with the Mass

One question asked, ‘Are there things the Church could do that would encourage you to reconnect or re-engage with the Mass?’ Participants provided a range of proposals for re-engagement in their responses, some of which intersected directly with settled doctrinal matters, while others discussed topics of pastoral discipline or reform.

Make Mass more engaging

The majority responded to ways in which the Church could make Mass more engaging. These included:

- Better homilies and formation
- Better music
- More child- and family-friendly
- Improving Mass times and accessibility, including allowing Mass to take place in other locations such as in outdoor settings
- Better technology
- More welcoming, including providing hospitality to attenders
- Shorter Masses
- Improving the readings to be more relevant
- Improving liturgical language—some asked for it to be modernised and easy to understand, while others called for more inclusive language
- Providing opportunities for contemplation or Eucharistic adoration
- Better accommodation of special needs, such as accessibility to the venue, and quieter services.

A small number requested a more traditional Mass, with a particular focus on the Eucharist and reverence for the priest, while a handful called for greater availability of the Traditional Latin Mass. Just under four-fifths of those calling for greater availability of the Latin Mass were from the category who reported weekly attendance, while most other responses were more evenly shared amongst those with different attendance patterns.

Be more inclusive, progressive

Among the other responses, there was a strong focus on being more inclusive and progressive. This included a greater encouragement of the involvement of lay people, of women specifically, and of both women and married people in the priesthood. There were also calls to allow already ordained priests to marry:

*More participation by the parishioners during the Mass, such as shared reflections.
(Demographics unknown)*

More women on the altar—maybe being a priest is not possible—but women acolytes, deacons, women giving the homilies. (F, 50-54)

The Church could become more progressive. Including female priests and allowing male priests to marry. (F, 40-44)

Acknowledgement by Church institution that priesthood, etc, etc, etc, are not validated in the Gospels. Drastic change in priesthood, ordination of women and married people, or at least moves in that direction. (F, 70-74)

Several also called for more inclusion in the congregation, particularly of LGBTQI+ people and divorced and remarried Catholics. There were several who decried the shaming and judgement of individuals, and a few suggested there was an issue with conservative attitudes:

Stop the depressing negative talk and making members of the congregation feel guilty for not being 'more' Catholic, be more accepting of all and less judgemental. (F, 50-54)

*Less ultra conservative criticism, I don't like being criticised because my attitude is not pre-Vatican II and those who don't believe in Vat II want to go back to Latin Masses etc. This ultra conservative attitude has turned my children from attending Mass and is hurting the Church.
(F, 65-69)*

Build relationships, broaden Church Interaction with people

Others focused on the Church reaching out to the community and building relationships. A large number of suggestions were focused on reaching out to young people and focusing on activities that would attract teenagers and young adults to the Church. Respondents made suggestions for various social activities that the Church could organise, small groups that could be run, or engaging with schools or volunteer organisations such as the St Vincent de Paul Society:

As a young person I often feel quite disconnected to the rest of my Church community. There is no youth group for teens or young adults' group and having the opportunity to connect, whether that be about faith or life, would encourage me to prioritise physically taking the time to attend Mass and celebrating with my community. (F, 20-24)

Build strong welcoming communities. New people have to feel welcome. Have coffee after church to allow people to socialise. Have regular events at church like cultural meals, retreats etc. (F, 40-44)

There was a focus from some respondents on rebuilding trust in the Church. While some responses criticised the handling of abuse issues in the Church, others talked about accountability and transparency, particularly regarding money. Several responses raised issues with the Church's attitude towards sex and contraception:

It would be difficult, because my family has been severely affected by clergy sexual abuse, with little or no apologies or true acknowledgement of the damage it has done. (F, 60-64)

Stop going on about sex. Get out of people's bedrooms. The Church has zero credibility in that department, from contraception and Paul VI to the abuse crisis, and just about anything in that field in between. (F, 70-74)

Reform the Church

Several respondents commented on the need to make significant reforms within the Church. Some talked about reform across the entire Church, while others identified specific issues. Addressing issues with clericalism was a high priority for several respondents. Some talked about the need for better leadership and decision-making, and an increase in transparency and accountability. A number raised issues related to the collection of money, such as calling for the collection plate to be passed only once and for sacraments not to require payment. A handful talked of a desire for the Church to practice synodality, while a few gave practical suggestions for improving church amenities, such as installing air conditioning:

The Catholic Church needs to redefine itself as a genuine expression of the gospel in today's world. (M, 80+)

I left my local parish because clericalism was rife, and performance seemed more important than nurturing a healthy relationship with God. Until these are fixed, I'll find other places to practice my faith. (F, 70-74)

There was a strong focus in the responses for the Church to be more modern and ensure its message was relevant to people of today:

Demonstrate values and communicate sermons which are reflective of modern society and values. (M, 45-49)

Advocate on social issues

Several respondents talked about the Church being more vocal in its advocacy on social justice issues:

It could be more engaged with the community by demonstrating that it is aware of common, everyday issues being experienced by all. This includes our First Nations peoples, people seeking asylum and people living in poverty. For instance, it was disappointing that the Church did not issue a statement supporting the recent referendum on The Voice. Catholic Social Teaching is a great fundamental principle—there should be much more open dialogue about how this relates to, and can inform, current social issues and injustices being experienced in Australia. (F, 55-59)

Improve priestly ministry

While many of the responses shared their gratitude for those in priestly ministry, various respondents provided suggestions for improvement. These ranged from providing training on preparing sermons, to public speaking, psychological skills, pastoral skills and, for those from other cultures, training in multicultural environments and English-speaking skills. There were calls for providing training in leadership and in strengthening relationships between the clergy and the laity:

I find it hard to connect to priests from different countries who, although they are pious and good men, struggle to articulate clearly, and have a very different cultural experience to myself. Their faith has arisen from their cultural experience. However, I also need to see my lived cultural experience embodied in the Church and the Mass. We are not all the same, it is the same Spirit who dwells within us, but that Spirit needs to be recognised, honoured and embodied in a multiplicity of cultures. (F, 70-74)

Most priests are very good but some need re training in their attitude towards parishioners in general. These particular priests tend to turn people, either away from attending Mass or they go to a different parish church. (M, 80+)

Some called specifically for priests and others in ministry to involve themselves in the community, while a few specified a desire for their priests to be role models in pursuing holiness and righteousness, such as praying with people. Several respondents called for priests to be more creative or flexible with the liturgy. A few respondents cited difficulties with specific priests and asked for them to be removed, while others called for priests who were enthusiastic and good communicators to be able to stay in their local parish and not be moved on. Some responses particularly called for priests to be appointed with the needs of the community and its unique demographic characteristics in mind:

The clergy have a big impact on how people connect to Church. They need to be a part of the community and involve themselves in everyday activities. (F, 40-44)

Seminary formation whereby the clergy develop a creative sense of the liturgies that can still be faithful to the rubrics. Clergy are too rigid in their interpretation of the theology of sacraments. (M, 70-74)

Keep good priests in local parishes. Don't move them away from the people. (F, 40-44)

Build faith and spirituality

A number of respondents suggested that the Church should improve its formation with a particular focus on the basics of faith and scripture. There were several comments recommending that the Church should return to its traditional foundation and avoid diluting the message of the Gospel, particularly in Catholic schools:

Churches getting back to the grassroots of Christianity. Churches avoiding political influences and standing strong in their faith. (F, 25-29)

The kids do feel that church is boring. I suggest probably some program for kids to understand the importance of tradition and culture of our Church. (F, 40-44)

Other responses

Of the 1,442 responses to this question, 220 respondents stated that there was nothing that the Church could do, or they were not sure what could be done. Some indicated this was because they were already attending as frequently as they wished, while others cited personal reasons as their barrier:

Not really, I just need to make time. (F, 40-44)

No, it's not about the Church, it's about penalty rates to try and survive in the Australian economy. (F, 40-44)

No, it's just personal issues. (F, 40-44)

Others stated they would not be interested in returning to the Church:

I think I am done and unlikely to ever reconnect with the Church. (F, 55-59)

Very little, I fear that the Church and I have parted ways. As time goes on that gap has become a chasm. (M, 65-69)

A handful shared their positive experiences in regard to attending Mass:

Feeling more welcome to come back and attend after a period of absence. (F, 30-34)

I enjoy attending through school with my children and for family events such as Christenings, weddings and at Christmas. (F, 40-44)

Attending More Frequently

Another question asked, 'What might help you to consider attending more frequently?' Many of the responses were similar to those shared in the previous question. However, respondents also made some additional comments.

In regard to improving the Mass, several respondents suggested ways that the liturgy could be made more meaningful and relevant to their daily lives. Responses also included suggestions to explain the ritual of the Mass to those who were new or irregular attenders:

A big change! Meaning of relationship with Jesus in daily life after leaving the Church. Making the time at Mass more relevant to my daily life. (F, 70-74)

More relevance, easier to engage with—little things change over time or you forget, Mass feels set up for those who are always there, there is so much assumed known ritual. (F, 40-44)

Many of the responses related to having more options for Mass times, or to having shorter Masses to allow people to balance their different activities. Some called for days other than Sunday to be approved for meeting their weekly obligation:

Different church service times, later in the day so as to not clash with sports and other activities that are scheduled in the morning. (F, 45-49)

Less emphasis on Sunday being the only day considered acceptable by the Church in order to be considered a 'good Catholic' whatever that means. (Sex unknown, 55-59)

There were also calls for better music which most defined as being high quality, performed live and, for several respondents, contemporary. However, there were some respondents who asked not to sing during the Mass as they found it distracting.

There was a focus in the responses to this question on parishes being welcoming and making efforts to make attenders feel like they belonged to a community:

Welcome environment, a community who will shake your hand at the peace be with you. Not look at you with disdain. But want to take part in getting to know you. A community can make or break a Church. (F, 70-74)

If there could be somehow a sense of community to attend. Maybe mentors willing to assist with a re-transition back to the Church. Life has changed where people have convinced themselves that attendance is no longer important or required. (F, 45-49)

A few responses, in particular, identified that they would be more likely to attend if there were people their own age in attendance. For some, this was young adults, for others it was middle-aged people. Respondents also suggested that a greater connection between the parish and Catholic schools would encourage people to attend.

There was also a call for churches to be more involved with volunteering, community outreach, and social justice. While some wanted parishioners to be more involved in volunteer opportunities, others were concerned that the Church hierarchy should be more vocal about relevant issues:

More opportunities to assist volunteer in the local community. (F, 30-34)

Church leaders speaking out loudly about climate change, inequality, social justice, human rights etc. ... be relevant and loud, use your power for good alongside people. (F, 50-54)

Various responses related to personal matters, which prevented or discouraged people from attending Mass more frequently. These included being busy or having other priorities, with people suggesting they would attend more if they had more free time, or once they retired. Several people identified issues with living a long way from a regular Mass, as well as transport or health issues that prevented them from attending. A number identified that they would attend more regularly if they had certain family members or friends to accompany them:

If I was to live closer to town or have more time. (F, 45-49)

Having aspects that would attract the rest of my family, so they feel the value of attending like I do. (F, 50-54)

If my children were willing to go and they had friends there. (F, 40-44)

Some people identified feeling guilty or pressured if they attended Mass and wanted to avoid those issues. While others acknowledged that their own personal beliefs were an issue for them:

Not feeling pressured into having to do something in the community because I'm there, simply being acknowledged that I'm there and that's enough. I'd be more open to a personal invitation to do something if I didn't feel pressured every time I went that I'd be called on just because I was there. (M, 50-54)

I think what I am searching for is not something I can keep waiting for. I think at the moment I am waiting for a kind of certainty, almost like a 'perfect' belief. Perhaps what I actually need is to just start where I am and go from there... (F, 30-34)

A few identified that they preferred other ways of connecting with the Mass such as through online services:

I like to receive the Eucharist but no longer feel it is the most significant/important presence of Christ within me or within my life. I certainly don't feel I need to receive Communion every week. For me, Christ is a constant presence in my life. For spiritual nourishment, I prefer to participate in Mass on the Internet. (F, 80+)

General Comments

The final question in both phases of the research invited participants to share any additional insights. Respondents provided a wide range of reflections. Some respondents commented on the survey itself, while others expanded on negative experiences with the Church or offered suggestions for improvement. A few shared their personal stories of faith, including both positive experiences and challenges that hindered their ability to attend Mass. A few participants reiterated the need for action to be taken following the project.

