

Pastoral Research Online

Issue 68

March 2025

Sharing in diocesan synodal experiences

During the weekend of 14-15 February, Dr. Trudy Dantis participated as a special observer at the 2025 Diocesan Assembly held in Sale, Victoria. The Diocese of Sale has adopted a synodal approach to assess its strengths and challenges and name future pastoral priorities for the next five years. Trudy had the chance to engage in the table conversations with other attendees and share her insights to enhance their discussion outcomes.



Right: Dr Trudy Dantis and participants at the Sale Diocesan Assembly.

Dear Readers,

As Holy Week and Easter approaches, many catechumens and candidates are preparing to receive their sacraments. In this issue, we examine the data for individuals who have received the sacraments of Baptism, First Communion, and Confirmation, as well as the number of marriages celebrated over the past thirty years. We are pleased to share an important update regarding the Religion question for the 2026 Census. The ABS will conduct additional testing prior to releasing the final version of the question later this year.

Our three key projects—Clergy Wellbeing, Evaluation of the Implementation of ‘Woman and Man’, and the exploration of why Catholics do not attend regular Sunday Mass—are all progressing well. This release features a range of updates.

In other developments, we have initiated a new project aimed at validating the canonical boundaries of parishes and dioceses using our mapping program in preparation for the 2026 Census. Our newly built mapping portal is now live, and we have arranged an online course later this year to train anyone interested in utilising it to access Census data for Catholics in Australia. This newsletter provides updates on a book launch, shares research findings from two international projects, and includes additional news. Enjoy reading!

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National Catholic Census Project



2026 Census Religion Question Update

Since 1911, the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) has included a question on religious affiliation in each Australian Census, which is conducted every five years. Although it is optional, the question is usually answered by the majority of individuals, with 93 per cent of respondents responding in 2021.

The Australian Standard Classification of Religious Groups (ASCRG) was updated by the ABS after the 2021 Census to include a broader range of religious affiliations present in Australia. This was the first significant update since 1996. The 'Catholic' group was expanded to include the option of 'Syriac Catholic', alongside the inclusion of religious groups under the broad categories of 'Buddhism' and 'Islam'. The NCPR and Australian Catholic Bishops Conference (the Conference) endorsed this inclusion.

In early 2024, the ABS tested various modifications to the 2026 Census question on religious affiliation and proposed the following:

- Asking 'Does the person have a religion?' instead of 'What is the person's religion?'.¹ The responses featured a tick box for 'No', but initially lacked a tick box for 'Yes'; this was subsequently added.²
- The 'Yes' option included a single write-in box for individuals to specify their religion. This replaced the previous approach consistently used since 1991, of providing a pick list of the most common religions from the previous Census, accompanied by a write-in box for all others.

The NCPR and the Conference raised significant concerns regarding these changes, highlighting that eliminating a pick list of common religions would make answering the question unnecessarily complicated, resulting in responses that were 'invalid, indecipherable, or ambiguous'.³ There were also significant concerns that the reformulation of the question would disconnect religious identification from one of culture and identity, resulting in a loss of comparability between the 2026 data and previous results. Furthermore, the proposed question could create a new bias favoring 'no religion' and affect the reporting of special ethnic minority groups. Several other researchers and sociologists of religion shared similar concerns with the ABS.

Following consultations, which included the NCPR and Conference representatives, the ABS announced that:⁴

- The ABS has chosen to retain the broad question design implemented in the 2021 Census. This includes the question wording 'What is the person's religion?', the pick list, and a write-in box for other religions.
- The ABS will slightly modify the processing of the 'Catholic' response category. The ABS has previously categorised the response of 'Catholic' to the religious group 'Western Catholic'. In the 2026 Census, individuals who select the 'Catholic' option will be coded under the Narrow group 'Catholic, nfd' (not further defined). This aligns with the manner in which the ABS categorises the other response options in the pick list that are not at the religious group level. The NCPR supported this change.
- There will be modifications to the instructional text of the question to support accurate data collection and to align with changes to the classification.
- The ABS will develop educational materials that religious and secular organisations can use to support their members to complete the Census accurately.
- The ABS will further test the questions in 2025: 'We will use a large-scale test during the second half of 2025 to ensure the final questions achieve the best possible outcomes.'

