

Pastoral Research Online

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First Assembly of the Synod of Bishops: Towards a more synodal Church



Left: Participants from the Oceania region gather at the 16th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops on Synodality.

The Australian participants included members, theologians, experts and facilitators each contributing in a unique way. NCPR Director, Dr Trudy Dantis shares her experience of the event. Details inside...



Dear Readers,

As we approach the end of 2023, we reflect on what has been an outstanding year for our team. Most of our efforts this year have gone towards producing the 2021 Census Social Profiles and supporting national and international consultations for the Synod of Bishops.

We produced a total of 1,256 Social Profile reports, each with 43 customised tables and graphs, equating to a total of 54,008 items in the entire collection! We are very appreciative of the cooperation of consultants and other General Secretariat staff who assisted us in the process of creating the profiles.

Our Synod work included continuing to assist the national network, coordinating the Synod Working Group, and collecting and reporting data at various stages of the process, with more to come in 2024.

This newsletter includes highlights from the 2021 Census about Australia's Top Five Parishes as well as details of a special report on Sex, Gender and Relationships. There is also information on several other projects we worked on during the year, as well as a list of new research beginning in 2024.

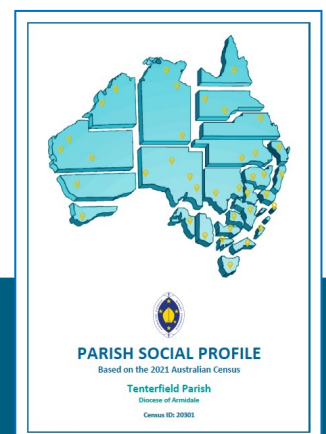
Thank you to everyone who has supported us this year in various ways. We rely heavily on you to ensure that our work continues to be in service of the Church's mission. We wish you all a blessed Christmas and a joyful New Year!

Inside this issue:

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2021 Parish Social Profiles to be released in January

Each parish will receive a hard copy of their profile. The complete set will also be available for download from our website: www.ncpr.catholic.org.au



2021 National Catholic Census Project

Top 5 Parishes in Australia

Table 1: Top Five parishes - Catholic population

Rank	Catholics (N)	Parish (diocese)
1.	31,149	Craigieburn (Melbourne)
2.	29,576	Burleigh Heads (Brisbane)
3.	22,475	Werribee (Melbourne)
4.	22,419	Maroochydore (Brisbane)
5.	22,135	Caloundra (Brisbane)

According to the 2021 Census, Craigieburn, in Melbourne's outer north, has the highest Catholic population in Australia, with nearly 31,150 adherents.

Craigieburn has long been one of Australia's largest parishes, ranking in the top ten in 2011 (19,699 Catholics) and the top five in 2016 (23,815). Werribee, a south-western Melbourne parish, was the only new parish in the top five since 2016, and its Catholic population rose from five years earlier. Growth in

the Catholic population of both Craigieburn and Werribee contrasted national and state trends that showed a reduction in the number of Catholics in Australia, although both parishes also had substantial increases in their overall populations between 2016 and 2021. Three Brisbane suburbs, Burleigh Heads (29,576), Maroochydore, (22,419) and Caloundra (22,135) round out the top five. Each of these parishes had fewer Catholics in 2021 than in 2016, in line with the national trend. Mill Park (Melbourne) moved out of the top five, after appearing in 2011 and 2016.

Three parishes in Darwin and two Broome had the highest **proportion** of Catholics in Australia in 2021. Just over eight in ten people in Santa Teresa (83.1%), 80km south-east of Alice Springs, and Bathurst Island (81.3%), 80km north of Darwin, were Catholic. Melville Island (74.1%), Kalumburu (57.4%) and Balgo-Kutjunga (56.6%) round out the top five. Balgo-Kutjunga reentered the list in 2021, displacing Wadeye in Darwin, which had a Catholic population of slightly less than half (47%).

Table 2: Top Five parishes - Percentage Catholic

Rank	Catholics (%)	Parish (diocese)
1.	83.1	Santa Teresa (Darwin)
2.	81.3	Bathurst Island (Darwin)
3.	74.1	Melville Island (Darwin)
4.	57.4	Kalumburu (Broome)
5.	56.6	Balgo-Kutjungka (Broome)

In 2021, remote and rural parishes had the highest proportion of Catholics aged under 15 (see Table 3). Palm Island (Townsville) had the highest proportion of people under the age of 15—just over one third of this group (34.6%) were Catholic. Wyndham (Broome) had a similar proportion (34.3%). Another Broome parish, Dampier Peninsula, had nearly three in ten Catholics under the age of 15, as did new entries to the top five, Santa Teresa (Darwin – 31%) and Jugiong (Canberra Goulburn – 29.5%). Mungindi (Armidale), which was the top parish in 2016, and Wadeye (Darwin) were displaced by these parishes.