Comments on the survey

Some participants appreciated the opportunity to share their views, saying the questions prompted deeper reflection on their faith journey. Others were critical of the survey's design and wording, expressing doubt that their feedback would lead to meaningful change:

I think having a survey like this was a very good idea. It has certainly encouraged me to think about my faith journey more closely and look into what services (outside of Masses) already exist in parishes accessible to me. (F, 40-44)

I hope none of the respondents' answers are dismissed out of hand, but I'm not holding my breath. (F, 30-34)

Comments on the interview process

Several interview participants expressed their gratitude for the research being done, as well as for being heard and having the opportunity to share their stories:

I'm very grateful for the opportunity to talk and thank you for that. (M, 55-59)

I think you've given me the opportunity to voice a whole lot of stuff that's been going around in my head for a long time. (F, 65-69)

I think what you and the bishops are doing is laudable. It's fantastic. I'm really, truly surprised that there would be this opportunity. (M, 70-74)

About the Church

Several respondents expressed deep mistrust in the Church, citing abuse issues, clericalism, hypocrisy, patriarchy and poor treatment of lay people, especially women. Concerns were also raised about bureaucracy and financial mismanagement:

I think people are still (as I am) shocked by the financial and paedophilia corruptions of the Catholic Church, which, of course, go against all we were taught about—we have lost trust in priests and the Catholic Church and its instructions. (F, 65-69)

Some of the most righteous people in our Church community are the worst people to deal with, even some of our past priests. Going to Church does not make you a better person, what you do with your life and how you treat others is more important. (M, 70-74)

A typical response was that ‘Catholicism is more than Mass’. Respondents valued living out their faith in daily life and believed and felt that weekday attendance or other forms of engagement should be equally recognised as valuable:

The Church is too Mass-centric; people want more than that—what surrounds the Mass? Even the title of this survey, ‘Absent from the Table’ is negative and even has the feeling of an accusation. Where were you? Why weren't you at the table? What else have you been doing? Like a disapproving parent to a child. The best thing the Church could do is tell people that they don't have to go to church every week, that they are welcome any time, even if that is only once in a while. (Demographics unknown)

Many voiced fears about the decline of the Church. While some respondents discussed the broader societal changes they saw as impacting Mass attendance, others expressed concerns that the Church was not focused on its true purpose:

I feel as though the Church has moved away from being a truly missionary Church to one of maintenance. (M, 65-69)

Other responses noted concerns about the Church’s relevance today, citing outdated views on birth control, gender identity, women’s equality, LGBTQI+ inclusion, and climate change. Some felt the Church's beliefs and practices did not align with their modern lives:

Beyond the scope of this, but participation falling off is also a reflection of how far the Church dogma is from the lived experience of people. (F, 45-49)

Lack of community and inclusivity

Some respondents highlighted a lack of community and inclusivity in parishes, contrasting this with more vibrant Church experiences from their childhood or other denominations:

Just that I am very hurt and disappointed by the Church’s attitude towards LGBTQ people, some of whom are my kind, good and loving grandchildren. (Sex unknown, 80+)

It feels like the Church asks much of people but does not give anything in return for their overall wellbeing. (F, 30-34)

The lack of community has been a great challenge as a mother—the lack of male mentors and leaders to guide my son and show him how to be a good man (besides his father) in today’s society. Other churches seem to be able to help men connect with each other and their sons—my son is very confused by the gender ideologies and by male violence in society, and it would be so wonderful if there were father and son groups to engage them in coming of age through strong leadership and ritual. (F, 45-49)

Issues with clergy, dioceses and schools

Several respondents raised concerns about the impact of priests on their engagement with the Church. Issues included clergy being disconnected from parish life, struggling to relate to families and children, and cultural challenges with priests from other countries. Some felt a disconnect between priests' theology and the lived experience of parishioners:

Priests very much disengaged with the realities of family life; as well as unable to connect at children's level to allow for them to participate fully in Mass. (F, 35-39)

Bringing priests from overseas to fill the many vacancies is not in my view a fair and reasonable solution for the Australian Church. Many thriving faith communities are being scattered because the priest from another culture does not know how to relate. (F, 75-79)

Concerns were also raised about Catholic schools—some felt they failed to pass on the faith effectively, while others acknowledged their role in connecting families to the Church but noted a lack of follow-up support. A few criticised schools for being overly focused on finances rather than student wellbeing:

The school-based curriculum has also resulted in young people disengaging with formal religion. It is disappointing that often, following 13 years of Catholic education, there [are] very few young people who seek to engage with the church or attend ongoing. (F, 45-49)

We also need to support Catholic schools in the extraordinary way they bring people to the faith. We often get them to church, but they don't return after they are not engaged or connected with. (M, 40-44)

Catholic secondary schools are only there to make money, I asked for assistance with fees and was told to look at another school. (M, 50-54)

Many respondents asked for clearer leadership from bishops and their dioceses, with some expressing frustration over the lack of action following consultations like the Plenary Council and Synod on Synodality. While grateful for the opportunity to contribute, many felt disheartened by the Church's slow response to calls for change:

Would really appreciate some action, please, as there is a lot of listening and discernment, but action seems limited. (F, 55-59)

The bishops are inconsistent in their teaching. They seem confused, and so are the Catholics. (M, 80+)

Thank you for the opportunity to have this say as part of the study, but I hope it is taken on board. All this 'listening', Plenary Council, Synod of Bishops, etc., people cry out for change and growth and ultimately is stifled. It becomes very disheartening and makes me less inclined to seek out Mass and only attend when it is required in my work. (F, 40-44)

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study investigated the reasons why Catholics do not participate regularly in Sunday Mass. It also explored how contemporary Catholics engage with their faith, the significance of the Eucharist in their spiritual lives, and the broader implications for the Catholic Church and the Catholic community in Australia. There were four key areas of exploration:

1. Factors influencing a Catholic's decision not to attend Sunday Mass.
2. Alternative forms of engagement with the Church.
3. Attitudes towards the Eucharist.
4. Implications for the wider Catholic community and the Church.

Mass Attendance Patterns and Perspectives

Phase 1: A diverse and richly layered Catholic experience

The Phase 1 survey captured responses from 1,963 Catholics aged 18 to over 80, across seven states and territories. While most were born in Australia, others represented at least 55 countries, contributing to a rich tapestry of cultural and spiritual perspectives about the topic. Participants varied in terms of marital status, education, occupation and religious upbringing, which shaped their experiences of Catholic identity, faith expression, and engagement with the Church.

Three-quarters of all Phase 1 respondents attended Mass less than weekly, with 19 per cent attending monthly, 36 per cent occasionally, and an additional 19 per cent not currently attending Mass at all.

Phase 2: Insights - Stories behind the statistics

The 67 Phase 2 interviews added depth to the survey findings, revealing stories of faith, disillusionment, resilience and hope. Weekly attenders were slightly over-represented; some had returned to weekly Mass after a period of absence, and others spoke on behalf of family members who no longer attended.

Interview participants expressed mixed views on Mass attendance. Some admired those who prioritised weekly Mass as a meaningful commitment, while others regarded it as an obligation or even frustrating. Several emphasised community over ritual, and some were inclined to attend if changes were made. COVID-19 reduced the sense of obligation for many, reframing Mass as one of several ways to connect with God. Others used non-attendance to signal dissatisfaction with Church teachings or conservative practices.

Interview participants described both gradual and abrupt changes to their attendance. For some, the changes unfolded over years, linked to life transitions such as leaving school, starting university, or moving parishes. Others stopped suddenly due to events like COVID-19, which disrupted routines and

weakened parish ties. While online Mass provided a temporary substitute, many did not return, citing health concerns, loss of habit, or feeling Mass was no longer central to their spiritual identity. Family dynamics, personal crises, abuse scandals, and disagreements with Church teaching also influenced their decisions that affected attendance.

Factors Influencing Non-Attendance at Sunday Mass

The study identified six main ‘participant-centred’ reasons and eight main ‘Church-centred’ reasons for why respondents did not attend Sunday Mass regularly. While most respondents named a primary reason, many described a combination of factors, offering further insights in follow-up questions. Personal experiences, attitudes and beliefs often overlapped with institutional concerns, resulting in significant intersections between the participant-centred and Church-centred reasons outlined below.

Table 3. Participant- and Church-centred Reasons for Non-Attendance

Participant-centred Reasons:	Church-centred reasons:
1. Going to Mass not a priority	1. Liturgical issues
2. Crisis of faith	2. Challenges with the parish priest and other clergy
3. Family- or household-related issues	3. The misuse of power and authority in the Church
4. Travelling, weather or temporary illness	4. Structural factors
5. Chronic illness, infirmity or old age, transport	5. Concerns related to the parish as a community
6. Attendance at another time or elsewhere	6. Disappointment in the Church
	7. Lack of inclusivity or a sense of being excluded by Church rules
	8. The irrelevance of the Church to life today

There was notable consistency between the reasons cited by respondents in this study and those identified in the 2007 research on Catholics who had ceased attending Mass. Common factors included:

- Going to Mass not a priority
- Crisis of faith
- Family- or household-related issues
- Concerns related to the parish as a community
- The misuse of power and authority in the Church
- The irrelevance of the Church to life today
- A sense of being excluded by Church rules
- Structural factors

However, this study also revealed several new primary reasons and highlighted the growing significance of factors that were previously considered minor. Among the Church-centred reasons, four stood out:

1. Disappointment in the Church
2. Liturgical issues (building on the 2007 theme of 'Poor homilies')
3. Challenges with the parish priest and other clergy (expanding on the 2007 theme 'Problems with the priest in the parish')
4. Lack of inclusivity (related to the 2007 theme 'A sense of being excluded by church rules')

Similarly, three participant-centred reasons gained prominence:

1. Attendance at another time or elsewhere
2. Chronic illness, infirmity or old age, transport
3. Travelling, weather or temporary illness (particularly among weekly attenders)

In addition to these, the study uncovered several new minor themes, which were nested within the broader categories. These nuanced factors reflect evolving social, cultural and personal contexts, and are identified in *italics* under the main reasons below.

1. Going to Mass not a priority
 - a. *Change in Mass habits since COVID-19*
2. Crisis of faith
 - a. *Connect to God in other ways*
 - b. *Don't believe weekly Mass is necessary*
3. Family- or household-related issues
 - a. *No family or friends attending*
 - b. *Partner not Catholic*
 - c. *Partner or family unsupportive of attendance*
 - d. *Other living issues*
4. Liturgical issues
 - a. *Boring or depressing Mass/Do not connect with Mass/Mass not relevant*
 - b. *Issues with the liturgy or the structure of Mass*
 - c. *Mass not age-appropriate*
 - d. *Poor music*
5. Challenges with the parish priest and other clergy
 - a. *Challenges with priests born in other countries*
6. The misuse of power and authority in the Church
 - a. *Clericalism*
 - b. *Hypocrisy and contradictions in the Church*
 - c. *Lack of trust in the Church*
7. Structural factors
 - a. *Disability support or access issues*
 - b. *Lack of priests*

- c. *Lack of Traditional Latin Mass*
- d. *Mass not offered weekly*
- e. *Preference for online Mass*

Faith Lives and Alternative Forms of Church Engagement

Despite not attending Mass weekly, many respondents still considered faith central to their lives. Over two-thirds said faith was very or fairly important, and more than three-quarters affirmed belief in Jesus as the Son of God. Similarly, over two-thirds described God as very or fairly important. Many also expressed that being Catholic remained an important part of who they were, even if their Mass attendance had changed.

For many, the Catholic faith was highly significant during childhood, shaped by family traditions (85%), school-based religious education (83%) and sacramental preparation (81%). These formative experiences continued to influence identity and values, as respondents expressed their faith through prayer, volunteering, Catholic education, and social justice work. Strong influences included involvement in youth groups (53%), and retreats or conferences (55%). Interview participants often described their Catholic identity in nuanced terms—some as ‘cultural Catholics,’ others as ‘unorthodox’ or ‘non-practising’—reflecting a spectrum of belonging beyond weekly Mass attendance.

Most participants remained engaged with their Christian faith, describing ways in which they expressed it or interacted with the Church. Nearly two-thirds (64%) prayed regularly, while smaller proportions sent their children to a Catholic school (40%), shared their faith with others (40%), wore religious symbols or displayed them at home (40%), and volunteered in the wider community (39%) or the parish (24%). Other expressions of faith included through small groups, faith-based events, and private Bible reading. Several participants expressed their faith through the way they lived their lives and how they treated others.

Nearly three-quarters (74%) described Catholic school communities as extremely or moderately important, compared with 51 per cent for parishes. Regarding participation in Catholic rituals, most interview participants stated that they would happily attend for others, such as baptisms, weddings and funerals, with some valuing these occasions as meaningful or cultural traditions. While several indicated they would still participate themselves, others expressed strong resistance, with some requesting that no Catholic funeral be held.

Participants also engaged with the Church beyond Mass, most commonly through Catholic support or welfare services (31%), social justice or political groups (14%), universities (10%), aged care or health organisations (8%), and sporting clubs (2%). A majority (62%) reported other connections, such as working or volunteering in Catholic schools, hospitals and agencies, with some describing their teaching or nursing careers as vocations. Many engaged in prayer and study groups, youth events, religious communities, and Catholic cultural or social clubs. Spiritual connections included Catholic devotions, personal prayer, Catholic arts, and spiritual direction. Digital engagement was significant, with respondents accessing online Mass, Catholic podcasts, social media, and Catholic seminars.

Almost all respondents (96%) did not attend services of other denominations or religions, with only four per cent doing so. The interviews revealed that most avoided other churches except for special occasions or ecumenical events, while a few attended regularly for inclusivity or personal preference.

Attitudes Towards the Eucharist

Many participants regarded the Eucharist as deeply meaningful for them, although their personal beliefs about the consecrated bread and wine at Mass varied. Just over half of all survey respondents (55%) believed the bread and wine truly became the sacred Body and Blood of Christ, while the remaining respondents believed it remained just bread and wine (24%) or were unsure about it (21%).