¹ Sherridan Winter, Email message to the General Secretary, Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, March 5, 2024.

² <https://www.abs.gov.au/census/census-media-hub/releases-and-statements/on-the-record/clarification-reports-published-regarding-religious-affiliation-question-2026-census>

³ <https://mediablog.catholic.org.au/census-religion-question-must-make-sense/>

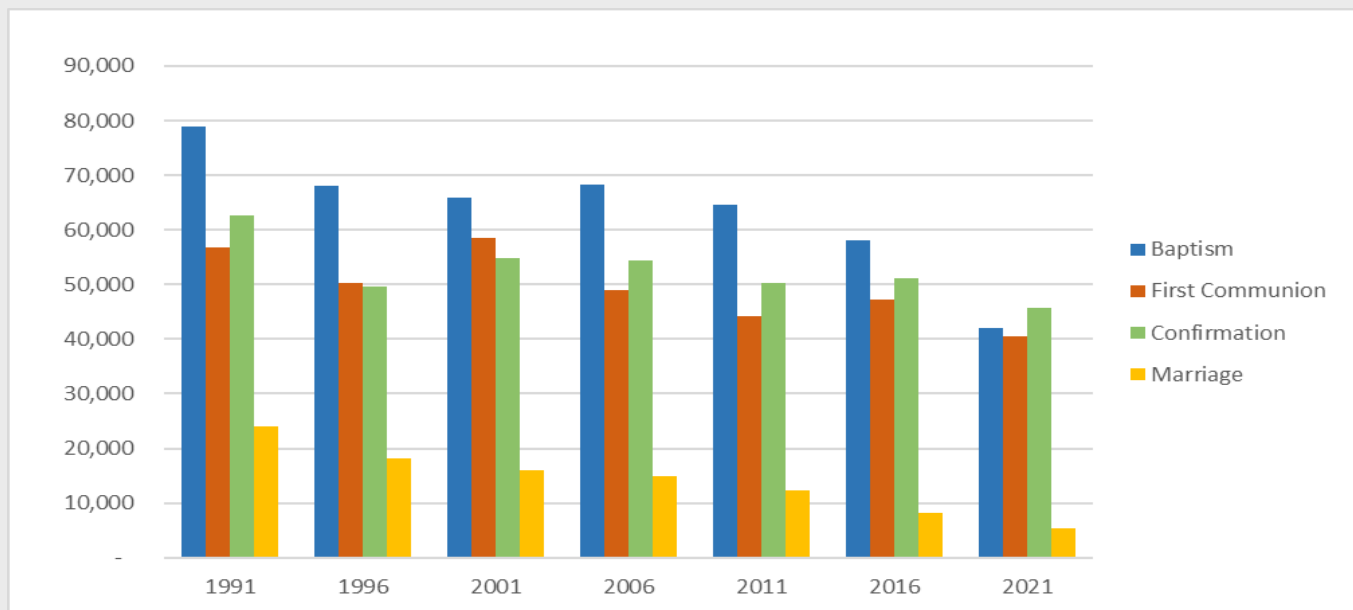
⁴ <https://www.abs.gov.au/media-centre/media-releases/outcomes-2026-census-topic-review-released>

Baptisms, Communion, Confirmations and Marriages in Australia —1991-2021

Data on various Church measures are collected annually by the Vatican's Central Office of Church Statistics, with information reported by each Australian diocese published in the *Annuarium Statisticum Ecclesiae*, also known as the Statistical Yearbook of the Church. The 2023 edition contains the latest information, with some figures recently released by the Vatican: <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/vatican-city/news/2025-03/pontifical-yearbook-2025-priests-religious-statistics.html>

The data in the Yearbook is presented by continent, and includes the number of individuals in each country receiving sacraments of Baptism, First Communion and Confirmation, as well as the number of marriages celebrated each year. This article examines the information published from 1991 onwards to identify the changes over the past three decades. Figure 1 below illustrates the trends from 1991 to 2021, presented in five-year intervals .

