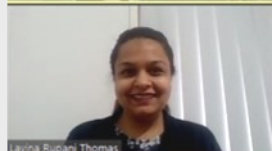


Pastoral Research Online

Issue 53

July 2021

Celebrating 25 Years of Pastoral Research



Top row L-R: Sam McEvedy, Claudia Mollitor, Julie Martin, Bob Dixon, Trudy Dantis, Gabrielle McMullen & Stephen Reid at the Staff Day, 2013; Sharon Bond & Bob Dixon, 2007; Stephen Reid, Michael Brady, Bob Dixon & Trudy Dantis in the office, 2012.

Bottom row L-R: Stephen Reid, Audra Kuncinunas, Bob Dixon & Michael Brady celebrating Bob's PhD, 2010; Paul Bowell, Leith Dudfield, Lavina Thomas, Trudy Dantis, Stephen Reid & Marilyn Chee at a staff meeting, 2020.

More photos inside...

Dear Readers,

This year, 2021, marks the Silver Jubilee of our office. What a momentous journey it has been ever since the first appointment was made in January 1996! As we look back on the road travelled, we are grateful to the dedicated work of our staff and volunteers over the years that made this success possible. Thank you to all our bishops for their continued support of our work, and for the many opportunities they have provided us with to serve the Catholic Church in Australia through research. We also thank our friends, colleagues and benefactors, our collaborators and fellow researchers, and the people we have worked with in parishes and dioceses everywhere.

This newsletter highlights our key accomplishments and projects. We bring you some reflections on and insights into our field of pastoral research and take a look at the way the Catholic community in Australia has changed in that time. We also share some photographs of people we have worked with over the years, whose friendships and help make our journey even more memorable.

We hope you enjoy reading this special issue!

INSIDE THIS ISSUE

- Celebrating 25 years of service
- Projects and publications
- Reflections from the Foundation Director
- Staff and colleagues over the years
- Changes in the Catholic Community in Australia since 1996
- Plenary Council update
- The 2021 Australian Census

Celebrating 25 years of service to the Catholic Church in Australia

In 2021, the National Centre for Pastoral Research (NCPR), an agency of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference (ACBC), is celebrating 25 years of service to the Church. This is a moment to celebrate the achievements of the Centre, to acknowledge those who have contributed to its development, and to reinforce its significance for the Australian Church.

The Centre has three key aims:

- Planning and undertaking pastoral research to support the mission of the Church;
- Working with Church leaders and the wider Catholic community to bring research findings effectively into pastoral practice;
- Ensuring engagement of the research findings within the life of the Church through effective communication strategies.



The work of the NCPR is supported by the ACBC's Australian Catholic Council for Pastoral Research, which has as its mandate "the promotion of the life and mission of the Catholic Church in Australia in the area of pastoral research".

Achievements of the Centre

The Centre has its origins in the Pastoral Projects Office established in Melbourne in 1996 under the Foundation Director, Dr Bob Dixon. Subsequently re-titled the Pastoral Research Office and then in 2018 NCPR, it supports Australian dioceses, parishes and Catholic agencies "scrutinising the signs of the times" (*Gaudium et Spes*, n. 4). Significantly, NCPR's research provides data and analyses about changing demographics, practices and conditions to inform planning in these various Australian settings, enabling the ministries to respond to the pastoral needs of the Church. Following a review in 2017, the national focus of the Centre was enhanced with its relocation to Canberra within the ACBC Secretariat. Its second and current Director, Dr Trudy Dantis was appointed in 2018. Other articles in this special edition of *Pastoral Research Online* illustrate the contemporary and relevant nature of the NCPR's research.

Expression of Appreciation

Many participants have contributed to the projects undertaken by the Centre over 25 years and to the dissemination of the results and their application to pastoral practice. In fact, the nature, quality and relevance of the Centre's work has won it an international reputation for placing the social sciences at the service of the Church. Thus, the results of NCPR projects have not only been disseminated in Australian parish and diocesan settings but also presented at national and international conferences, and the ACBC has been commended for its foresight in establishing a social research agency.