Interview participants who had a chance to elaborate further noted that the Eucharist often held significance, even if they did not attend Mass regularly. Some expressed their concerns about receiving the Eucharist when they disagreed with Church teachings or held different views about the Mass. For others, the rituals surrounding the Eucharist—especially the familiarity of traditions and the sense of community—were more important than beliefs about the elements themselves.

Several participants expressed their doubts about the doctrine of transubstantiation, and for a few, the Eucharist had little or no real significance at all. From a Church perspective, these beliefs and attitudes represent not merely pastoral trends but a weakening of faith in the Eucharist at the core of Catholic belief.

Implications for the Catholic Community

Interwoven Themes Across the Research Findings

Throughout the study, many respondents described complex and overlapping experiences that could not be easily categorised. While these themes were not always cited as primary reasons for disengagement from Sunday Mass, they consistently emerged across multiple response categories and phases of the research. Their recurrence suggests that they are deeply embedded in the broader context of Catholic life and warrant focused attention. Six key themes were identified and are explored in the following sections.

1. The Impacts of Abuse
2. Seeking Community Beyond the Parish
3. Spirituality Beyond the Church
4. Burnout and Competing Priorities
5. Generational Disconnect Among the Young
6. Indigenous Issues

The Impacts of Abuse

Abuse—particularly clergy sexual abuse—emerged as a deeply significant theme in both phases, interwoven across both participant-centred and Church-centred reasons. In Phase 1, respondents frequently cited it in connection with a crisis of faith, disappointment in the Church, a misuse of power and authority, lack of trust in Church leadership, and feelings of exclusion or judgment.

In Phase 2, participants shared personal experiences or spoke on behalf of family members or friends, revealing the enduring legacy of abuse. Emotional trauma, spiritual rupture, and disillusionment were common threads. Beyond sexual abuse, participants described experiences of spiritual and emotional harm within parishes and Catholic workplaces, including verbal harassment, mistreatment by clergy or Church leaders, and a lack of accountability. Women and lay staff, in particular, reported feeling unsupported or silenced when raising concerns.

These findings highlight the need for any pastoral response to acknowledge explicitly the impact of abuse—not only through safeguarding measures but also through meaningful efforts to rebuild trust and offer healing to survivors and their families.

Seeking Community Beyond the Parish

Throughout the study, a recurring theme emerged in which many respondents expressed a deep desire for community and belonging—one that was not always fulfilled within their local parish. This longing was evident across both participant-centred and Church-centred reasons for non-attendance. Respondents frequently cited the absence of family or friends at Mass, a lack of welcome, or limited opportunities for meaningful engagement as barriers to participation. In some cases, individuals described feeling judged, unsupported or disconnected from the broader parish community, particularly when their life circumstances, beliefs or identities did not align with prevailing norms.

In response to these experiences, many participants sought spiritual and relational connections elsewhere. Some attended weekday Masses, online services, or celebrations in other denominations where they felt more accepted and spiritually nourished. Others found community through Catholic organisations, social justice groups, or informal networks of faith. These alternative spaces often provided the relational depth, shared values, and sense of belonging that respondents felt were missing from their parish experience. This pattern was further reflected in the finding that Catholic school communities were valued more highly than parish communities. Nearly three-quarters of respondents (74%) rated Catholic school communities as ‘extremely’ or ‘moderately important’, compared to just over half (51%) for parish communities.

Altogether, these findings suggest that disengagement from Sunday Mass is not necessarily a rejection of faith, but rather a reflection of unmet communal needs. They highlight the importance of fostering inclusive, relational and welcoming parish environments where individuals feel known, valued and supported. For many Catholics, the search for community is inseparable from their spiritual journey, and any pastoral response must attend to both dimensions.

Spirituality Beyond the Church

A growing number of Catholics seek spiritual nourishment outside traditional Church settings, reflecting a broader shift toward individualised and diverse expressions of faith, a trend that was particularly evident among non-regular attenders in the study.

Many participants viewed weekly Mass as not essential for their spiritual growth. This is not a novel finding, as previous research suggests it has been a trend for some time.¹⁴⁶ Instead, participants described connecting with God through personal prayer, nature, online Mass, podcasts and acts of service. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated this shift, with many finding alternative forms of worship more accessible and spiritually fulfilling. Some felt closer to God through involvement in community service or their own personal devotions than through formal liturgy.

These insights suggest that for many Catholics, spirituality is no longer confined to physical attendance at the celebration of Mass alone. While not diminishing the importance of sacramental participation for Catholics, they offer a pastoral opportunity to recognise and affirm diverse spiritual practices and to invite individuals to rediscover the richness of the Eucharist and parish life. By expanding formation opportunities—such as retreats, small groups, and digital resources—and fostering more welcoming liturgical experiences, the Church can re-engage Catholics in ways that honour their spiritual journeys while inviting them back to the heart of Catholic worship.

Burnout and Competing Priorities

Burnout and competing priorities emerged as a central barrier to regular Mass attendance, particularly among parents, carers, shift workers, and those in rural areas. The most frequently cited participant-centred reason was that ‘Going to Mass is not a priority’, often due to demanding lifestyles and emotional exhaustion.

Respondents described feeling overwhelmed by work, family responsibilities, and social obligations. Volunteer expectations within parishes added pressure, with many expressing guilt or stress around attendance. Structural factors—such as inconvenient Mass times, scarcity of priests in rural areas, transport difficulties, and inadequate disability support—further compounded the issue.

There was a need expressed for more flexible and compassionate pastoral approaches, including alternative Mass schedules and days of obligation, outreach initiatives, and community care that respond to the realities of burnout and competing demands.

Generational Disconnect Among the Young

Another underlying theme was the disconnect between younger Catholics and regular parish life. While many young people continue to identify as Catholic and affirm core beliefs, their engagement

¹⁴⁶ A 1996 survey of parents of children attending Catholic schools revealed that 54 per cent no longer felt that being a committed Catholic required going to Mass every week. See Dixon et al., *Catholics Who Have Stopped Attending Mass*, 5.

with the Church often differs from older generations and is shaped by distinct spiritual needs and life experiences.

Participants aged 18–29 were more likely to cite reasons such as a crisis of faith, Mass not being a priority, concerns about the parish community, and the belief that they could connect with God in other ways. Many described feeling unwelcome or uninspired in their parish communities, noting a lack of peers, limited opportunities for involvement, and the absence of youth-focused ministries.

These responses suggest that many young Catholics may not reject faith itself but rather seek expressions of spirituality that feel more relevant, relational and accessible. These findings point to the need for pastoral approaches that foster belonging and engagement among younger Catholics. Approaches might include inclusive and relational parish communities, liturgies that speak to contemporary life and meaningful opportunities for younger people to participate in Church life.

Indigenous Issues

While not a dominant reason for lack of attendance at Sunday Mass, Indigenous issues surfaced as a meaningful theme interwoven with broader Church-centred concerns. A small number of respondents expressed disappointment with the Church's perceived lack of support for The Voice Referendum, viewing it as a missed opportunity for moral leadership and reconciliation and citing it as a factor influencing their disengagement. Some felt that the Church's perceived ambiguity on this issue undermined its commitment to justice in relation to First Nations peoples.

Acknowledgement of Country also featured in the responses, with contrasting views. Some felt frustrated or alienated by its inclusion in liturgical settings. In contrast, others were disappointed by parish priests who actively discouraged its use, seeing this as a failure to uphold Catholic Social Teaching and a barrier to truth-telling and healing.

Though not widespread, these concerns were emotionally significant and linked to broader themes of disappointment in the Church, liturgical dissatisfaction, and lack of inclusivity. They highlight the importance of reconciliation and cultural inclusion in the Church's pastoral engagement and future outreach.

Strategies for Reconnection

The findings of this study call for a renewed pastoral approach—one that recognises the diversity of Catholic experience and responds meaningfully to the spiritual needs of today's Catholics. In recent interviews, Pope Leo XIV described synodality as:

‘a way of ... how we can come together and be a community and seek communion as a Church, so that it's a Church whose primary focus is not on an institutional hierarchy, but rather on a sense of “we together”, “our church”, where everyone has a specific vocation, “a

role to play and something to contribute, and together we look for the way to grow and walk together as Church””.¹⁴⁷

This vision was strongly reflected in participants' responses.

While some participants identified personal barriers that prevented more frequent attendance, and a few stated they were not interested in returning to Church at all, many offered constructive suggestions for how reconnection might be fostered.

Respondents proposed a range of strategies to help them reconnect with the Church, including making Mass more engaging, being more inclusive and progressive, building relationships, and broadening Church interaction with people. Reforming Church structures, advocating on social issues, improving priestly ministry, and supporting faith and spiritual development were also seen as important pathways forward.

Suggestions for improving attendance regularity focused on making services more meaningful and relevant. This included explaining the ritual of the Mass to new or irregular attenders, offering better Mass times, shortening the duration of services, and enhancing the quality of some elements of the Mass, such as the music and language used. Some respondents called for greater flexibility, such as approving days other than Sunday to meet weekly obligations.

A recurring theme was the importance of creating welcoming parish environments where individuals feel a sense of belonging. Respondents noted that having peers of similar age, as well as family or friends present, would support their return to regular attendance. Parishes were also encouraged to be more actively involved in volunteering, community outreach, and social justice initiatives—actions that reflect the Church’s mission and foster deeper engagement.

Limitations of the Research

While this study offers valuable insights into the experiences and perspectives of Catholics in Australia, several limitations should be acknowledged.

Firstly, the sample was self-selected for both the survey and the interviews, which limits the generalisability of findings to the broader Catholic population. Certain groups—such as culturally and linguistically diverse communities, non-English speakers, individuals with lower educational attainment, or those with limited digital access—may have been underrepresented, particularly in the survey phase.

Secondly, the voluntary nature of participation in research always introduces a degree of self-selection bias. Individuals with strong views or significant personal experiences—especially those feeling disillusioned or disconnected from the Church—may have been more likely to participate, potentially skewing results toward more critical perspectives.

¹⁴⁷ Leo in Carol Glatz, “Pope says his biggest challenge since election is being a world leader”, Catholic News Service, September 15, 2025, <https://melbournecatholic.org/news/pope-says-his-biggest-challenge-since-election-is-being-a-world-leader>.

Thirdly, while the study combined quantitative and qualitative data, the depth of personal narratives was constrained by the survey format and the scope of Phase 2 interviews. Some complex themes, such as intergenerational faith transmission or nuanced theological concerns, require more targeted exploration than was possible here.

Despite these limitations, the findings offer important insights into factors influencing Mass attendance among Catholics in Australia and their engagement with the Church.

Future Research Directions

Building on the findings of this study, several areas warrant further investigation. Future research could explore the experiences of specific sub-groups within the Catholic community, such as young adults, Indigenous Catholics, culturally diverse communities, or those working in Catholic institutions. These groups may have distinct perspectives that could enrich understanding and inform targeted pastoral strategies.

Longitudinal studies could also be valuable in tracking changes in Catholic engagement over time, particularly in response to Church reforms, social movements, or global events such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, more in-depth qualitative research—such as focus groups—could provide richer insights into the lived experiences of Catholics and the spiritual dynamics that shape their relationship with the Church.

Finally, comparative studies across dioceses or international contexts could help identify patterns and innovations in pastoral practice, offering lessons that may be adapted to the Australian Church context. Such research would contribute to a more holistic and responsive approach to Catholic engagement in the Mass in contemporary society.

REFLECTIONS ON THE FINDINGS

Reflection 1: Professor Gabrielle McMullen AM, Deputy Chancellor, University of Divinity

Professor Gabrielle McMullen AM has a background in higher education, including as a former Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Academic) at Australian Catholic University and currently Deputy Chancellor of the University of Divinity. Her community contributions have encompassed membership of education, health, theological and community services boards and serving as a trustee of Mary Aikenhead Ministries and Mercy Ministry Companions. She chairs the ACBC's Australian Catholic Council for Pastoral Research.

In his opening address to the Synod on Synodality, Pope Francis recognised the opportunity of moving 'towards a *synodal Church*, an open square where all can feel at home and participate'. In this endeavour, he said, we need 'to become a *listening Church*, to break out of our routine and pause from our pastoral concerns in order to stop and listen'.¹⁴⁸ With the *Absent from the Table: Catholics in Australia who do not Regularly Attend Sunday Mass* project, the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference has sponsored research which has brought the voices of some two thousand Australian Catholics to inform current 'pastoral concerns' of the Australian Church and future planning.

The project had its origins in the national 'listening and dialogue' processes that underpinned Australia's Fifth Plenary Council and the Australian Synthesis report for the Synod on Synodality. As the current report notes, these consultations 'highlighted declining Mass participation as a pressing pastoral issue'.¹⁴⁹ The five-yearly Australian Mass attendance surveys undertaken by the National Centre for Pastoral Research record related data. The national *Absent from the Table* study, in looking at factors which have impacted on Mass attendance in Australia, is timely and offers insights for pastoral planning and potentially future research. I acknowledge the insight of Mr Daniel Ang, Director of the Sydney Centre for Evangelisation, and Dr Trudy Dantis, Director of the National Centre for Pastoral Research, who proposed the project.