Figure 1: Baptisms, Communion, Confirmations and Marriages in Australia, Census Years 1991—2021



Source: *Annuarium Statisticum Ecclesiae* 1991 to 2021, Libreria Editrice Vaticana.

The figure shows that in 1991, the largest group receiving sacraments were those being baptised, amounting to 78,914 people. Confirmations ranked second with 62,602 individuals receiving this sacrament that year. A total of 56,863 individuals received their First Communion and 24,049 marriages were celebrated.

Over the 30 years, there was a modest rise in the number of First Communions in 2001 (58,499), but since then there has been a general decline, with 40,620 individuals receiving the sacrament in 2021. In 2021, Confirmations also saw a decrease, dropping to 45,679, which reflects an overall decline of 27 per cent. The number of those being baptised has nearly halved (-47%) over the three decades, with just 42,120 baptisms recorded in 2021, marking the first occasion where this figure fell below that of Confirmations. It is worth noting that the effects from the COVID-19 pandemic were still evident that year, which likely had a significant impact on these figures.

In the last three decades, there has been a notable decrease in the number of marriages celebrated each year, culminating in only 5,460 marriages recorded in 2021. Marriages between Catholics have seen a decline of 73 per cent over this period, while the decline of marriages between Catholics and non-Catholics is even more pronounced at 82 per cent. In summary, the overall trend regarding sacraments and marriages indicates a decline that aligns with the decreases noted in religious affiliation in the Census and the patterns of Mass attendance during this period.

2025 Project Updates

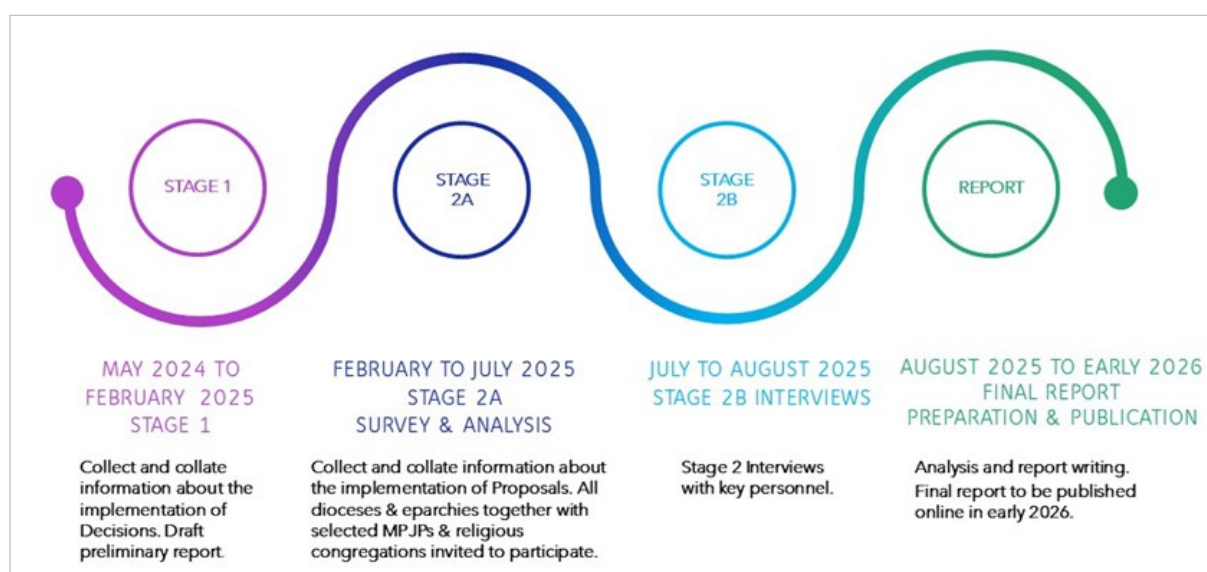
I. Evaluating the Implementation of *Woman and Man: The Bishops Respond* (Social Justice Sunday Statement 2000)

Stage 1 of the project was completed in February 2025, when the Bishops Commission for Evangelisation, Laity and Ministry (BCELM) approved the *Preliminary Report*. We are currently progressing with Stage 2a.