The outstanding role of Dr Dixon in leading and developing the Centre over a period of 21 years is acknowledged with deep gratitude. Under Dr Dantis' leadership NCPR's outreach continues to expand, with research support for the Plenary Council one key focus in the last triennium. Both Directors have been supported by dedicated staff and established effective teams and partnerships with related agencies to realise the Centre's aims. Those staff and partners are also recognised with appreciation.

Celebrating 25 years of service to the Catholic Church in Australia

The Australian Catholic Council for Pastoral Research and predecessor bodies have played a crucial role in the evolution of the ACBC's pastoral research initiative. Archbishop Adrian Doyle, Bishop Gerard Hanna and Archbishop Julian Porteous, in turn, were Council chair. Thanks are due to them and to numerous Council members who, over the years, have generously brought their expertise to furthering the ACBC's ministry of pastoral research.

The current membership of the ACCPR is:

- Mr Daniel Ang, Director, Sydney Centre for Evangelisation, Archdiocese of Sydney
- Archbishop Peter A. Comensoli of Melbourne, Bishop delegate
- Ms Danielle Cronin, Director of Education Policy, Catholic Schools NSW
- Dr Louise St Guillaume, Discipline Coordinator of Sociology, University of Notre Dame Australia (Sydney campus)
- Fr Stephen Hackett MSC, ACBC General Secretary
- Fr Brian Lucas, National Director, Catholic Mission
- Professor James McLaren, Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Research), Australian Catholic University
- Professor Gabrielle McMullen AM (Chair), Deputy Chancellor, University of Divinity and Emeritus Professor, Australian Catholic University
- Mrs Sophy Morley, Diocesan Pastoral Coordinator, Diocese of Sale

Significance of Pastoral Research

In 2020, as Bishop Delegate for Pastoral Research, Archbishop Comensoli highlighted the valuable insights provided by some 1,300 parish profiles prepared by the NCPR. He said: "Engaging with and ministering effectively to the People of God relies upon understanding the circumstances of the faith communities to which they belong". This captures the critical importance of ongoing pastoral research, particularly on the threshold of what Pope Francis has characterised as a 'change of era'.

At the beginning of the new millennium, Pope St John Paul II highlighted the need for review to inform renewal:

It is especially necessary for us to direct our thoughts to the future which lies before us ... This is a task I wish to invite all the local churches to undertake ... Now is the time for each local Church to assess its fervour and find fresh enthusiasm for its spiritual and pastoral responsibilities. (Novo Millennio Ineunte, n.3)

As we journey towards the Fifth Plenary Council and 25 years after the NCPR's establishment, its mission remains of great relevance:

To place and support pastoral research at the heart of the Church's life and mission as a resource to inform planning, responding to the "signs of the times" in the Australian context. In carrying out its responsibilities, the National Centre for Pastoral Research is inspired by Gospel values and guided by the principles of Catholic pastoral theology.

Gabrielle McMullen AM
Chair, Australian Catholic Council for Pastoral Research

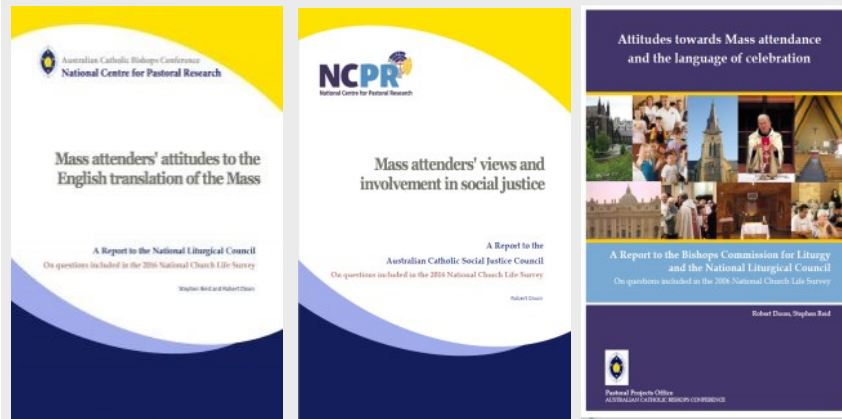


Projects and publications (a selection)

