THRIVING (&SURVIVING) IN MINISTRY

A PROFILE OF CATHOLIC CLERGY IN AUSTRALIA: HEALTH AND WELLBEING

Trudy Dantis **Stephen Reid** **Carole Gan** **Leith Dudfield**

NCPR
National Centre for Pastoral Research

TABLE OF CONTENTS

AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC BISHOPS CONFERENCE

General Secretariat

Bishops Commission for Evangelisation, Laity and Ministry

FOREWORD

I am delighted to introduce to you this final version of the report: "A Profile of Catholic Clergy in Australia: Health and Wellbeing."

As Chair of the Bishops Commission for Evangelisation, Laity and Ministry, I know this project has had quite a long gestation. We have worked wonderfully together with Dr Trudy Dantis and her team in the National Centre for Pastoral Research. This too forms part of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference.

This report has undergone several drafts to reach this final version. We have added several contributions from experts nominated by my Commission to reflect on it's conclusions.

I encourage Dioceses to read this report carefully and for priests particularly to reflect with their Bishop and others on the significance of these findings for the ongoing pastoral care of our priests.

For priests themselves it may be an opportunity for us to have somewhat of an "examination of conscience" on our ministry with our people. Some of the findings you will see are very complimentary and show signs of great joy in the priesthood by so many. Other conclusions are more worrying and could well be the subject of the ongoing formation of clergy and their pastoral care.

Perhaps a more recent comment by Pope Leo regarding priests could give some context to this final report.

On Friday the 25th of July 2025 in Rome, Pope Leo reflected to participants of formators of Seminaries, amongst others, on the priesthood. He reiterated the words of Pope Francis from 17th February 2022. Here four kinds of closeness were articulated: "closeness to God, to the bishop, to fellow priests, and to the people."

Pope Leo also added three brief suggestions on the pastoral care of priests. The first suggestion he made was "to cultivate friendship with Jesus...we need personally to experience the closeness of the Master; to know we have been seen, loved and chosen by the Lord by pure grace and without merit on our part, because it is above all our own personal experience that we then exude in our ministry."

GPO Box 368
Canberra ACT 2601
Australia

63 Currong Street North
Braddon ACT 2612
Australia

T: +61 2 6201 9800
W: www.catholic.au

Pope Leo then spoke about the importance of "a continuous journey of conversion." This entails "to live an effective and affective fraternity among ourselves…in order to overcome individualism and the desire to overtake others."

The third and final aspect of Pope Leo's address to priests was to "share the mission with all the Baptised. Here we "commit ourselves personally to evangelisation. The ordained ministry was at the service of the mission shared by all. Today, we feel strongly that we must return to this participation of all the Baptised in witnessing to and proclaiming the Gospel…we need priests who are able to discern and appreciate in lay people the grace in baptism and the charisms that flow from it."

My hope is that this unprecedented survey of priests' wellbeing in Australia and the Papal comments above, will engender even greater joy in the ministry of priests and their wellbeing for many years to come.

I recommend this report to you. I encourage you to ponder and discuss the significant findings of the report.

I particularly thank Dr Trudy Dantis, her team and the Bishops from my commission who were particularly involved in this project.

Yours sincerely in Christ,

+ bbrowse

Archbishop Christopher Prowse
Chairperson, Bishops Commission for Evangelisation, Laity and Ministry
7th August 2025

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Dr Trudy Dantis

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

Dr Stephen Reid

Stephen Reid is the Senior Research Officer at the National Centre for Pastoral Research, having worked there for the past 17 years. He is an Honorary Fellow of Australian Catholic University and works concurrently as the Research Coordinator of the Christian Research Association. As a co-researcher on this project, Stephen worked on developing the survey in Qualtrics and subsequent data collection, conducting interviews, analysing quantitative data, and contributed to the writing of this report.

Ms Carole Gan

Carole Gan was contracted as a Research Assistant at the National Centre for Pastoral Research for this project. Carole worked on conducting interviews, analysing quantitative data, reviewing the literature on clergy wellbeing, and contributed to the writing of this report. She also supported the project through numerous administrative tasks, including liaising with respondents, applying for ethics approval, and editing and assembling documents.

Ms Leith Dudfield

Leith Dudfield is a Research Assistant at the National Centre for Pastoral Research. Leith worked on conducting interviews, coding and analysing qualitative data, assisted with reviewing literature on wellbeing and contributed to the writing of this report.

About the 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 *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).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This study on the health and wellbeing of Australian Catholic clergy was commissioned by the Bishops Commission for Evangelisation, Laity and Ministry (BCELM) and conducted by the National Centre for Pastoral Research (NCPR) and the Australian Catholic Migrant and Refugee Office (ACMRO).

The study aimed at developing an understanding of the health and wellbeing of Australian Catholic clergy (excluding bishops) to inform discussions at the bishops' Plenary Meetings and guide future pastoral strategies. It also provided priests and deacons with the opportunity to share feedback on their overall wellbeing, mental and spiritual health, and raise any related concerns.

The project aimed to answer the following key questions:

1. What are the key issues affecting Catholic clergy in areas of physical wellbeing, mental health and spiritual health?
2. How have recent social and cultural changes in Australia affected Catholic clergy?
3. What are some other concerns with which Catholic clergy in Australia struggle?
4. How can the support available for clergy be improved?

The study was conducted in two phases using both qualitative and quantitative approaches. Phase One involved an online survey, while Phase Two consisted of one-on-one interviews. A Research Reference Group provided guidance throughout the project, and ethics approval was granted by the Human Research Ethics Committee of the Christian Research Association.