The project's methodology of a self-selected online survey as Phase 1 saw a wide cross-section of respondents from metropolitan, rural and regional Australia participate in the study. While the majority were occasional or non-Mass attenders, about a fifth of respondents were monthly Mass attenders. This diversity provides rich insights about factors impacting on attendance. These were explored in greater depth in Phase 2 where 67 of the respondents volunteered to participate in interviews with the researchers. The findings of the study are complemented by an extensive Australian and international literature review.

¹⁴⁸ Francis, "Address for the Opening of the Synod", October 9, 2021, <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2021/october/documents/20211009-apertura-camminosinodale.html>.

¹⁴⁹ See page 10 in this report.

The researchers' analysis of the data from Phases 1 and 2 identified, and then explored, six frequently-stated participant-centred and eight Church-centred reasons for non-attendance at Sunday Mass. From both phases of the research, six 'interwoven themes emerged ... reflecting deeper emotional, cultural, and spiritual dynamics that shape Catholic engagement today'.¹⁵⁰ These are explored in the report for their 'implications for the Catholic community'.¹⁵¹

Importantly, the study then considers strategies identified from the participants' input for reconnection with non-attenders.¹⁵² A significant finding in relation to potential re-engagement is that many respondents who are not weekly-Mass attenders 'still considered faith central to their lives' and some two-thirds prayed regularly.¹⁵³ The study highlighted the active involvement, including volunteering, of some respondents in school communities and other Church ministries and social justice activities. Respondents' accounts of such participation offer insights into their wider (re-)engagement in a parish or other Church community.¹⁵⁴ In this regard the research offers insights for dioceses as well as ministerial public juridic persons and other Church entities in relation to their respective ministries.

In the nature of this study and with its focus on 'listening and dialogue', it makes an intentional contribution to moving 'towards a *synodal Church*, an open square where all can feel at home and participate'.¹⁵⁵ The researchers and reference group are to be commended on a substantial study which can inform evangelisation in twenty-first century Australia. The Australian Catholic Bishops Conference's sponsorship of this project and other contemporary studies reflects its commitment to the Synod's call 'to continue research aimed at clarifying and deepening the meaning of synodality and accompanying formation in the local Churches'.¹⁵⁶

¹⁵⁰ See page 13.

¹⁵¹ See pages 13, 130.

¹⁵² See pages 133-4.

¹⁵³ See page 129.

¹⁵⁴ See pages 129-30.

¹⁵⁵ Francis, "Address for the Opening of the Synod".

¹⁵⁶ Francis, *XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops – For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, Mission Final Document*, November 24, 2024, 25, https://www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/news/2024-10-26_final-document/ENG---Documento-finale.pdf.

Reflection 2: Most Rev. Anthony J. Ireland DD STD, Archbishop of Hobart

Archbishop Tony Ireland was appointed Archbishop of Hobart in June 2025 after serving as priest and bishop in the Archdiocese of Melbourne for thirty-eight years. During those years, he served as parish priest and in many teaching and leadership roles. Archbishop Tony has higher degrees in Moral and Spiritual Theology and currently chairs the Episcopal Panel for Doctrine and Morals of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference.

Having read *Absent from the Table* carefully, I am grateful for the generosity of those who shared their stories. What follows is not a technical response to the data, nor a justification of the Church's practice, but a personal reflection—shaped by experience, memory, and faith—on why the Sunday Eucharist still matters profoundly, and why its absence wounds not only the Church, but the human soul.

1. The Community That Gathers to Pray

The importance of the community that gathers for Sunday Eucharist is sometimes underestimated. We speak often about obligation or belief, but not enough about belonging. Our Jewish friends say that you have a membership of a Synagogue.

I am reminded of a small scene from TV. In the very first episode of NCIS, Kate Todd, a Secret Service agent assigned to the President's protection detail, is discovered to be dating a colleague. She is immediately dismissed—fraternisation is forbidden. Gibbs offers her a position with NCIS but warns her about the rules which she accepts. Then she asks: 'With my job and my hours, where am I ever going to find someone to date?' Gibbs gave her a one-word answer: 'Church'. Then the credits rolled.

Church is one of the few remaining places where people of different ages, backgrounds, professions, and stories still gather regularly—not because they are alike, but because they are called together. The Sunday Eucharist creates a community that does not choose itself. It receives itself. In an increasingly fragmented and lonely society, this is significant.

Absent from the Table shows clearly that many people still long for community, even if they (or their peers) do not find it in parish life. That longing itself is a sign that something essential is missing. The Eucharistic assembly is not incidental to faith; it is the locus where faith becomes shared life.

2. Love for the Lord Present in the Eucharist

The report speaks insightfully about belief, practice, knowledge, and action. Given those surveyed, it touches less explicitly on the affective dimension: love—love for Our Lord present in the Eucharist.

In my first year in the seminary, Mother Teresa came to speak to us. She did not offer a lecture on theology or pastoral strategy. She spoke simply, passionately, and with utter clarity about the Eucharist. Referring to her sisters and the poorest communities they served, she said:

'Give us a priest, no matter how old he is. Give us a priest, no matter how toothless he is. Give us a priest.'

Why? Because without a priest there is no Eucharist, and without the Eucharist the heart of the community is missing. Mother Teresa understood something that cannot be reduced to explanation: Our Lord present in the Eucharist is not only to be believed, He is to be loved. He wants not only our understanding but our hearts.

Some who are absent from Sunday Mass still believe; some still serve generously; some still pray deeply. But love fades when presence fades. The Eucharist sustains a relationship, not merely a worldview. When love grows cold, it is rarely because it was disproved, but because it was no longer nourished.

3. Credible Witnesses in a Wounded Church

The report acknowledges the deep impact of scandal, abuse, and the misuse of power. These realities cannot be minimised. They have damaged trust and made Eucharistic participation, for some, morally or emotionally impossible.

Here the words of Pope St Paul VI in *Evangelii Nuntiandi* ring true: ‘Modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses’.¹⁵⁷ The crisis before us is not only one of structure or strategy, but of credibility.

The Eucharist itself remains holy. And, those who preside, preach, and lead must be seen to live what they celebrate. Where credibility is absent, the invitation to the table rings hollow. Renewal of Eucharistic life will not come through insistence alone, but through humility, repentance, transparency, and lives that quietly align with the Gospel.

4. A Question Worth Asking

Finally, I cannot ignore a simple, almost uncomfortable observation. Post COVID-19, AFL stadiums are full again. The tennis draws massive crowds. Airline flights are full to the brim. People clearly know how to return to what they value.

So, the question must be asked: why not Sunday Mass?

The answer is not that people no longer believe in gathering, or in ritual, or even in shared passion. It is that the Church must once again help people recognise the Sunday Eucharist as something worth having at the centre of their lives. This will come with meaningful catechesis and preaching, beautiful liturgies, authentic church life and leadership, and the cultivation of a deep love for the Lord present in the Eucharist.

Absent from the Table does not close the conversation. It opens it. My hope is that, through renewed community, deeper Eucharistic love, credible witness, and honest self-examination, the altar table will once again be recognised for what it truly is: the place where Christ gathers his people, feeds them with his life, and sends them out as missionaries of hope.

¹⁵⁷ Paul VI, *Evangelii nuntiandi*, apostolic exhortation (Holy See, December 8, 1975), 41, https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_p-vi_exh_19751208_evangelii-nuntiandi.html.

Reflection 3: Professor Renée Köhler-Ryan, Associate Deputy Vice Chancellor, University of Notre Dame Australia

Renée Köhler-Ryan is Professor of Philosophy and Associate Deputy Vice Chancellor Academic at the University of Notre Dame Australia. She served as a voting member and Drafting Group Committee member of the Fifth Plenary Council of Australia and as a voting member of the Synod on Synodality. Her research includes work on the importance of community in the thought of St Augustine, and the importance of St Edith Stein for understanding human formation and education. She is a dame in the Order of St Gregory the Great.

Absent from the Table offers thoughtful insight into the continuing decline in weekly Sunday Mass attendance in Australia. As the study makes clear, there is no single cause; rather, a range of overlapping and intersecting factors shape this phenomenon. Many participants identified very recognisable pressures in their busy and complicated lives, making regular Sunday worship difficult to sustain. Others reflected on deeper wounds within the Church—most painfully, the legacy of child sexual abuse—and on the discouragement that arises when Christians fail to show one another Christ-like charity.

Having served as a voting member and Drafting Group Committee member of the Fifth Plenary Council of Australia, and more recently as a voting member of Synod on Synodality, the themes in this report are deeply familiar to me. Australians are not alone in experiencing what is captured in *Absent from the Table*. Yet the focus of this study reveals something essential that demands a genuinely multi-layered response.

When we consider who is absent from the table, we must also face the difficulty that Christ's real, personal presence in the Eucharist is, for many, no longer compelling enough to draw them into the 'full and active' participation the Church hopes for each Sunday. Human and institutional failings have contributed to a tepidity toward the 'source and summit' of the Catholic sacramental life. Others have more deliberately distanced themselves from the Church, expressing this partly through choosing not to participate in the Eucharist at all.

The upcoming International Eucharistic Congress (2028) offers a significant moment in the life of the Church in Australia. This is an opportunity to respond to some of the concerns raised in this study. One can hope that a renewed focus on beautiful and inspiring liturgy, capturing both the ancient and the new dimensions of belief in Christ's Eucharistic presence, may form one important part of that initiative. When the liturgy addresses the realities of daily life while also lifting the heart toward transcendence, the human spirit has room to rise, to breathe, and to find meaning.

One should come away from Sunday Mass renewed, to carry the life and light of Christ into the week ahead. Yet this study makes strikingly clear how many obstacles stand in the way of this opportunity to be with Christ, and with others through Him. Keeping the Lord's Day holy should offer a break from the mundane—an interruption to the relentless treadmill of work and activity that too often draw the heart away from God. It should be a moment of genuine peace and rest, a time when Christ shoulders our burdens. Instead, many experience it as empty or purely human in its construction. Others even

experience it as a place where power is misused—at times to the point of the most heartbreaking abuses imaginable.

Some have quietly drifted from Mass, while others have left in anger. Still others express loneliness—of not being seen or welcomed. Yearning for community, they find themselves unnoticed in parishes where no one greets them or overlooked even when they offer their time in ministry. St. Paul’s vision of a Church in which every person is a living, active member of Christ’s body should prompt us to ask how we might truly see and receive those who come to the table.

Catholic life depends on the living connection between the gift we receive at the altar and the mission we take into the world when we are sent forth. Nourished by the bread of angels, we are called to feed others—through works of mercy and through communities that draw us nearer to Christ by drawing us closer to one another. However, this bond between liturgy and Christian community can only deepen when Christ is more deeply known in the Eucharist. This can only happen when we come to recognise Who it is who meets us there.

If Catholics understood the Eucharist not as human construction but as divine gift—if they knew that Christ Himself is present at the table, waiting to meet us—might the trends in this study look different? Alongside this, might parishes meet some of the very practical calls for more accessible Mass times, beautiful and transformative liturgy, and homilies that illuminate Scripture for daily life?

Absent from the Table demands thoughtful engagement from those in the sanctuary, in the pews, and beyond. Above all, it reminds us that Catholics in Australia have much work before them: to prepare the way to Christ in the sacrifice on the altar, where the risen Lord beckons, nourishes, and offers His promise.

Reflection 4: Deacon Peter Pellicaan PhD, Executive Director of Archdiocesan Ministries, Archdiocese of Brisbane

Deacon Peter Pellicaan PhD is the Executive Director of Archdiocesan Ministries in the Archdiocese of Brisbane. He is an experienced practitioner working with parishes and communities to help them become mission-oriented communities where people encounter Jesus and live the joy of the gospel.

In many cases, parents will not blink an eye at a 2-hour drive to have their child attend a sporting match. Middle-aged men will set their alarms at 4:30am for a game of golf or a ride on their bike. There is no shortage of mums who will get to their gym class every afternoon after work. We humans are more than capable of significantly inconveniencing ourselves for the things we find meaningful. So why is an hour a week for Mass too much?

The National Centre for Pastoral Research has provided us with the participant-centred and Church-centred reasons that people don't attend Mass weekly. These reasons beg the question, what is truly meaningful? What would inspire a mum to drive two hours to see her son play soccer, but not drive 5 minutes so that her son might encounter Jesus, receive body and blood, soul and divinity in the Eucharist?

There are three aspects to this question. The first is the objective question: what is truly meaningful. The second is the subjective question: what does an individual recognise as meaningful? And the third aspect has to do with the experience of what is truly meaningful. Did my experience of something that is objectively meaningful, help me to experience real meaning—real nourishment—real encounter? Let's briefly examine these three aspects as it pertains to attendance at Mass.