National Catholic Census Project (1996 – 2021)



National Church Life Surveys (2001 – 2016)



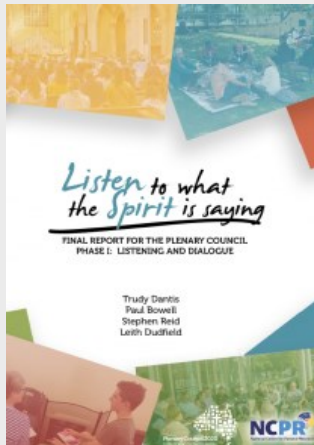
Building Stronger Parishes (2009 – 2015)



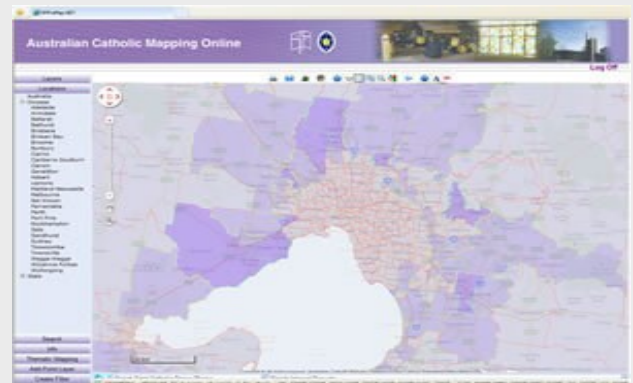
National Count of Attendance (2001 – 2021)



Projects and publications (a selection)



Plenary Council (2018—2023)



Australia Catholic Mapping Online (2006 – 2021)



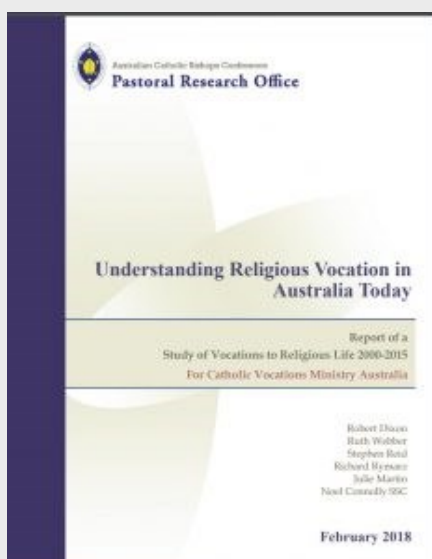
2018 Survey of Religious Congregations in Australia (2018 – 2019)



See, I am Doing a New Thing! – A Survey of Catholic Religious Institutes (2009)



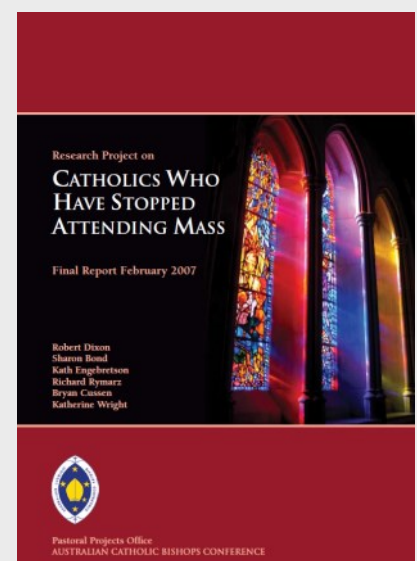
Our Work Matters: Catholic Church employers and employees in Australia (2015 – 2017)



Understanding Religious Vocation in Australia Today (2014 – 2018)



Australian Catholic Bishops' Youth Survey (2016 – 2017)



Catholics Who Have Stopped Attending Mass (2007)

Reflections from the Foundation Director

Dr Bob Dixon

When Fr Michael McKenna, then General Secretary of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference (ACBC) and now Bishop of Bathurst, appointed me in January 1996, no-one thought that out of that appointment there would develop a Conference agency that is now celebrating 25 years of existence. Indeed, Fr McKenna's stern instruction to me was that I must understand that my non-renewable appointment was for three years and that, although I had been appointed as the Pastoral Projects *Officer* of the Bishops Conference, I was not to refer to a Pastoral Projects *Office*, as to do so might convey some sense of permanency. Almost inevitably, however, the name Pastoral Projects Office came to be used – even by Fr McKenna!