Table 3: Top Five parishes - Percentage of Catholics aged under 15

Rank	Aged 0-14 (%)	Parish (diocese)
1.	34.6	Palm Island (Townsville)
2.	34.3	Wyndham (Broome)
3.	31.0	Santa Teresa (Darwin)
4.	30.3	Dampier Peninsula (Broome)
5.	29.5	Jugiong (Canberra-Goulburn)

The parish with the largest proportion of Catholics aged 65 and over was Victor Harbor/Goolwa, a coastal parish in Adelaide, with approximately one in every two Catholics in that age bracket. Between 2016 and 2021, this age group increased from 39.3 per cent to 49.1 per cent. Other seaside parishes of Narooma, on the NSW south coast (Canberra-Goulburn), Myall Coast, north of Newcastle (Maitland-Newcastle), and Rosebud (on Melbourne's Mornington Peninsula) had just over four in ten Catholics aged 65 or older. Flinders Island, north-east of Tasmania in Bass Strait, completes the top five, with around four in ten Catholics over the age of 65.

Table 4: Top Five parishes - Percentage of Catholics aged 65+

Rank	Aged 65+ (%)	Parish (diocese)
1.	49.1	Victor Harbor/Goolwa (Adelaide)
2.	43.0	Narooma (Canberra-Goulburn)
3.	41.7	Flinders Island (Hobart)
4.	41.7	Myall Coast (Maitland-Newcastle)
5.	41.3	Rosebud (Melbourne)

2021 National Catholic Census Project

Sex, Gender and Relationships in the Census

The NCPR has published an information paper on *Sex, Gender and Relationships in the Census*. There has been increased interest in understanding the demographics of relationships, including same sex relationships, within the Catholic community. The 2021 Australian Census did not specifically ask people about their sexual orientation. Instead, there are two separate questions which, when combined, provide information about different relationships among Australians.

The first question on sex is worded differently on the paper and online versions of the Census questionnaire. The paper version asks, "Is the person: Male, Female". The online version, on the other hand, has a 'Non-binary sex' option. If the person selects this option, they are then presented with an opportunity to provide more information. Note that a person may select more than one response.

In relation to reporting the data, the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) advises the following:

Data collected from the sex question will be reported in most Census data releases as 'male' or 'female' in order to maintain the quality of standard products at the small area level. Where a respondent has provided a male or female response and a non-binary sex response, the male or female response will be used to determine a binary sex variable. Otherwise, sex will be derived by a statistical process using random allocation.

The second question asks about the relationship of people within the household on Census night. Taken together, the answers to the two questions ('Sex' and 'Relationship in Household') can be used to identify if someone is in a same sex relationship.

The table below sets out the couple relationships of Catholics by state.

Table 1: Relationship as Reported by Individuals in Couple Relationships by State (all Catholics)	NSW	VIC	QLD	SA	WA	TAS	NT	ACT	Other Territories	Total
Husband, wife or partner as reported, opposite-sex couple	689,966	522,232	360,022	110,344	191,445	27,454	11,758	33,389	135	1,946,759
De facto partner as reported, opposite-sex couple	121,578	90,630	77,021	17,893	35,242	5,767	4,220	6,049	39	358,429
Husband, wife or partner as reported, same-sex couple	2,425	1,603	1,272	337	612	99	34	131	0	6,509
De facto partner as reported, same-sex couple	5,564	3,696	2,720	634	1,021	197	101	280	0	14,216
Not applicable	988,199	717,618	520,438	146,646	268,536	37,528	23,091	47,718	223	2,749,990
Total	1,807,730	1,335,784	961,469	275,849	496,847	71,045	39,208	87,566	396	5,075,907

Source: *Census of Population and Housing, 2021* (data retrieved using TableBuilder Pro).

Note: Figures in the above table may have been randomly adjusted to avoid the release of confidential data. No reliance should be placed on small figures within cells.

According to the data, nationally, 6,509 Catholic couples reported they were in a marriage with a person of the same sex, and 14,216 couples reported they were in a de facto relationship with a person of the same sex. The report contains further detail, including a breakdown of relationships by diocese. To read more, go to the section titled "Special Reports from the 2021 Census" at: <https://ncpr.catholic.org.au/national-catholic-census-project/>

If you would like more information about how the NCPR can support your organisation, parish or diocese, please contact us at ncpr@catholic.org.au

Bishops Synod on Synodality



My Experience of The First Assembly

If someone had told me last year that I would be seated with eminent bishops and cardinals discussing the future of the Church, I probably would not have believed them. Imagining this experience is difficult; writing about it is an even greater challenge.