In the Catholic Tradition we recognise the deepest desire of the human heart is an encounter with God which leads to a deeper encounter with others and all of creation. We experience this encounter with God most profoundly through the sacraments, and in a particular way with Christ in the Eucharist. We recognise that Jesus is the way, the truth and the life (John 14:6), and at every Mass we listen to the words of Christ and encounter him in the sacrament. To go to Mass is to experience the source and summit of the Christian life¹⁵⁸ and can be considered one of the most meaningful experiences within the gamut of all human experience. In this light, objectively speaking, Mass is deeply meaningful.

Having said that, we now turn our attention to the question of what an individual recognises as meaningful. With a sound and considered understanding of the Mass, it's almost laughable to juxtapose going to Mass with going to a sporting event, but what we're seeing—and what the research data identifies—is that many Catholics do not recognise the profound meaning of the Mass. The first participant-centred reason for not attending Mass weekly was simply that 'going to Mass is not a priority'. In other words, for these people, other activities are preferred and experienced as a higher

¹⁵⁸ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1324.

priority. Whether it be sport, social activities, a Netflix series or just sleep, these are considered more important and therefore more meaningful than Mass.

This raises serious questions for every parish and diocese in the country in regard to the kind of formation we are providing to those being initiated. How is it that fully initiated Catholics are not yet aware of the meaning and significance of the Mass? How is it that only 55% of those surveyed recognised Jesus' real presence in the Eucharist? And what kind of experiences are they having at their local parish that would support their notion that other things are more important?

This leads us to the final aspect, the lived experience of that which is truly meaningful. How is the objective meaning of the Mass being experienced subjectively? The fact that the first Church-centred issue raised in the research relates to liturgy suggests that the experience of liturgy is not helping the participant to experience the deep and transformative meaning of an encounter with Christ in the Eucharist. One of the challenges in assessing this is the significant distinction between how 'insiders' (regular Mass-goers) experience liturgy compared with those who may only attend occasionally. Whilst regular Mass-goers can be quite content with what takes place every Sunday, it's the visitors who will often struggle through our music, be confused by what's taking place, struggle to relate to the homily, feel disconnected and leave with the sense that what took place was neither meaningful nor relevant.

This research should inspire us to renew our parishes—and specifically our liturgies—in order that all participants experience and recognise the profound meaning of what's taking place. Let us develop a 'missionary impulse capable of transforming everything, so that the Church's customs, ways of doing things, times and schedules, language and structures can be suitably channelled for the evangelisation of today's world rather than for her self-preservation'.¹⁵⁹ Let us help all of humanity to recognise the profound meaning of an encounter with Christ so that no one is absent from the table.

¹⁵⁹ Francis, *Evangelii gaudium*, apostolic exhortation (Holy See, November 24, 2013), 27, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html.

Reflection 5: Fr Mark Reynolds, Parish Priest, Bulleen Parish

Mark Reynolds has been a priest of the Archdiocese of Melbourne for 46 years and is currently parish priest of St Clement's Bulleen and, since 2021, the Episcopal Vicar for Catholic Schools. He has ministered in a number of parishes and was, for 11 years, full-time as a member of the staff of the then Catholic Education Office. He has served on the Council of Priests, the College of Consultors and was for 18 years the secretary of the Priests Remuneration Fund. He currently chairs the Priests Retirement Foundation.

All of those involved in bringing about the document *Absent from the Table* are to be congratulated for providing a thoughtful, informative and challenging piece of research. As someone born in the early 1950s and having spent the last 46 years in priestly ministry in parish and other settings *Absent from the Table* tells something of the story that I have experienced through the years. Certainly, there are less people at the table than 70, 50, 30, 10 and 3 years ago. But there was never a time when everyone was at the table. Whilst the research makes it clear that there are a variety of reasons for the growing absence, we need to remember that this has occurred in a world that has undergone dramatic change in every aspect of life. Our world is increasingly secular, family life and constructs are different, work patterns have changed very significantly, belonging to groups and organisations has decreased, just to name a few. It is in this setting that we need to reflect on the research presented.

Most importantly, *Absent from the Table* makes clear that absence does not mean, in so many cases, opposition, disinterest or hostility. Each year, Christmas and Easter presence around the table shows this clearly.

Whilst the raw numbers tell one story which may depress, the research interviews, the qualitative research, offers much hope and opportunity. For instance, over two-thirds of those who participated indicated that their faith was either fairly or very important. Nearly 70% agreed or strongly agreed that being Catholic was an essential part of who they are today. The Eucharist was seen as deeply meaningful for many of the participants. It is also clear that there is an urgent need for formation to bring about a much deeper understanding of that which is so central to the life of the Church.

The Sacred Congregation for Divine Worship published a wonderful document way back in 1973. In paragraph 2 we read the following: "Nonetheless, we may fear spiritual harm if over the years children repeatedly experience in the Church things that are scarcely comprehensible to them"¹⁶⁰ and I think that is just as true for adults. Formation for ALL involved in the celebration of the Eucharist is essential.

Another recurring theme was around the need for a real sense of welcome, whether folk are present rarely, monthly or every week. Very much associated with this was the strongly felt need to build relationship within communities. And also the need to recognise that the expression of Catholic identity has changed. That, of course, challenges some, but it's very much reality. Very much

¹⁶⁰ Congregation for Divine Worship, *Directory for Masses With Children*, November 1, 1973, §2, <https://www.liturgybrisbane.net.au/media/cglcwkb/directory-for-masses-with-children.pdf>.

associated with this was the fact that for many, the Catholic school was the vital and life-giving means of Church affiliation, especially for parents. This too will challenge, especially when the data has shown that 74% of respondents saw the Catholic school as extremely or moderately important and only 51% for the local parish.

The report reinforces other things we know to be impactful on absence from the table. The abuse crisis, place of women, hierarchical structures, 'outdated' views were often cited.

The report also notes that a similar exercise was conducted in 2007 and since then the numbers have only decreased. The call for serious listening leading to change is louder now. As one participant noted:

“Thank you for the opportunity to have this say as part of the study,
but I hope it is taken on board”.¹⁶¹

That, I am sure, will be the hope of many.

¹⁶¹ See page 111 in this report.

Reflection 6: Mr Denis Fitzgerald, Lay Prison Chaplain and Parish Ministry Volunteer

Denis Fitzgerald has a background in government administration, including service as Australian High Commissioner to Nauru. In a subsequent career he served for more than a decade as Executive Director of Catholic Social Services Victoria. He is currently active as a lay prison chaplain, on several boards and advisory bodies with Catholic and ecumenical organisations, and in a range of ministries in his local parish, including safeguarding, justice & peace, and welcoming.

Absent from the Table addresses a major challenge, and opportunity, to our shared mission of preaching the Gospel. Its example of seeking out and listening to the bad news as well as the good advances our national practice of synodality, in challenging circumstances.

With thanks for the thorough work of the research team, I would note some of the points identified in the report which, in my experience, bear emphasis.

The pain of loss

The absence from our churches of those who were once regular Mass goers is a source of grief for many. Thirty years ago, when I looked around my local church, there were many people whom we knew as school parents, as fellow members of various social groups, as members of various religious associations etc. That cohort is now largely absent. Their children used to be there as well, but few of those are now present. This eats at the heart of many of my generation who still attend Mass, including our pastors. There are many pastoral priorities, but one of them is surely keeping these former Mass attenders front of mind, not only for those we reach out to, but also for those of us still in the pews. Thanks be to God for *Absent from the Table*.

Mass attendance is no longer a default position

Now that for much of the Catholic community Mass attendance is no longer a standard part of family and cultural life, we all need to be well prepared to explain the reason for the hope that is in us in attending weekly Mass. We need to have at heart a positive proposition, of how Mass attendance nurtures with Word and Sacrament, and how it strengthens us and others as part of the community with whom we engage with our risen Lord; a community from which we go out in loving service to others, and thus enjoy the joy and consolation of the Gospel. And we need the grace and wisdom to share that hope effectively.

A focus on people who are leaving

When people leave a parish, we often seem to not ask them why. Yet to follow up with that question seems so fundamental to pastoral ministry. Not only is it a focus on the lost sheep, as we are called to do, but ‘exit interviews’ or the like are a staple of modern management, the best elements of which we are surely called to apply to the preaching of the Gospel. Among many examples: I’ve seen a longstanding parishioner come up to a parish office and ask to be removed from the thanksgiving

program, and have his request processed without comment, and without any thanks for many decades of contributions.

Nor should we wait until people are at the exit. Embracing with humility the local dialogue based on transparency and accountability that would flow from the recommendations of Royal Commissions, Synods and Plenary Councils would enable issues to be identified in advance, and addressed.

Welcoming people home

And we must, at the same time, do all we can to work, with God's grace, to make the blessings of Mass attendance a reality for those who currently attend, and for those whom we invite to rejoin us or to come and see what the Lord has to offer. This involves offering spiritual nourishment that speaks to the people and making each person feel welcome as an individual or family.

Women

Many women whom I meet sustain a deep spirituality but are disillusioned with the Church's position on the role of women. There are exceptions, of course, but many professed religious, lay people in Catholic education, health and welfare, as well as many who would see themselves as 'ordinary Catholics' feel deeply the exclusion of their gender from ordained ministry, for reasons that they do not understand. Many of these no longer regularly attend Mass. This is a major issue, that might well have been understated in *Absent from the Table*, perhaps due to the methodology employed. It affects the composition of our communities, and the wellbeing of us all. The Church in Australia cannot change the rules on ordination of women, but there is much we can do to stand in pastoral solidarity with those who feel excluded by what they see as a patriarchal structure, and to play our part in ensuring that pastoral sensitivity and faithful dialogue and scholarship be hallmarks of the focus on women's roles, including ordination, by the universal Church.

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APPENDICES

- **Appendix A** – Notification of Ethics Approval: Phase 1
- **Appendix B** – Notification of Ethics Approval: Phase 2
- **Appendix C** – Confirmation of Ethics Approval for Phase 2 Amendment
- **Appendix D** – Invitation Letter to Dioceses
- **Appendix E** – Template for Diocesan Letter to Parish Priest or Administrator
- **Appendix F** – Template for Email to Participants
- **Appendix G** – Participant Information Letter: Phase 1
- **Appendix H** – Support Services Letter
- **Appendix I** – Phase 1 Survey Questionnaire
- **Appendix J** – Phase 2, 1st Email Invitation Template
- **Appendix K** – Phase 2, 2nd Email Invitation Template
- **Appendix L** – Phase 2 Information Letter to Participants
- **Appendix M** – Phase 2 Demographic Profile
- **Appendix N** – Phase 2 Consent Form
- **Appendix O** – Phase 2 Semi-Structured Interview Questions
- **Appendix P** – Analysis of Demographic Characteristics of Participant-centred Reasons for Not Attending Mass Regularly
- **Appendix Q** – Analysis of Demographic Characteristics of Church-centred Reasons for Not Attending Mass Regularly

Appendix A – Notification of Ethics Approval: Phase 1



Human Research Ethics Committee

NHMRC Registration No. EC00354

90 Albion Street, Box Hill, VIC 3128

Email: secretary_HREC@cra.org.au

Notification of Ethics Approval

HREC Application number: 180

Date of Approval: 16/5/2024

Project Name: Absent from the Table: Australian Catholics who do not regularly attend Sunday Mass
- Stage 1.

Principal Researcher(s): Trudy Dantis, Stephen Reid.

Organisation: National Centre for Pastoral Research

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads 'Philip Hughes'.

Rev Emeritus Professor Philip Hughes
Executive Officer,
Christian Research Association
Human Research Ethics Committee

Appendix B – Notification of Ethics Approval: Phase 2



CRA
CHRISTIAN RESEARCH
ASSOCIATION

Human Research Ethics Committee

NHMRC Registration No. EC00354

90 Albion Street, Box Hill, VIC 3128

Email: secretary_HREC@cra.org.au

Notification of Ethics Approval

HREC Application number: 205

Date of Approval: 8/11/2024

Project Name: Absent from the Table: Australian Catholics who do not regularly attend Sunday Mass
- Stage 2.

Principal Researcher(s): Trudy Dantis, Stephen Reid, Leith Dudfield.

Organisation: National Centre for Pastoral Research

Rev Emeritus Professor Philip Hughes
Executive Officer,
Christian Research Association
Human Research Ethics Committee

Appendix C – Confirmation of Ethics Approval for Phase 2 Amendment

From: [Philip Hughes](#)
To: [Trudy Dantis](#)
Cc: [Stephen Reid](#); [Leith Dudfield](#)
Subject: Re: Ethics Modification to HREC Application 205
Date: Sunday, 2 March 2025 1:22:13 PM
Attachments: [image001.png](#)

Hello Trudy,

Thanks for the details of those amendments.

The CRA Ethics Committee takes notes of those amendments. We see none of them as significantly ethically and are happy for you to proceed with your research.

Best wishes with it,

Philip Hughes,

Executive Officer, CRA HREC

On 19/02/2025 10:57 am, Trudy Dantis wrote:

Dear Philip,

Please see attached a Letter advising amendments to the application (HREC Application 205) for our 'Absent from the Table' project.

I have attached the revised forms with changes highlighted for your review.

Please let me know if these amendments meet the Committee's approval or if further changes are needed.