Above: Dr Bob Dixon, Foundation Director

According to my first job description, my role was to carry out two major research projects: to acquire, analyse and distribute data on the Catholic population from the Australian Census to parishes, dioceses and Catholic agencies; and to coordinate the participation of the Catholic Church in the National Church Life Survey (NCLS). At the same time, Fr McKenna appointed Fr Michael Mason CSSR to a consultative role with the title "Project Sociologist".

It so happens that the Pastoral Projects Office (PPO) was not the first social research centre established by the Bishops Conference. The National Catholic Research Council, with Fr Michael Mason as its first chairman and executive officer, had been established in 1976. Its functions were primarily to advise the bishops on the research needs of the Church and to act as an information service, publishing three or four newsletters a year with reports of social science research relevant to the Church. It ceased to exist in about 1985.

In 1998, Professor Wolfgang Grichting, Australian Catholic University's Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Research at the time, invited Fr Mason to join ACU. This resulted in the formation of the ACU-ACBC Office for Pastoral Research, with Michael as its director, while the Pastoral Projects Office continued as before. In his new role, Michael recorded some major accomplishments, including securing full government funding for three students to complete doctorates on topics of pastoral importance, partnership in *The Spirit of Generation Y* project (a national study of youth spirituality) and directing a study of English speaking attenders at the 2008 World Youth Day in Sydney. The closure of this office in 2010 so that Michael could take on a different role at ACU allowed the Pastoral Projects Office to change its name to the Pastoral Research Office (PRO), a more accurate label for its work, without fear of causing confusion with the ACU office. In 2018, the name changed again, to the National Centre for Pastoral Research (NCPR).



Above: Fr Michael Mason

This very short account of the Bishops Conference's social research initiatives reveal the immense contribution that Fr Michael Mason made over many decades, from the 1970s to the 2010s. When I retired in 2016, I was honoured with the title "Foundation Director of the Pastoral Research Office", but it was Michael who created the path down which all who follow in pastoral research in the Catholic Church in Australia must follow.

The Census and the multi-denominational NCLS projects have continued as the core elements of the office's work. The National Catholic Census Project, as it has come to be known, has proven to be an enormously helpful and regularly updated resource for understanding the demography of Australia's Catholics, from national level right down to the detail of individual parishes and even parts of parishes. Over the years, the PPO/PRO staff, particularly Mr Stephen Reid, have become recognised by the Australian Bureau of Statistics as having expert knowledge of the Australian Census.

Reflections from the Foundation Director

Dr Bob Dixon

While the Census project provides a demographic profile of the Australians who identify as Catholic, it tells us nothing about those people's faith and religious practice. That is where we see the tremendous value of the NCLS, which tells us so much about the Catholics who are most involved in the Church, that is, those who attend Mass on Sundays. The NCLS not only provides a demographic profile of Mass attenders, but it also tells us about what they believe and how they practise their faith, and what they think about a vast range of subjects relating to the Church and society. After testing the waters with a parallel Catholic Church Life Survey in 1996, the Bishops Conference became full partners in NCLS in 2000 and remained in the partnership until 2018, meaning that we have a treasure trove of data from five five-yearly surveys (in 1996, 2001, 2006, 2011 and 2016) to help us understand so much about Mass attenders, parish leaders, and parishes themselves. The unique structure of the NCLS, with its array of survey variants on different topics, has resulted in almost all the ACBC agencies commissioning survey questions that help them to understand what Mass-going Catholics think about issues relating to their mandate.

Over the years, the PPO/PRO/NCPR has taken on many additional projects, including several major ones. These include the five-yearly National Count of Attendance, a study of why mature age Catholics stop going to Mass, three studies of religious institutes, including one relating to recent vocations to religious life, the Building Stronger Parishes project, a study of Catholic Church employers and employees, and research on youth ministry. Most recently, the office has done an enormous amount of work in preparation for this year's Plenary Council.