In Stage 2a, all dioceses and eparchies, along with selected religious congregations and MPJPs are invited to provide details about the Social Justice Sunday Statement 2000 Proposals that they have opted to implement. The data gathered during this stage will be used to evaluate the implementation of the Proposals across Australia.

The survey for Stage 2a began on 5 March 2025 and will conclude on 30 May 2025. A workshop was hosted on 12 March 2025 to introduce diocesan contacts to the project and familiarise them with the information being requested.

The timeline for the project has been recently adjusted. Stage 2b interviews will continue through August 2025, allowing extra time for data analysis from Stage 2a. The project completion date has been extended to early 2026 to allow for a more comprehensive review of the *Final Report* prior to its publication. The updated timeline appears below. More information on the project is available at: <https://ncpr.catholic.org.au/evaluating-the-implementation-of-woman-and-man-the-bishops-respond-social-justice-sunday-statement-2000/>



II. Absent from the Table: Australian Catholics who do not regularly attend Sunday Mass

Stage 1 of the project, which included an online survey, concluded in August 2024, and the data is now being analysed. Following the data cleaning process, the final number of respondents was 1,973. Respondents ranged in age from 18 to over 80 years and were drawn from seven of the eight states and territories throughout Australia. Although most respondents were born in Australia, the rest hailed from over 50 different countries globally.

Respondents indicated a range of attendance frequencies at Mass, with some attending weekly while others reported never attending at all. A diverse range of responses emerged regarding the main questions about the reasons respondents chose not to attend Mass, which will inform the next stage of the project. A *Preliminary Report* incorporating the findings from Stage 1 is nearing completion.

2025 Project Updates

During the second stage of the project, which began in early March, individuals from the first stage who indicated their interest in participating further were contacted for an interview. Most interviews occur online, with some opportunities for telephone or in-person interviews when needed. The interviews are expected to continue until July 2025. Upon completion, a thorough analysis will be conducted, integrating the findings from Stages 1 and 2, followed by the preparation of a *Final Report*.

We would like to extend our gratitude to everyone who took part in Stage 1 by sharing the online survey, completing it, or motivating others to participate. We are also very grateful to all who have expressed their willingness to participate in Stage 2 interviews and share their stories with us. For further information about the project, please visit: <https://ncpr.catholic.org.au/absent-from-the-table-australian-catholics-who-do-not-regularly-attend-sunday-mass/>

III. A Profile of Catholic Clergy in Australia

All Australian clergy, with the exception of bishops, were invited to participate in the Phase 1 of the study, which was an online survey administered in May and June 2024. Phase 2 began in September 2024. Most participants in Phase 2 had responded to the invitation at the end of the survey, while two heard about the study from other clergy members and contacted the NCPR independently.

Data collection for Phase 2 was recently completed with seventy priests and eight deacons sharing their views on five main themes – Ministry, Health and Wellbeing, Relationships, Concerns and Support, and the Changing Face of the Priesthood.

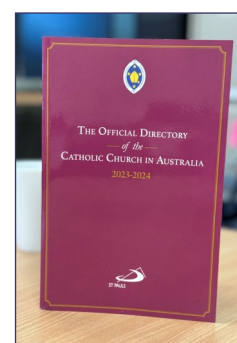
The interviews were conducted in two batches, the first from mid-September to end-December 2024, and the second from mid-January to end-February 2025. These generally took about an hour and were conducted online, via telephone or in-person as needed. Participants came from a wide range of geographical areas, representing all states and territories in Australia and both urban and rural areas. Additionally, they varied in age and ministry, ranging from clergy ordained within the last five years to those who were fully retired, as well as clergy who worked in parish settings, the chancery, academia, or prisons, to name a few.