Kind Regards,



DR TRUDY DANTIS
National Coordinator, Synod of Bishops 2021-2024
Director, National Centre for Pastoral Research | Australian Catholic Bishops Conference
GPO Box 368, Canberra ACT 2601
P: (02) 6201 9812 |
E: trudy.dantis@catholic.org.au | W: ncpr.catholic.org.au



We acknowledge the Traditional Custodians who have walked upon and cared for this land for thousands of years. We acknowledge the continued deep spiritual attachment and relationship of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples to this Country and commit ourselves to the ongoing journey of Reconciliation.

The information in this email is confidential. If you are not the intended recipient, you must not use, copy, disclose or disseminate this email or information contained in this email, and must delete it. Opinions contained in the message(s) do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference.

Appendix D – Invitation Letter to Dioceses

Dear [Bishop],

As you may be aware, the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference is undertaking a research project investigating why some Catholics do not participate in regular weekly Sunday Mass.

Regular weekly attendance is defined as physical attendance at Sunday Mass three or more times a month, including the Saturday vigil celebrated in many parishes.

The project will provide in-depth information about contemporary religious practices and beliefs of Catholics in Australia. The insights will enable parishes, movements, and school communities to respond to the trends in participation in the Church, update the Church's awareness and understanding of the present-day context, and enable responses and collaboration around the underlying factors for non/dis-engagement.

We are seeking to survey a range of Catholics who, for various reasons, do not attend Sunday Mass regularly. To contact the broadest cross-section of people, **we would like your assistance in forwarding this request to the parishes within your diocese.**

To invite your parishes:

Attached is an email template (See "Template for Diocesan Letter to Parish Priests or Administrator") for you to use to write to your parishes and seek their assistance in inviting potential participants for the study.

Parish priests or administrators are invited to identify people known to them who do not attend Sunday Mass on a regular weekly basis. Suitable participants may include parents of children in the parish school, family members of parishioners or other Catholic acquaintances who do not attend Mass regularly.

To invite individual participants:

Parish priests or administrators can use the second email template provided (See "Template for Parish Priests to email individual participants") to invite potential participants. They will need to send each person a copy of the *Information Letter to Participants* (See attached) and the survey link provided below. The letter provides detailed information about the process and what would be required of participants. It is also available through the survey link. Please note that the survey will be open from **Monday, 17 June 2024** and will close on **Tuesday, 20 August 2024**.

<https://bit.ly/AbsentFromTheTableSurvey>

The study has been approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee at the Christian Research Association.

If you have any questions about this research, please contact me via phone (02) 6201 9812 or email at any time. I thank you for your assistance in carrying out this valuable research.

Kind Regards,



DR TRUDY DANTIS

National Coordinator, Synod of Bishops 2021-2024

Director, National Centre for Pastoral Research | Australian Catholic Bishops Conference

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Appendix E – Template for Diocesan Letter to Parish Priest or Administrator

TEMPLATE FOR DIOCESAN LETTER TO PARISH PRIEST OR ADMINISTRATOR

Dear NAME,

The Australian Catholic Bishops Conference is undertaking a research project aimed at investigating why some Catholics do not participate in regular weekly Sunday Mass (Sunday Mass includes the Saturday Vigil). The project will provide in-depth information about contemporary religious practices and beliefs of Catholics in Australia. The insights would enable parishes, movements, and school communities to respond to the trends in participation in the Church, update the Church's awareness and understanding of the present-day context, and enable responses and collaboration around the underlying factors for non/dis-engagement.

We have been asked to seek the assistance of parishes to identify people who meet the selection criteria for this survey:

1. That they self-identify as Catholics and are 18 years and over.
2. That they do not regularly* attend weekly Mass on Sundays.

*Regular weekly attendance is defined as physical attendance at Sunday Mass three or more times a month, including the Saturday vigil celebrated in many parishes.

Suitable participants may include parents of children in the parish school, family members of parishioners or other Catholic acquaintances who do not attend Mass regularly.

Attached is an email template to invite participants to complete the survey. If you are happy to assist with this research, please forward an email using the email template to any suitable people known to you. I note that the survey will run from **Monday, 17 June 2024** and close on **Tuesday, 20 August 2024**.

<https://bit.ly/AbsentFromTheTableSurvey>

We thank you for your assistance with this valuable research.

Appendix F – Template for Email to Participants

TEMPLATE FOR PARISH PRIESTS/ADMINISTRATORS TO EMAIL INDIVIDUAL PARTICIPANTS

Dear NAME,

The Australian Catholic Bishops Conference is undertaking a research project aimed at investigating why some Catholics do not participate in regular weekly Sunday Mass (Sunday Mass includes the Saturday Vigil). The project will provide in-depth information about contemporary religious practices and beliefs of Catholics in Australia. The insights would enable parishes, movements, and school communities to respond to the trends in participation in the Church, update the Church's awareness and understanding of the present-day context, and enable responses and collaboration around the underlying factors for non/dis-engagement.

We would like to invite you to take part in this research. Please click on the link below (or copy and paste the link into your browser) to access information about the project, and to enter the survey itself.

<https://bit.ly/AbsentFromTheTableSurvey>

The survey will run from **Monday, 17 June 2024** and close on **Tuesday, 20 August 2024**. Thank you for considering this invitation to participate.

Appendix G – Participant Information Letter: Phase 1



AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC BISHOPS CONFERENCE National Centre for Pastoral Research

Absent from the Table: Australian Catholics who do not regularly attend Sunday Mass

INFORMATION LETTER TO PARTICIPANTS

Title of project: Absent from the Table: Australian Catholics who do not regularly attend Sunday Mass

Names of investigators: Dr Trudy Dantis (Principal Investigator)
Dr Stephen Reid
Ms Leith Dudfield

Dear Participant,

You are invited to participate in this research project which is aimed at investigating why Catholics do not participate in regular weekly Sunday Mass (Sunday Mass includes the Saturday Vigil). The project will provide in-depth information about contemporary religious practices and beliefs of Catholics in Australia.

The survey will cover matters such as:

- Your faith and beliefs
- Previous Mass attendance patterns
- Current Mass attendance patterns
- Your involvement in other religious practices

The participants in this study will include Catholics within Australia aged 18 years and over who do not attend Sunday Mass on a regular weekly basis. Regular weekly attendance is defined as physical attendance at Sunday Mass three or more times a month, including the Saturday vigil celebrated in many parishes. The findings of this research project will offer a number of benefits to the Catholic community in Australia including:

- Identifying the factors that influence a Catholic's decision not to attend Sunday Mass;
- Exploring other ways in which they engage with the Church and why;
- Gaining a greater understanding of the attitudes of non-attenders towards the Eucharist; and,
- Exploring the implications of this phenomenon for the wider Catholic community and the Church at large.

You are under no obligation to accept this invitation to participate in the survey. If you decide to participate, you have the right to:

- Ask any questions about the study at any time during participation
- Decline to answer any question
- Choose to withdraw from the study at any time without giving a reason
- Be given access to the research findings when the project is concluded
- Preserve your confidentiality with regard to participation in this project.

ACBC National Centre for Pastoral Research
GPO Box 368 Canberra ACT 2601

T: (02) 6201 9812

ncpr@catholic.org.au
www.ncpr.catholic.org.au

The survey is anonymous and only aggregated results will be published. No identifiable information will be collected about participants.

This study has been approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee of the Christian Research Association. In the event that you have any complaint or concern about the way you have been treated during the study, or if you have any query that the researcher has not been able to satisfy, you may contact the Chair of the Ethics Committee, Dr Neville Carr, via email at: secretary_hrec@cra.org.au. Any complaint or concern will be treated in confidence and fully investigated, and the participant will be informed of the outcome.

For more information on the project, please contact Dr Trudy Dantis, Director, National Centre for Pastoral Research: trudy.dantis@catholic.org.au



.....
Dr Trudy Dantis, Director



Appendix H – Support Services Document



AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC BISHOPS CONFERENCE National Centre for Pastoral Research

Absent from the Table: Australian Catholics who do not regularly attend Sunday Mass

SUPPORT SERVICES

Participation in this project is completely voluntary and you may, without any penalty, decline to take part, refuse to answer a question, or withdraw at any time without providing an explanation.

If after the survey you want to talk to someone about what was discussed, if this has raised any issues for you that make you feel uncomfortable, or if you wish to talk to a counsellor, please see the range of contact numbers provided in this sheet.

If you, or someone you are caring for, is in imminent danger, please call 000.

- Lifeline 13 11 14 <https://www.lifeline.org.au/>
- Beyond Blue – support for anxiety and depression 1300 224 636
<https://www.beyondblue.org.au/>
- Headspace – support for young people experiencing mental health issues 1800 650 890
<https://headspace.org.au/>
- Mensline Australia 1300 789 978 <https://mensline.org.au/>



Appendix I – Phase 1 Survey Questionnaire

Default Question Block



ABSENT FROM THE TABLE:

Australian Catholics who do not regularly attend Sunday Mass

The National Centre for Pastoral Research (NCPR), an agency of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, has developed a survey to investigate why some Australian Catholics do not participate regularly in Sunday Mass.

The participants in this study are **Catholics in Australia who do not attend Sunday Mass on a weekly basis**. Regular weekly attendance at Sunday Mass is defined as physical attendance three or more times a month, including the Saturday vigil. The definition for this project does not include attendance at services held online nor Sunday Liturgies in the Absence of a Priest.

This survey is for Catholics aged 18 years or older.

This is an opportunity for you to make known your experiences to the bishops, priests, parish communities and to a wider audience including schools and agencies of the Church. The important information gathered from this survey will be used to lay a strong research foundation to support further pastoral action in this area.

The survey is anonymous and confidential. You will not be asked to provide your name, location or any other identifiable details. Your involvement in this project is entirely voluntary but your time would be greatly appreciated. The survey could take around 10 minutes, but there are a few questions which allow you to provide unlimited additional comments. A report of the aggregated results will be written and published in some form, but no individuals can be identified in any way.

This research has been approved by the Christian Research Association Human Research Ethics Committee. In the event that you have any complaint or concern about this research, you may contact the Chair of the Ethics Committee, Dr Neville Carr, via email at: secretary_hrec@cra.org.au.

Should any of the questions in this survey raise any issues for you that make you feel uncomfortable, or you wish to talk with a counsellor, please contact one of the support services listed in [THIS DOCUMENT](#).

For more information on the project, please contact:

Dr Trudy Dantis, Director, National Centre for Pastoral Research: trudy.dantis@catholic.org.au

If you have technical difficulties with this survey, please contact Dr Stephen Reid: stephen.reid@catholic.org.au.

The last date for completing this survey is **Tuesday 20 August 2024**.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Q1. Which best describes your initiation into the Catholic Church?

- ☐ I was baptised Catholic as a child
- ☐ I was baptised and confirmed in the Catholic church as an adult
- ☐ I was baptised in another denomination and confirmed into the Catholic Church as an adult
- ☐ I am not Catholic

PREVIOUS ATTENDANCE AT MASS

Q2. How often did you attend Mass at each of the following ages? *If you have not reached that age, select 'Not applicable'*

	At least weekly	At least monthly	Occasionally	Not at all	Not applicable
At age 7	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
At age 16	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
At age 20	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
At age 30	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
At age 40	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
At age 50	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
At age 60	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

ABOUT YOUR FAITH AND BELIEFS

Q3. How important is faith in your life?

- ☐ The most important thing in my life
- ☐ Very important, but other things are also important
- ☐ Fairly important, but many other things are more important
- ☐ Not important at all
- ☐ I do not have a personal faith
- ☐ I am not sure

Q4. Which of the following statements is closest to your belief about Jesus?

- ☐ Jesus is the Son of God
- ☐ Jesus was a religious leader, but not God
- ☐ Jesus was just a normal person
- ☐ Jesus was not a real historical person
- ☐ I am not sure what to think about Jesus

Q5. When you were growing up, how important was the Catholic faith to you?

- ☐ The most important thing in my life
- ☐ Very important, but other things were also important
- ☐ Fairly important, but many other things were more important
- ☐ Not important at all
- ☐ Not sure

Q6. Do you agree or disagree? 'Being Catholic is an important part of who I am today'

- ☐ Strongly agree
- ☐ Agree
- ☐ Neutral or unsure
- ☐ Disagree
- ☐ Strongly disagree

Q7. How important is God in your life?

- ☐ God is the most important reality in my life
- ☐ God is very important, but other things are also important
- ☐ God is fairly important, but many other things are more important
- ☐ God does not matter to me at all
- ☐ I do not believe in God
- ☐ Not sure

Q8. Which of the following statements about the consecrated bread and wine at Mass expresses your own personal belief?

- ☐ They truly become the sacred Body and Blood of Christ
- ☐ They remain just bread and wine
- ☐ I am not really sure what to believe

OTHER RELIGIOUS PRACTICES AND INVOLVEMENT

Q9. How would you rate the importance of each of the following communities in your life?