I have come to think of the work of the office as akin to solving a jigsaw puzzle. The overall puzzle is a picture of the Catholic community in Australia in all its dimensions, and each research project contributes another piece that helps us to see the overall picture. Unlike actual jigsaw puzzles, however, this puzzle will never be finished, because the picture keeps changing, as do the underlying social conditions of the whole Australian population. The graphic below, created by Dr Trudy Dantis, shows the state of the jigsaw at the end of 2016.



Twenty-five years after that first appointment, and under the exceptional leadership of Dr Trudy Dantis and her skilled deputy, Mr Stephen Reid, the office is stronger than ever, and its work is highly regarded in Australia and internationally. The office's work is just as crucial as it ever was, and I look forward to its next 25 years of service to the Australian Church.



Staff and colleagues over the years



Here are a few photographs of staff, friends, colleagues and other people who have supported our work over the years.



National Pastoral Planners Network Conference, Brisbane, 2013



Farewell to Annemarie Atapattu, Melbourne, 2018



Visit to Pew Research Centre, USA, 2019



Plenary Council Phase One, Canberra, 2018



At the ISSR Conference, Aix-en-Provence, France, 2011



NCLS Research Meeting, Sydney, 2016



With scholars from the US and Netherlands ISSR Conference, 2011

Staff and colleagues over the years



Pastoral Research Office Conference, Melbourne, 2014



National Pastoral Planners Network Meeting, ACU Melbourne, 2015



With CARA researchers, SSSR Conference, Las Vegas, USA, 2018



Victorian Pastoral Planners Network, Melbourne, 2010,



Staff, colleagues, volunteers and family members at Christmas, 2015



Farewell to Audra Kuncinas, 2010



Australian Catholic Council for Pastoral Research Christmas Lunch, 2019

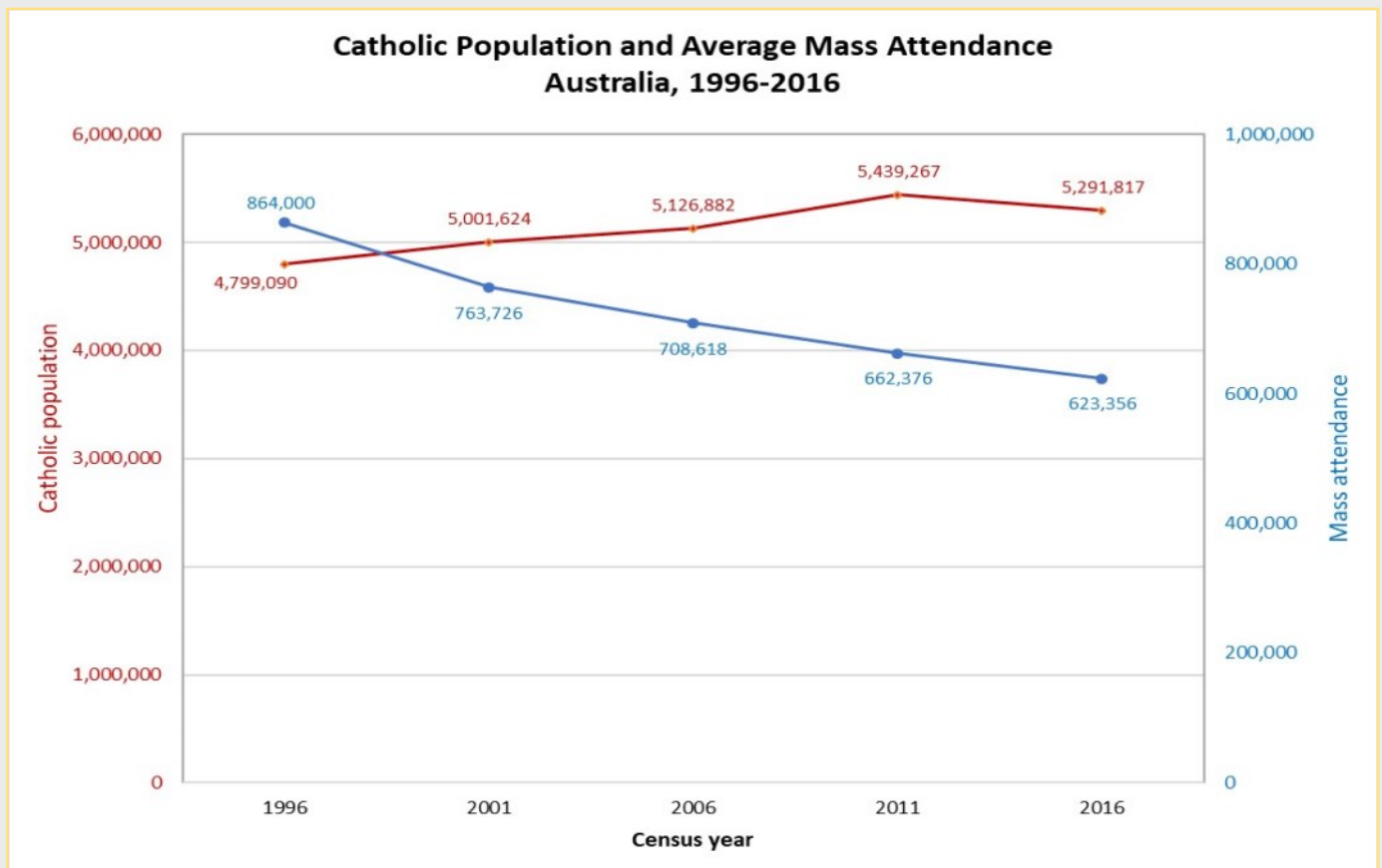
Photo Credits: Dr Bob Dixon, Mrs Sophy Morley, NCLS Research, Dr Trudy Dantis, Ms Fiona Basile and other sources.