The *Preliminary Report* which covered the results from Phase 1, was approved by the BCELM who commissioned the study. The analysis of Phase 2 data has recently commenced. The *Final Report* which will include the findings from both phases will be submitted to the Commission in late 2025. More information on the project is available at: <https://ncpr.catholic.org.au/a-profile-of-catholic-clergy-in-australia/>

Call for Diocesan Statistics

Diocesan contacts have received a request from the NCPR to submit their annual statistics for the *2025-2026 Official Directory of the Catholic Church in Australia*. The Directory serves as an important resource for the Catholic Church, offering insights into the current population, clergy and various ministries in dioceses across Australia. The request includes a copy of the previous years' figures to assist with the process. Responses must be submitted via email no later than **Tuesday, 15 April 2025**.

Any questions about the process can be directed to Katherine Jelavic at katherine.jelavic@catholic.org.au or Stephen Reid at stephen.reid@catholic.org.au.



Australian Catholic Mapping Online

Verification of Canonical Boundaries

Preliminary work is underway for the verification of canonical boundaries, a process aimed at ensuring that the NCPR's national mapping database contains updated boundaries in preparation for the 2026 Census. Later this year, we will initiate contact with dioceses to commence this process. A report regarding the national status of canonical boundaries will be presented to the bishops in early 2026.



Catholic Census Maps Workshop



Wednesday 30 July 2025, 2:00pm-3:00pm AEST

Join the NCPR team to learn about navigating the Catholic Census Maps in the Australian Catholic Mapping Online (ACMO) portal and using them alongside the Social Profiles. Both sources of information can be found on our webpage: <https://ncpr.catholic.org.au/>

Registrations are now open at <https://bit.ly/CatholicCensusMapsWorkshop2025>

Book Launch

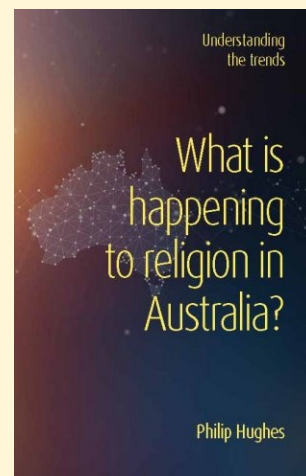
What is Happening to Religion in Australia? Understanding the Trends

Rev Emeritus Professor Philip Hughes, an Honorary Research Fellow of the NCPR, has authored a book exploring the future of religion in Australian society. The book examines the trends indicated by anecdotal evidence, Census and survey statistics which reveal a decline in religious identification in Australia. It offers a social interpretation of current events and proposes ways in which individuals of faith and congregations might address these trends. In his review of the book, Dr Bob Dixon observes that "Church leaders and Christians in general concerned about the current health and future prospects of Christianity in Australia will find it to be an informative and thought-provoking resource, one which will help them and their communities chart a course into the future". The book launch is scheduled for:

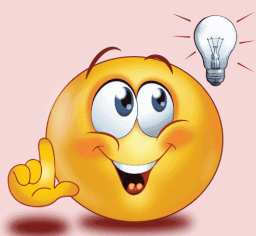
Monday 7 April 2025, 4:00pm—5:00pm

Pilgrim College, 29 College Crescent, Parkville VIC

Speakers at the event include Prof Andrew Singleton, a leading sociologist of religion at Deakin University, and Dr Muriel Porter, journalist and author of several books on religion in Australia. The event is free, however for catering purposes, please register at <https://bit.ly/Phillip-Book-Launch>. The book will be available for sale from Coventry Press: <https://coventrypress.com.au/>



DID YOU KNOW?....



Did you know that nearly half (47.8%) of the world's Catholics live in the Americas?

27.4% live in South America, 13.8% in Central America and 6.6% in North America. The rest of the Catholic population resides in Europe (20.4%), Africa (20%), Asia (11%) and a mere 08% in our own region, Oceania.

Source: New Church Statistics reveal growing Catholic population, fewer pastoral workers, Vatican News, March 20, 2025.

Overseas Research

Italians are proudly Catholic, but not so many attend Mass

A recent Italian study conducted by the company *Censis* for the Italian Bishops Conference reveals that while the majority (71%) identify as Catholic, only 15.3 per cent report they attend Mass regularly, and an additional 34.9 per cent indicate that they attend occasionally.