	Extremely important	Moderately important	Important on special occasions and feast days only	Not very important	Irrelevant	Not sure	Not applicable
Local parish community	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Catholic school community	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Q10. Aside from attendance at Mass, are there other ways in which you connect with the Catholic community? *Select all that apply*

- ☐ I am involved with a Catholic support/welfare service
- ☐ I am involved with a Catholic aged care or health organisation
- ☐ I am involved with a Catholic social justice or political group
- ☐ I am involved with a Catholic sporting club
- ☐ I am involved with a Catholic University
- ☐ Other (please describe)

Q11. In what ways do you express your faith in your life? *Select all that apply*

- ☐ I pray regularly
- ☐ I read the Bible privately
- ☐ I share my faith with others
- ☐ I volunteer my time in the parish
- ☐ I volunteer my time in the wider community
- ☐ I wear religious symbols or display them at home
- ☐ I receive the Sacrament of Reconciliation
- ☐ I belong to a small faith group
- ☐ I attend other faith events in my community
- ☐ I send my child to a Catholic school
- ☐ Other (please describe)

CURRENT ATTENDANCE AT MASS

Q12. How often do you currently attend Mass?

- ☐ At least weekly
- ☐ At least monthly
- ☐ Occasionally
- ☐ Not at all
- ☐ Not applicable

Q13. If Mass is not available in your area, do you attend Sunday celebrations in the absence of a priest?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

Q14. How often do you currently attend Sunday celebrations in the absence of a priest?

- ☐ At least weekly
- ☐ At least monthly
- ☐ Occasionally
- ☐ Not at all

Q15. Do you **regularly** attend worship services of another Christian church or religion?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

Q16. What is the **main reason** you **do not** attend Mass at least weekly?

Q17. Are there other factors that influence you to not attend Mass at least weekly? *If so, please describe*

Q18. Would you like to provide more information about your answers above?

YOUR FAITH JOURNEY

Q19. In thinking about your faith journey, which of the following have been a part of your life? *Select all that apply*

- ☐ Faith experiences in your home/family (e.g. prayer, Catholic traditions, other faith activities)
- ☐ Preparation for sacraments in the parish or school
- ☐ Religious education or instruction at school
- ☐ Involvement in youth groups or other church groups
- ☐ Attendance at spiritual retreats or conferences
- ☐ Other (please describe)
- ☐ None of the above

DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONS

In order to do further analysis of the results, would you mind providing us with a little bit more information about yourself.

Q20. What is your postcode?

Q21. What is your age group?

Q22. Are you . . .

- ☐ Female?
- ☐ Male?
- ☐ Prefer not to say

Q23. In which country were you born?

- ☐ Australia
- ☐ India
- ☐ Ireland (including Northern Ireland)
- ☐ Italy
- ☐ New Zealand
- ☐ Philippines
- ☐ United Kingdom (except Northern Ireland)
- ☐ Other (please specify)

Q24. Where were your mother and father born?

Mother

Father

Q25. In which year did you arrive in Australia?

Q26. What is your current marital status?

- ☐ Never married
- ☐ Married
- ☐ In a defacto relationship
- ☐ Separated
- ☐ Divorced
- ☐ Widowed

Q27. What type of school did (or do) you **mainly** attend?

	Catholic	Government	Other non-government
Primary	☐	☐	☐
Secondary	☐	☐	☐

Q28. What type of school did (or do) your child/ren **mainly** attend?

	Catholic	Government	Other non-government	Not applicable
Primary	☐	☐	☐	☐
Secondary	☐	☐	☐	☐

Q29. What is the highest educational qualification you have completed?

- ☐ Primary school
- ☐ Some secondary school
- ☐ Completed secondary school
- ☐ Trade certificate
- ☐ Diploma or associate diploma
- ☐ Bachelor degree
- ☐ Postgraduate degree or diploma

Q30. What is your general occupation? *If you are not currently in paid employment, please select 'Not applicable'*

- ☐ Manager
- ☐ Professional
- ☐ Technician or trade worker
- ☐ Community or personal service worker
- ☐ Clerical or administrative worker
- ☐ Sales worker
- ☐ Machinery operator or driver
- ☐ Labourer
- ☐ Not applicable

Q31. What is the religion of your spouse or partner? *If you do not have a spouse or partner, please select 'Not applicable'*

- ☐ Catholic
- ☐ Anglican
- ☐ Orthodox
- ☐ Other Christian
- ☐ Non-Christian
- ☐ No religion
- ☐ Not applicable

FINAL THOUGHTS

Q32. Are there things the Church could do that would encourage you to reconnect or re-engage with the Mass?

Q33. What might help you to consider attending more frequently?

Q34. Would you like to say anything else about any of the topics or questions asked today?

Thank you for taking the time to respond to this survey. A copy of the research findings will be available at ncpr.catholic.org.au

Would you be interested in being contacted for an interview to discuss these matters? If yes, please send an email to ncpr@catholic.org.au

If not, please click to the next page.

Thank you for your interest in this survey. I'm sorry though, this survey is only for those who are Catholic.

Please click to the next page or close your browser to exit.

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Appendix J – Phase 2, 1st Email Invitation Template

EMAIL 1: INVITATION TO SPECIFY MONTH

Absent from the Table: Australian Catholics who do not regularly attend Sunday Mass project

Dear NAME,

Thank you for your involvement with our survey last year for the project *Absent from the Table: Australian Catholics who do not regularly attend Sunday Mass* and for expressing your interest in taking part in the interview process of Phase 2.

We are now beginning to organise interviews which we plan to run between 1 March and 31 July 2025. Our plan is to run 1-hour long interviews over Microsoft Teams. Other arrangements may be possible depending on availability.

Please let me know:

- Your preferred month for interview and/or any times that you would be unavailable;
- Your best contact details (email and phone if possible).

We will then contact you to organise a specific interview time and to provide more information.

In the meantime, please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any queries.

With thanks and warm regards|

Appendix K – Phase 2, 2nd Email Invitation Template

EMAIL 2: INVITATION TO PROPOSE INTERVIEW TIME

Absent from the Table: Australian Catholics who do not regularly attend Sunday Mass project

Dear NAME,

Thank you for getting back to me about participating in an interview for our *Absent from the Table: Australian Catholics who do not regularly attend Sunday Mass* project. My apologies for the delay in responding.

We are running 1-hour long interviews over Microsoft Teams. Interview times slots are generally available on Monday to Friday, with morning sessions usually held at 10.30am and afternoon sessions at 2:00pm AEST (Sydney, Canberra, Melbourne time), although we have some flexibility if none of the above are suitable for you. ***Please take into account any time zone differences***

Please let me know:

- Two or three dates for any of the timeslots above that would be suitable for you (in order of preference).
If none of the time slots are suitable, please feel free to suggest an alternative date/time. We have some capacity for out-of-business-hours time slots if required.
- If you have a preference for a male or female interviewer, or it doesn't matter.

I will then confirm the date and time and send you the meeting link.

I have also attached the following documentation:

- A Participant Information Sheet
- Support Services Sheet
- Consent Form – **Please complete, sign and return**
- Demographic Profile – **Please complete and return**

Please read through the documents. We would be grateful if you could complete/sign and return the consent form and demographic profile to ncpr@catholic.org.au before the interview.

In the meantime, please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any queries.

Appendix L – Phase 2 Information Letter to Participants



AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC BISHOPS CONFERENCE National Centre for Pastoral Research

Absent from the Table: Australian Catholics who do not regularly attend Sunday Mass Stage 2 – Interviews

INFORMATION LETTER TO PARTICIPANTS

Title of project: Absent from the Table: Australian Catholics who do not regularly attend Sunday Mass

Names of investigators: Dr Trudy Dantis (Principal Investigator)
Dr Stephen Reid Ms Katherine Jelavic
Ms Leith Dudfield Ms Carole Gan

Dear Participant,

You are invited to participate in this research project which is aimed at investigating why Catholics do not participate in regular weekly Sunday Mass. Regular weekly attendance at Sunday Mass is defined as physical attendance three or more times a month, including the Saturday vigil. The definition for this project does not include attendance at services held online nor Sunday Liturgies in the Absence of a Priest. The project will provide in-depth information about contemporary religious practices and beliefs of Catholics in Australia.

Stage 2 of the Absent from the Table research project involves one-on-one interviews and will take approximately an hour. The interviews, which will be primarily done online, take a deeper look at some of the issues raised in questionnaires in Stage 1. You will also be asked to complete a demographic profile prior to the interview.

The interview will cover matters such as:

- Your faith and beliefs
- Previous Mass attendance patterns
- Current Mass attendance patterns
- Your involvement in other religious practices

The participants in this study will include Catholics within Australia aged 18 years and over who do not attend Sunday Mass on a regular weekly basis. The findings of this research project will offer a number of benefits to the Catholic community in Australia including:

- Identifying the factors that influence a Catholic's decision not to attend Sunday Mass;
- Exploring other ways in which they engage with the Church and why;
- Gaining a greater understanding of the attitudes of non-attenders towards the Eucharist; and,
- Exploring the implications of this phenomenon for the wider Catholic community and the Church at large.

You are under no obligation to accept this invitation to participate in an interview. If you decide to participate, you have the right to:

- Ask any questions about the study at any time during participation
- Decline to answer any question
- Choose to withdraw from the study at any time without giving a reason
- Be given access to the research findings when the project is concluded
- Preserve your confidentiality with regard to participation in this project.

Interviews will be recorded for the purpose of transcription and analysis and can only be accessed by NCPR research staff and other authorised IT personnel. Any details that identify participants will be kept confidential at all times and will not be disclosed. Data will be stored for a minimum of seven years before being destroyed in accordance with ACBC data security protocols.

Please also find attached a list of Support Services that you may choose to access if you feel uncomfortable or wish to discuss further any of the topics raised during the interview.

This study has been approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee of the Christian Research Association. In the event that you have any complaint or concern about the way you have been treated during the study, or if you have any query that the researcher has not been able to satisfy, you may contact the Chair of the Ethics Committee, Dr Neville Carr, via email at: secretary_hrec@cra.org.au. Any complaint or concern will be treated in confidence and fully investigated, and the participant will be informed of the outcome.

If you agree to participate in this project, please complete the attached Demographic Profile and sign the Consent Form which will be provided prior to the interview.

For more information on the project, please contact Dr Trudy Dantis, Director, National Centre for Pastoral Research: trudy.dantis@catholic.org.au

.....
Dr Trudy Dantis, Director



ACBC National Centre for Pastoral Research
GPO Box 368 Canberra ACT 2601

T: (02) 6201 9812

ncpr@catholic.org.au
www.ncpr.catholic.org.au

Appendix M – Phase 2 Demographic Profile



AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC BISHOPS CONFERENCE National Centre for Pastoral Research

Absent from the Table: Australian Catholics who do not regularly attend Sunday Mass

DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE

Dear Participant,

Thank you for your willingness to be interviewed as part of our investigation into why Catholics do not participate in regular weekly Sunday Mass. To assist us with preparing for your interview, we would be grateful if you could fill out the information in the form below and return it to us. We note that while you may have completed the same information in the initial survey, the anonymous nature of the survey prevents us from identifying your previous response.

CONTACT INFORMATION

Full name: _____

Email address: _____

Phone number: _____

Postcode: _____

Do you have a preference for a male or female interviewer?

☐ Yes, male ☐ Yes, female ☐ No, I don't have a preference

Are there any other accommodations you need to participate in the interview?
(e.g. need for an interpreter; particular meeting software to enable certain accessibility features for someone who is hearing-impaired)

DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

You are: ☐ Female
☐ Male
☐ Prefer not to say

What is your age group:

- | | |
|--------------------------------|--|
| ☐ 18-19 | ☐ 50-54 |
| ☐ 20-24 | ☐ 55-59 |
| ☐ 25-29 | ☐ 60-64 |
| ☐ 30-34 | ☐ 65-69 |
| ☐ 35-39 | ☐ 70-74 |
| ☐ 40-44 | ☐ 75-79 |
| ☐ 45-49 | ☐ 80 years and over |

Country of Birth	You	Mother	Father
Australia	☐	☐	☐
India	☐	☐	☐
Ireland (inc. Northern Ireland)	☐	☐	☐
Italy	☐	☐	☐
New Zealand	☐	☐	☐
Philippines	☐	☐	☐
United Kingdom	☐	☐	☐
(except Northern Ireland)			
Other (please specify)	_____	_____	_____

Are you of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent?

- ☐ Yes, Aboriginal
- ☐ Yes, Torres Strait Islander
- ☐ Yes, both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander
- ☐ No
- ☐ Prefer not to say

What is your furthest educational achievement?

- ☐ Post-graduate qualification
- ☐ Bachelor degree
- ☐ Diploma or Trade qualification
- ☐ Year 12 certificate or equivalent
- ☐ Did not complete year 12
- ☐ Prefer not to say

MASS ATTENDANCE

How often do you currently attend Mass?

- ☐ At least weekly
- ☐ At least monthly
- ☐ Occasionally
- ☐ Not at all

How did you become a Catholic?

- ☐ Baptised as a baby/child
- ☐ Baptised and confirmed as an adult
- ☐ Baptised in another denomination and confirmed Catholic as an adult
- ☐ Other _____

You will be able to provide further details about any of your answers during your interview. Please return your completed form to ncpr@catholic.org.au.