More photos and stories in forthcoming newsletters this year.

Changes in the Catholic Community in Australia since 1996

Since 1996, the NCPR (and its earlier iterations) have been collecting and reporting on data relevant to the Catholic community in Australia. Two of the biggest sources of data are the Australian Census and the National Count of Attendance, which are undertaken in the same year, every five years, to provide comparable data. These allow us to be able to look back over time and see the trends in the Catholic community, in comparison with the actual Mass attendance at the time. In the table and the chart below, you can see the statistics for the Catholic population, the median age of Catholics, the number of Mass attenders and the number of parishes from 1996 to 2016.

	Year				
	1996	2001	2006	2011	2016
CATHOLIC POPULATION					
Number of Catholics	4,799,090	5,001,624	5,126,882	5,439,267	5,291,817
Per cent Catholic (%)	27.0	26.6	25.8	25.3	22.6
Median age of Catholics (years)	33	34	37	38	40
MASS ATTENDERS					
Average number of attenders at Mass on a typical weekend	864,000	763,726	708,618	662,376	623,356
Mass attendance rate (%)	18.0	15.3	13.8	12.2	11.8
CATHOLIC PARISHES					
Number of parishes	1,430	1,423	1,363	1,368	1,385



Changes in the Catholic Community in Australia since 1996

The table and graph show that the number of people who identified as Catholic in the Australian Census rose between 1996 until 2011, where it peaked and then saw a decline in 2016. However, although the population was increasing, the proportion of the overall Australian population who identified as Catholic declined steadily over that same period. While the table shows that the median age of Catholics has risen from 33 in 1996 to 40 in 2016, it also shows that Mass attendance across Australia has been declining steadily in that time.

The Mass attendance rate is the proportion of the Australian Catholic population who attend Mass on an average weekend, which is also in decline. It declined sharply between 1996 and 2001, from 18 per cent to 15.3 per cent, but has declined at a slower rate since 2001.