The report indicated that “religious individualism” was a key factor in the decline, particularly identifying a disconnect between younger Catholics and their disinterest in traditional Church involvement. Many practising Catholics expressed the view that the Church should adapt to contemporary society and be more relevant. Despite the concerns raised, many Italians—even those who do not hold religious beliefs—conveyed that religious symbols like the cross and figures of the Virgin Mary continue to hold importance for them.



<https://cathnews.co.nz/2024/11/14/italy-feels-catholic-but-church-needs-to-modernise/>

CARA—20 years of abuse statistics



The Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) has published a report summarising two decades of data from the *CARA Survey of Allegations and Costs for U.S. Catholic Dioceses, Eparchies, and Religious Communities of Men*. The Survey, commissioned by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), has been conducted annually from 2004 to 2023.

The report presents a comprehensive overview of credible allegations, alleged perpetrators, associated costs for victim support services, settlements and expenses for safeguarding and child protection efforts. The average response rates for the 195-197 dioceses and eparchies invited to participate reached 99 per cent over the span of 20 years, while that of the roughly 220 religious communities invited to participate was 85 per cent.

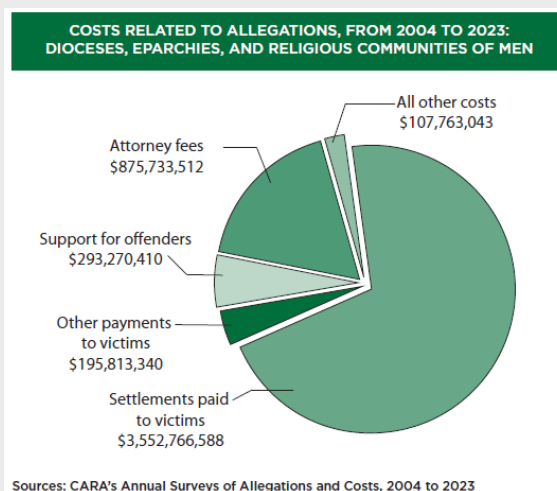
Over 20 years, there were 16,276 credible allegations of abuse involving minors by priests, deacons and religious brothers. In 2016, in addition to the initial categories of “credible” and “unsubstantiated/obviously false”, a third category, “unable to be proven” was added. This introduction led to a notable decrease in credible allegations, dropping from 82 per cent to 55 per cent.

Before 2013, the survey focused solely on allegations related to clergy. In 2013, it was broadened to include religious brothers. This inclusion altered the composition of offenders from 99.9 per cent priests and 0.1 per cent deacons to 62 per cent priests, 0.5 per cent deacons, and 37 per cent religious brothers.

The report also includes details about the costs associated to allegations spanning the 20-year period. As seen in Figure 1, the majority of costs related to settlements paid to victims (\$3,552,766,588). Other costs included attorney fees (\$875,733,512), support for offenders (\$293,270,410), other payments to victims (\$195,813,340) and other associated costs (\$107,763,043).

A copy of the report is available at: <https://cara.georgetown.edu/s/CARASummary2024.pdf>

Figure 1: Costs related to allegations, 2004-2023



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

Staff News

NCPR Staff solve the mystery!

With staff working at three different locations across Australia, it is always a challenge for NCPR staff to meet in person. However, on 11 February 2025, the entire team was in Canberra and we seized the opportunity to enjoy a bit of fun.

What do a bunch of people do who all love analysing data and solving problems? They head to an Escape Room! The Riddle Room in Canberra provided an fantastic opportunity for the team to work together and unravel the mystery of The Hotel. While time constraints proved very challenging, we were able to solve the puzzle and escape to tell the tale.

Many thanks to the staff of the Riddle Room for providing such an enjoyable and challenging activity!



The NCPR team after solving The Hotel room at the Riddle Room in Canberra, ACT. L-R: Stephen Reid, Carole Gan, Leith Dudfield, Trudy Dantis and Katherine Jelavic

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