



AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC BISHOPS CONFERENCE

National Centre for Pastoral Research

2021 National Count of Attendance



Information Paper:

The importance of conducting the National Count of Attendance coming out of COVID-19

There has been little research carried out worldwide about the impact of COVID-19 on Mass attendance. Various hypotheses have been suggested as to the extent to which patterns of Mass attendance have been impacted by the global pandemic, how long recovery will take, and the extent to which parish life returns to some sort of normalcy. Early research of Anglican parishes in the UK has suggested that there was increased church involvement through online services during the pandemic (Church Online, *FutureFirst*, 71, p. 2) but returning to face-to-face services may be slow.

In Australia, as our memories of a locked-down existence slowly fade (depending upon which state you live in), there is a cautious return to life as it was before COVID-19. However, Catholic parishes throughout the country will respond in different ways. For some, parish life will never return to 'the way it used to be'. For other parishes, COVID-19 will have presented an opportunity to adapt and grow. Yet for others, a new normal will arise.

But what will the new normal of parish life look like in the short-term and long-term?

In planning for the 2021 National Count of Attendance, several questions were considered in response to suggestions that it should be postponed or cancelled altogether.

- On average, how many people currently attend Mass?
- What has been the impact of COVID-19 on Mass attendance?
- Anecdotal evidence suggests that attendance rates will be down, but by how much?
- How many parishes are continuing with online Masses? How many people are connecting in that way?
- How have parishes been adapting to the various COVID-19 restrictions placed upon them? What will be the impact of any ongoing COVID-19 restrictions on Mass attendance into the future?
- If the National Count of Attendance is postponed, when would be an opportune time to undertake it? Do we wait until all restrictions are lifted, in every state and region? Do we await a further period of time after that until things return to some other sort of 'expected' normal?
- What does this mean for bishops, clergy and other parish leaders moving forward?

None of the above questions can be answered unless reliable empirical data is obtained. In the end, the benefits of conducting the Count in 2021, rather than postponing or cancelling it, outweighed all other concerns.

With Australia's success thus far in having controlled the pandemic, the Catholic Church in Australia has the opportunity to lead the way with post-COVID-19 research into parish life. More importantly, having empirical evidence from the Count of Attendance will provide bishops with reliable information for future mission planning in their dioceses and at a national level.

By taking a snapshot of Mass attendance now we obtain a realistic picture of participation levels across the country. The importance of conducting the National Count of Attendance in 2021 cannot be overestimated.