I travelled to Rome in late September with Mrs Gracia Wrakia, a member from Papua New Guinea. Upon our arrival, we were issued official badges and documents that would form an integral part of our identity over the next month. My earliest Synod recollections are Fr. Timothy Radcliffe's moving and inspiring remarks at the three-day retreat in Sacrofano, the delight of joining leaders from the global Church in participating in the ecumenical prayer vigil in St. Peter's Square, and the sudden realisation of the magnitude of it all as we were confronted with an onslaught of cameras aimed directly at us when we processed into the Square on the day of the Opening Mass.

Over the subsequent days, we engaged in a relentless routine as we began working through the *Instrumentum Laboris* in small groups. Being one of only 54 women voting members, I often found myself as the lone female voice at the table. Initially this was a bit confronting, but I was soon comforted by the generosity of spirit shown by other participants in the group as we all gradually became accustomed to a synodal style of deliberation and resolution.

The discussions we engaged in were enormously rich, as each participant addressed the discussion question from a unique perspective, incorporating theological observations, pastoral insights, consultation outcomes, and personal anecdotes. Although we disagreed at times, we persevered in integrating this diversity into our reports in a way that guaranteed the recognition of all views. This was far from easy, as it required constant discernment of what to “hold on to” and what to “let go”. I believe we only succeeded because of the frequent moments of prayer and silent reflection that were incorporated into our “Conversations in the Spirit”.

I was delighted to have the opportunity to serve as a



Two of my discussion groups at the Synod

“Secretary” and a “Rapporteur” in various groups. Compiling and finalising group reports and synthesising individual interventions required hours of extra work, aided by several caffè lattes and occasional espresso shots. It was a pleasure collaborating with other cardinals, bishops, priests and lay people who accompanied me in these duties. The Synod's reporting to the larger assembly was aided by the superior technology that supported us throughout the event. Listening to group reports from the other 36 tables and various language groups meant that a considerable number of us relied significantly on simultaneous translations and crystal-clear audiovisual aids supplied by support staff.



Working as Secretary and Rapporteur

Bishops Synod on Synodality



Our work in the Synod hall was interspersed with other significant occasions. Some memorable events included the visit to the Domitilla Catacombs, a prayer service for Migrants and Refugees led by Pope Francis at “Angels Unaware” in St Peters Square and a candlelight rosary procession in St Peter’s Basilica on the feast of the Holy Rosary. We were consciously aware of the wars and turmoil occurring in several parts of the world as fellow participants shared their testimonies, and in the Synod hall we interceded daily for peace.



At the Domitilla Catacombs

The Oceania contingent had other occasions to gather, through a dinner hosted by Domus Australia and a reception held by Chiarra Porro, the Australian Ambassador to the Holy See. I also took the opportunity to visit other churches and places of interest on my Sundays off and to sample as many flavours of gelato as I could.



With members of the Oceania contingent at Domus Australia



With members of the group I lived with

My account of this trip would be incomplete without highlighting the wonderful experiences I shared with nine other participants I lived with during that time—Fr Sijeesh Pullankunnel, Mrs Kelly Paget and Mr John Lochowiack, all from Australia, Archbishop Jason Gordon (Trinidad & Tobago), Bishop Alain Harel (Seychelles), Mr Manuel Beazley (New Zealand), Mrs Grace Wrakia (Papua New Guinea), Mrs Susan Sela (Fiji) and Mrs Anna Peter from Malaysia. We began each day with Mass in our small chapel, travelled four times a day

to and from Synod meetings, shared all our meals together, engaged in fervent conversations over dinner and generally supported one another through the highs and lows of the Synod. This sharing of our lives during that month was, in a way, our own little synodal journey, and one for which I will be ever grateful. Many thanks are also due to the sisters of Congregation of the Daughters of Saint Joseph of Genoni who cared for us during that time and looked after our every need.

If the achievements of this First Assembly are measured merely by the outcomes produced in the Synthesis report or by the agendas progressed, there is bound to be some disappointment. The greatest transformations I believe, occurred in hearts and minds, in people coming together as Church and being willing and courageous enough to journey as one body in Christ. I have been enormously blessed by the people I’ve met and the friendships I’ve made—women and men from different countries, serving in dioceses, Church organisations and ministries in

various capacities. Our journey is far from over and our work continues as we share our experiences of this event and help build and strengthen processes for greater collaboration and encounter in our own contexts. As we look forward to the Second Assembly, may the Holy Spirit continue to guide us all.