Appendix N – Phase 2 Consent Form



AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC BISHOPS CONFERENCE National Centre for Pastoral Research

Absent from the Table: Australian Catholics who do not regularly attend Sunday Mass CONSENT FORM FOR INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS

Title of project: Absent from the Table: Australian Catholics who do not regularly attend Sunday Mass

Names of investigators: Dr. Trudy Dantis (Principal Investigator)
Dr. Stephen Reid Ms Katherine Jelavic
Ms. Leith Dudfield Ms Carole Gan

- ☐ I have read and understood the information provided in the Information Letter to Participants. Any questions I have asked, have been answered to my satisfaction.
- ☐ I agree to participate in this activity, realising that I can withdraw at any time. I give my consent for the interview to be digitally recorded.
- ☐ I agree that the researchers will use their discretion to remove any sensitive data and that I will have the option to review all remarks made by me before they are used in the study.

NAME OF PARTICIPANT:
(Block letters)

SIGNATURE: DATE:

SIGNATURE OF PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: 

DATE:4/3/2025.....

Please return the form to ncpr@catholic.org.au



Appendix O – Phase 2 Semi-Structured Interview Questions



AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC BISHOPS CONFERENCE National Centre for Pastoral Research

Absent from the Table: Australian Catholics who do not regularly attend Sunday Mass

INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

Introduction

Thank you for agreeing to be part of this interview.

*I am a researcher with the National Centre for Pastoral Research. We are undertaking some research to investigate why some Catholics do not participate in regular weekly Sunday Mass. This project will help us obtain **in-depth data about contemporary religious practices and beliefs of Catholics in Australia**. You would have completed the online survey, and as part of this interview, we hope to expand on some of the topics touched on in the survey.*

*We are particularly interested in your **honest opinions and your experiences**. Whatever you say is just between the two of us and the other researchers, unless a criminal offence is disclosed or something else is said which I legally have to report.*

*We will be writing a **general report** which will take into account all the things that we hear from people in these interviews, but **no one will specifically be identified** in any way. If we want to use a direct quote or attribute comments to you, we will give you the chance to read what will be published and seek your further consent.*

*In order to get an accurate account of what we discuss, is it okay if I **record this conversation** and take a few notes? **If there is anything I ask that you don't want to talk about, that is fine.***

*This interview will go for **no longer than 60 minutes**, but if you want to stop at any time, you are **free to do so**. If you have any complaints about the process, then the information sheet gives you a contact person to follow it up with. Thanks for agreeing to be interviewed.*

[If needed, confirm documentation sent in – Demographic Profile and Consent Form.]

Are you happy to proceed?

NOTES FOR INTERVIEWER: -----

1. Italicised questions are prompts.
2. If the interviewee does not attend Mass and/or does not identify as Catholic, be mindful to adjust questions accordingly.

Introduction

- 1) Tell me briefly about yourself. [*Are you married? Do you have kids? Are you studying? Where do you live?*] [**Use Demographic Profile for prompts**]
- 2) What drew you to be a part of this project? [*What interested you in this research?*]

Mass Attendance and the Catholic Faith

- 3) Do you currently attend Mass?
 - a) [*If yes*] Can you tell me about how often you attend Mass? [*special occasions, frequency*]
 - b) [*If no*] When did you last attend Mass?
- 4) Do you currently identify as Catholic? [*If no, be especially sensitive to how the following questions are phrased*]
- 5) Can you tell me about your Mass attendance patterns in the past? [*Growing up, over time*]
- 6) What other ways have you been involved in the Church? [*Growing up, over time, current*]
- 7) Have you been involved with other Catholic organisations? [*e.g. St Vincent de Paul, Catholic school, Catholic healthcare, youth group*] Please describe.
- 8) Are there any other ways that you express the Catholic faith in your life? [*e.g. praying, reading the Bible, rosary, volunteering etc.*]
- 9) Are your family or friends Catholic? [*especially Partner / Family / Household*] Do they attend Mass?
 - a) How does their faith and/or Mass attendance influence your own, if at all?
- 10) Do you attend services of other denominations/religions? If so, which?
- 11) What are your general views about Mass attendance?
- 12) What are your general views about the Eucharist?

Change in Mass Attendance Patterns

- 13) When and how did the change in your Mass attendance patterns begin [*decreasing/increasing/ceasing*]? Was the change gradual or abrupt: was there a moment of decision or realisation?
- 14) Which factors influenced the change? [*Personal or External factors*]

View of the Church

- 15) What is your current view of the Catholic Church?
- 16) How do you feel about participating in Catholic rituals in your own life or others, such as baptisms, weddings, funerals?
- 17) What is your current view of Catholic clergy – bishops, priests and deacons?
- 18) What is your current view of your local Catholic community (i.e. parish or school)?
- 19) What about other Catholics in general?

Future Involvement and Final Comments

- 20) *[If they have ceased attending Mass]* Is attending Sunday Mass something you would like to do in the future? *[If so]* What would help you to do so?
- 21) *[If they have decreased attendance]* Would you like to attend Sunday Mass more often? *[If so]* What would help you to do so?
- 22) *[If they would like to attend Mass in future]* Are there things the Church or parish could do that would make a difference to you attending the Mass more often in the future?
- 23) *[See separate demographic profile.]* Is there anything in your demographic profile that you wanted to provide more information about?
- 24) Is there anything else you would like to tell us?

Appendix P – Analysis of Demographic Characteristics of Participant-centred Reasons for Not Attending Mass Regularly

Participant-centred reasons for not attending Mass regularly, by Demographic characteristic (Percentage of each group naming each reason)

Demographic characteristic	N.	Going to Mass not a priority	Crisis of faith	Family or household-related issues	Travelling, weather or temporary illness	Chronic illness, infirmity or old age, transport	Attendance at another time or elsewhere
Age							
18-29	117	30.8	12.0	5.1	0.9	0.9	1.7
30-49	683	40.3	7.5	9.2	3.5	0.3	0.9
50-69	667	21.3	7.5	2.4	3.7	1.0	0.3
70 years and over	407	8.6	4.4	1.5	6.4	6.9	0.5
Sex							
Female	1,298	27.7	7.4	5.7	4.3	2.4	0.5
Male	550	22.5	6.2	2.4	3.6	0.5	0.7
Prefer not to say	35	11.4	11.4	11.4	0.0	0.0	2.9
Birthplace							
Australia	1,513	27.3	7.6	4.8	3.3	1.8	0.5
Overseas ESC	161	18.6	8.1	6.2	2.5	4.3	0.0
Overseas NESC	218	20.6	3.7	4.1	10.1	1.8	1.8
Year of Arrival							
1993 and before	130	29.2	6.2	3.1	4.6	2.3	0.8
1994-2003	30	30.0	10.0	3.3	0.0	3.3	0.0
2004-2013	76	15.8	1.3	7.9	10.5	1.3	0.0
2014-2023	39	35.9	0.0	2.6	10.3	0.0	0.0
Primary School Attended							
Catholic	1,445	24.9	7.4	4.3	3.9	2.1	0.4
Government	402	29.9	6.7	6.7	4.0	2.0	1.5
Other non-government	48	20.8	4.2	4.2	6.3	0.0	0.0
Secondary School Attended							
Catholic	1,410	25.9	7.7	4.0	3.8	1.8	0.4
Government	381	28.3	5.8	6.6	4.5	1.8	1.8
Other non-government	85	20.0	5.9	10.6	3.5	3.5	0.0
Highest Qualification							
Bachelors or higher	1,336	26.6	7.3	5.4	4.3	1.2	0.7
Certificate	89	29.2	4.5	1.1	4.5	1.1	1.1
Diploma or associate diploma	257	21.8	6.2	3.5	3.5	3.9	0.8
Secondary school or lower	219	24.2	8.2	4.1	2.3	5.0	0.0
Occupation							
Occupation - Manager or professional	1,089	32.0	8.2	5.9	2.8	0.6	0.6
Occupation - Sales, clerical, community or other	223	31.4	6.7	3.1	5.4	1.3	0.9
Occupation - Labourer, technician or tradeworker	52	32.7	7.7	3.8	0.0	0.0	1.9
Marital Status							
Marital Status - Married	1,278	28.5	6.5	5.8	4.0	1.4	0.5
Marital Status - Divorced or Separated	150	24.7	9.3	2.7	4.7	2.0	0.0
Marital Status - Widowed	96	8.3	2.1	2.1	7.3	6.3	1.0
Marital Status - De facto	80	32.5	10.0	8.8	1.3	0.0	1.3
Marital Status - Never married	274	19.3	8.8	1.1	3.6	3.3	1.5
Partner's Religion							
Catholic	913	26.0	4.8	5.1	4.2	1.8	0.5
Christian, not Catholic	281	27.8	8.5	5.3	5.7	0.7	0.7
Non Christian	33	30.3	12.1	0.0	6.1	3.0	0.0
No Religion	238	37.4	11.8	10.9	0.8	0.4	0.0

Appendix Q – Analysis of Demographic Characteristics of Church-centred Reasons for Not Attending Mass Regularly

Church-centred reasons for not attending Mass regularly, by Demographic characteristic (Percentage of each group naming each reason)

Demographic characteristic	N.	Liturgical issues	Problems with the parish priest and other clergy	The misuse of power and authority in the Church	Structural factors	Concerns related to the parish as a community	Disappointment in the Church	Lack of inclusivity, A sense of being excluded by Church rules	The irrelevance of the Church to life today
Age									
18-29	117	13.7	0.9	6.8	5.1	10.3	2.6	0.0	2.6
30-49	683	12.2	4.1	3.7	5.0	4.5	1.5	1.3	1.8
50-69	667	13.6	7.8	7.3	4.9	5.2	4.9	3.4	2.5
70 years and over	407	8.8	6.4	4.9	3.9	2.5	5.7	2.2	1.2
Sex									
Female	1,298	11.1	6.2	5.6	5.4	4.9	3.5	2.8	2.0
Male	550	14.0	3.6	4.7	3.3	4.0	3.8	0.7	1.5
Prefer not to say	35	14.3	17.1	2.9	2.9	5.7	2.9	2.9	8.6
Birthplace									
Australia	1,513	12.5	5.9	5.9	4.6	4.8	3.8	2.5	2.0
Overseas ESC	161	14.3	6.2	5.0	6.2	3.7	3.1	1.2	2.5
Overseas NESC	218	7.3	3.2	2.3	4.1	4.1	2.8	0.5	0.5
Year of Arrival									
1993 and before	130	7.7	2.3	4.6	6.9	3.8	4.6	1.5	1.5
1994-2003	30	10.0	3.3	6.7	6.7	6.7	6.7	6.7	3.3
2004-2013	76	13.2	6.6	9.2	5.3	5.3	2.6	3.9	1.3
2014-2023	39	7.7	2.6	2.6	2.6	5.1	5.1	0.0	0.0
Primary School Attended									
Catholic	1,445	12.7	5.6	5.9	4.5	4.0	4.0	2.0	2.2
Government	402	9.5	6.0	4.0	6.0	6.2	2.5	2.2	1.2
Other non-government	48	8.3	4.2	2.1	4.2	8.3	2.1	4.2	0.0
Secondary School Attended									
Catholic	1,410	12.5	5.8	6.0	4.8	4.8	3.7	2.3	2.0
Government	381	10.2	4.5	3.1	6.0	3.7	3.9	1.3	1.8
Other non-government	85	9.4	8.2	7.1	1.2	7.1	1.2	3.5	2.4
Highest Qualification									
Bachelors or higher	1,336	12.5	6.2	5.5	4.6	5.2	4.0	2.7	2.4
Certificate	89	12.4	4.5	5.6	5.6	4.5	2.2	1.1	0.0
Diploma or associate diploma	257	12.1	5.1	5.4	4.7	2.3	3.5	0.4	1.6
Secondary school or lower	219	8.2	3.2	5.0	5.9	3.7	1.8	0.9	0.5
Occupation									
Occupation - Manager or professional	1,089	14.0	6.2	5.4	4.4	5.2	3.4	2.7	2.5
Occupation - Sales, clerical, community or other	223	9.4	4.0	4.9	5.8	5.8	0.9	0.4	1.3
Occupation - Labourer, technician or tradeworker	52	15.4	0.0	7.7	7.7	1.9	1.9	0.0	0.0
Marital Status									
Marital Status - Married	1,278	12.9	5.9	4.9	4.8	4.1	3.8	2.0	2.0
Marital Status - Divorced or Separated	150	10.7	4.7	6.7	5.3	3.3	3.3	2.7	4.0
Marital Status - Widowed	96	8.3	9.4	4.2	4.2	2.1	7.3	4.2	1.0
Marital Status - De facto	80	15.0	3.8	12.5	2.5	3.8	2.5	3.8	1.3
Marital Status - Never married	274	9.5	4.7	4.4	5.5	9.1	2.2	1.5	1.5
Partner's Religion									
Catholic	913	11.7	6.4	5.1	5.0	5.1	3.7	2.6	2.3
Christian, not Catholic	281	14.9	6.4	5.7	4.6	2.1	2.5	1.4	1.1
Non Christian	33	6.1	3.0	9.1	6.1	3.0	9.1	0.0	0.0
No Religion	238	14.3	2.1	7.6	2.1	2.5	3.8	1.3	2.5

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