The number of parishes in Australia declined from 1,430 in 1996 to a low of 1,363 in 2006. However, it began rising again slowly and in 2016, there were a total of 1,385 parishes. Counting the number of parishes is a somewhat capricious exercise. Changes in the number of parishes can be due to a number of factors, such as the closure of declining parishes, the establishment of churches in new areas or in the merging of parishes. However, it may also be due to reporting differences in how parishes are recognised by different dioceses.

The 2021 National Count of Attendance was undertaken in May this year, and the 2021 Census will take place in August. Data from both may start to be available for analysis in 2022. Time will tell whether the trends of the previous years continue in 2021 and what the effect of changes due to the COVID-19 pandemic have meant for Catholics in Australia. The NCPR will be here to collect, analyse and report on the data and to shine a light on what this could mean for the Catholic Church in Australia both now and in the future.

Journey to Plenary Council 2018-2022 Update



Photo Credit: plenarycouncil.catholic.org.au/

“Fan the Flame”

Sunday 23 May was the feast of Pentecost and marked the third anniversary of preparations towards the Plenary Council. To mark this occasion the final necessary step in preparing for the Plenary Council was taken. The Australian Catholic Bishops Conference formally convoked the fifth Plenary Council with its

president Archbishop Mark Coleridge signing the required decree. In signing the decree Archbishop Coleridge said: “on Pentecost Sunday we have invoked the Holy Spirit upon the entire journey of the Plenary Council but in particular upon the first assembly – to which we now move.” To read more, click this link:

<https://mediablog.catholic.org.au/australian-bishops-formally-convoked-plenary-council/>

In keeping with Archbishop Coleridge’s words of invoking the Holy Spirit upon the first assembly of the Plenary Council, a guided prayer resource kit titled “Fan the Flame” has been made available by the Plenary Council facilitation team.

“Fan the Flame” is a prayer and reflection resource package that could be used in a number of settings, such as parishes, schools, universities or the family home. The idea is to bring us together and pray as we walk together to the First Plenary Council assembly in October 2021. The resources available include prayers, reflections, short videos, slides capturing reflective quotes of the week’s gospel and candle decals. The “Fan the Flame” resources can be accessed here:

<https://plenarycouncil.catholic.org.au/fantheffame/>



The 2021 Australian Census



The next Australian National Census will be held on **Tuesday 10 August 2021**. The Census is a snapshot in time which provides valuable information that can be used by government and other organisations for forward planning. The NCPR has been involved in analysing and reporting Census data that pertains to the Catholic population since 1991.

For 2021, there will be some changes to the way the Census is undertaken and to some of the questions that are posed. These include:

Flexibility: For the first time in Australia's Census history, there will be a window of time to complete the Census, rather than a single night, so you can fill in your form at a time that best suits you. Households will begin receiving Census instructions from late July 2021.

Variety of completion options: You will be able to complete your Census online, on your mobile device, on paper, or with help from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS).

New topics: There will be new questions in the 2021 Census, the first significant changes to questions collected in the Census since 2006. The new questions are on long-term health conditions, such as arthritis and diabetes, and on defence force participation.

Religious Affiliation: While the topic will be retained as per previous Censuses, there will be minor changes to the order of response categories, based on results from the 2016 Census. The NCPR will notify you about these changes as soon as we receive further information from the ABS.

For more information on the Census in 2021, please view the ABS website at:

<https://www.abs.gov.au/websitedbs/d3310114.nsf/home/2021+census+overview>

NCPR Staff

Trudy Dantis
Director

trudy.dantis@catholic.org.au
(02) 6201 9812

Leith Dudfield
Research Assistant

leith.dudfield@catholic.org.au
(02) 6201 9813

Lavina Thomas
Research Assistant

lavina.thomas@catholic.org.au

Stephen Reid
Senior Researcher

stephen.reid@catholic.org.au

Paul Bowell
Research Assistant
(Plenary Council)

paul.bowell@catholic.org.au

Marilyn Chee
Research Assistant

marilyn.chee@catholic.org.au

For more information please contact:
National Centre for Pastoral Research
Australian Catholic Bishops
Conference,
GPO Box 368 Canberra ACT 2601
P: (02) 6201 9812
E: ncpr@catholic.org.au
W: www.ncpr.catholic.org.au