With some of the other women at the Synod waiting to process in for the Closing Mass

Research Projects in 2023

The Year in Review

The NCPR has continued to undertake a wide variety of projects both for the Bishops Conference as well as the wider Catholic community. Below is a snapshot of what the office achieved in 2023.



- **National Catholic Census Project:**

- Published the 2021 National Social Profile.
- Published 28 Diocesan Social Profiles.
- Prepared 1227 Parish Social Profiles ready for publishing in early 2024.
- Developed a paper on Sex, Gender and Relationships in the Census.

- **National Count of Attendance:**

- Distributed final national summary to Bishops.
- Prepared National Count of Attendance Final Report ready for publishing in early 2024.
- Prepared 2021 Census figures for the parish-level reports.

- **Plenary Council:**

- Coordinated the 2023 Interim Review of the implementation of the Plenary Council Decrees.
- Prepared a report for the Plenary Council Implementation Interim Working Group on the implementation strategies and progress to date.

- **2023-2024 Catholic Directory statistics:**

- Collected data for the *Official Directory of the Catholic Church in Australia*.

- **Australian Catholic Mapping Online (ACMO):**

- Built and tested the mapping portal
- Checked and finalised 2021 diocesan and parish boundaries.
- Developed 2021 Percentage of Catholics map

- **XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops**

- Coordinated the Australian consultation for the Continental Stage
- Prepared the Australian response to the *Document for the Continental Stage*.
- Attended the FCBCO meeting in Suva, Fiji, to assist with the preparation of the *Oceania*

Discernment on the Working Document for the Continental Stage.

- Provided executive support to the Synod Working Group
- Coordinated Australian Synod contacts network
- Developed and distributed synodality resources.
- Attended the First Assembly of the Synod as a voting member.

- **2018-2019 Catholic Religious Australia survey:**

- Prepared a journal article from research findings

- **National Catholic Education Commission:**

- Sent participants summary of the findings.

- **ACBC Response to Recommendations of the Governance Review:**

- Published reports on Diocesan Pastoral Councils (DPCs) and Parish Pastoral Councils (PPCs)

- **Safeguarding Response to the Royal Commission 5-Year Review :**

- Coordinated the update of the ACBC and CRA's Response to the Royal Commission
- Prepared a report on the updated response.

- **Online surveys commissioned by the ACBC:**

- Survey of bishops and leaders of religious institutes regarding the joint CRA-ACBC meeting.
- 2023 CathNews Subscriber Survey

- **Data Requests**

- 31 Data Requests were processed:
Data requests can range from a simple request for Census data, to more complex requests that require collating and analysing data from a number of sources over an extended period of time.
- NCPR staff conducted nine international/national seminars and workshops.

New Projects for 2024

The NCPR has been tasked with a number of exciting projects starting in 2024. A brief summary of our three new projects are below:

“Why Catholics don’t go to Mass regularly”

Data in recent years has shown that the proportion of Australians who identify as Catholic has declined. The Church in Australia has been discerning pastoral strategies to respond to this challenging context. However, many of these attempts have not been able to remediate disengagement among Catholics from parishes and faith communities. This project will look to identify the reasons that Catholics do not attend Mass or engage with local parishes and communities, and identify ways that Catholic communities can more effectively respond to those factors.

A Profile of Australian Clergy

The purpose of this joint NCPR—ACMRO research project is to create a profile of Catholic clergy in Australia, both those born in Australia and those born overseas who are working here. The project will explore their spiritual, physical, mental and general wellbeing, including areas that require more care and support.

Evaluating the 2000 Social Justice Statement—Responding to Woman & Man: One in Christ Jesus

In 1996, the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference launched a major research initiative focusing on the participation of women in the Catholic Church in Australia. In 2000, a number of decisions were published in response to that research initiative in the Social Justice Sunday Statement for that year. The purpose of this project will be to evaluate the responses to those decisions and report on the progress made.

Do you enjoy this newsletter? Do you know someone who would benefit from receiving a copy?

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<https://ncpr.catholic.org.au/pro-newsletter/>

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Christmas Greetings From the National Centre for Pastoral Research

*Glory to God in the
Highest Heaven
and on Earth, Peace.*

Luke 2:14



Photo by Krisdog @ Bigstockphoto.com

Photo
by

From the staff at the NCPR: Trudy, Stephen, Leith and Katherine.

CHRISTMAS SHUTDOWN



The NCPR office will be closed from **Wednesday 20 December 2023** until **Monday 1 January 2024** (inclusive) and will have only limited staff from Tuesday 2 January until Friday 5 January 2024. During this entire period, we will be unable to process any research requests.

We thank you for your cooperation.