A total of 825 priests and deacons (just over 27 per cent of all clergy in Australia) completed the Phase One survey, and 78 were interviewed in Phase Two. Both phases included a diverse mix of diocesan and religious clergy across age groups (under 30 to over 80), cultural backgrounds, ministry contexts (urban to remote) and work arrangements. Older participants were overrepresented in the Phase Two interviews, with 61 per cent aged over 70. Participants in both phases included those in active ministry and those fully retired, serving in diverse roles across parishes, chanceries, and in areas such as education, healthcare, and community services.

General Wellbeing, Ministry and Relationships

The overall wellbeing of Australian clergy was found to be generally positive. A significant majority (75%) reported having 'good' or 'very good' self-confidence. Additionally, about two-thirds (66%) reported maintaining a healthy diet, and 61% believed they were getting sufficient rest. More than half (55%) also reported experiencing high energy levels.

Many clergy struggled with exercising regularly, with 31 per cent rating themselves poorly, although 41 per cent considered themselves good or extremely good in this area. Walking was the most common physical activity, often combined with prayer or meditative reflection. Older clergy reported various health concerns but generally received regular check-ups and remained in good health. Clergy in rural areas, however, faced significant challenges in accessing adequate medical care.

Australian clergy worked an average of 8.6 hours daily, with 64 per cent exceeding the standard 7.5-hour workday. Nearly half (49%) of clergy under 40 worked more than 10 hours per day. Although office work was the main activity, nearly three-quarters (71%) of all clergy spent less than five hours

on it. Many spent up to two hours daily in administering Sacraments (81%), pastoral work (69%), formal meetings (75%) and external events (74%). Over a quarter (27%) spent more than two hours per day on pastoral work, including home and hospital visits.

Several interviewees reported feeling overwhelmed by heavy workloads and the unpredictable nature of their roles. Some described themselves as workaholics or felt pressured to work beyond healthy limits, with a few experiencing burnout. Married clergy faced challenges in balancing ministry and family commitments, while clergy in rural parishes often experienced isolation and loneliness.

Despite their demanding schedules, most clergy (65%) managed to take at least three weeks of annual vacation, and 83 per cent participated in spiritual retreats lasting four to seven days. Family time varied widely—40 per cent spent up to five hours monthly, while four per cent spent at least one week annually with family.

For most clergy, professional and personal development typically included diocesan retreats and safeguarding training. Some pursued additional opportunities, such as local seminars, overseas study, or postgraduate qualifications. However, many clergy reported having limited access to such options, either due to time, funding or availability, prompting several to seek these independently.

Clergy involvement in the wider community was strong, with 62 per cent involved in some capacity, primarily through social clubs (37%), sports (36%), and volunteering (32%) in areas such as welfare, healthcare, and education.

Over half (52%) were active on social media, mainly to connect with family and friends (87%). Usage was higher among clergy from non-English-speaking backgrounds (59%), compared to those from Australia (41%) and other English-speaking countries (33%).

Popular hobbies included watching TV, videos, or movies at home (74%), reading (73%), listening to music (69%), and engaging in outdoor activities (64%).

An overwhelming majority (95%) of clergy valued their work, while 73 per cent felt adequately supported and 64 per cent agreed they were adequately remunerated. Many highlighted the central role of the Mass in their ministry, especially celebrating the Eucharist, preparing homilies, and 'breaking the Word open'. Several described ministry as journeying with others through life and offering pastoral care to individuals and communities.

Positive experiences of ministry included celebrating sacraments such as weddings and baptisms, supporting those in grief, and engaging in simple, everyday life experiences. Clergy with overseas experience also spoke positively about serving in diverse cultural contexts.

Clergy generally reported positive relationships, with the vast majority (90%) rating their connection with parish communities positively. Similarly, 87 per cent had positive relationships with family, with permanent deacons most likely to rate these as 'extremely good' (74%), compared to diocesan (46%) and religious clergy (49%). Relationships with bishops were generally consistent across clergy groups, with close to six in ten (59%) rating their relationship with their bishop 'good' or 'extremely good', although 71 per cent of religious priests rated them positively, compared to 54 per cent of diocesan priests.

Responses varied on whether forming relationships became easier or harder after ordination. While some clergy found it easier, others struggled more, often depending on their personality and ministerial context. Nevertheless, around 40 per cent of all clergy identified friends as key sources of support, including fellow clergy, seminary peers, support groups, and international contacts. Additional support came from parishioners and professional networks such as pastoral supervisors, spiritual directors, therapists, and other trusted connections.

Spiritual and Mental Health

Most clergy rated their spiritual health positively, with nearly four in five (79%) describing their relationship with God as 'good' or 'extremely good', and 63 per cent feeling similarly about their ability to pray and meditate daily. Interviewees highlighted the value of prayer routines such as morning prayer, the Divine Office, spontaneous prayer, meditation, retreats, daily Mass, spiritual reading, and theological podcasts.

Nearly four in ten (39%) currently had a spiritual director, while 53 per cent had had one in the past. Common barriers included availability, suitability, and affordability. Most clergy (70%) reported no issues with personal Confession, although some struggled to find suitable confessors or had concerns about trust. Around a third reported other spiritual concerns, including spiritual dryness, inconsistency and a lack of time. Other issues included distractions, low motivation, health problems, pastoral difficulties and limited access to spiritual formation.

Most clergy expressed a positive outlook, with 71 per cent feeling hopeful and 61 per cent feeling joyful frequently, especially those from non-English-speaking backgrounds. However, anxiety was the most common negative emotion, experienced at least occasionally by 53 per cent. Younger clergy were more affected—17 per cent under age 40 felt anxious frequently, compared to 8 per cent of those aged 70 and above. Additionally, 16 per cent of clergy reported frequent exhaustion.

Over the past year, clergy commonly faced stress (65%), lack of sleep (49%), anxiety (44%), and loneliness or isolation (43%). A small number used alcohol to cope (13%), and 7 per cent reported other mental health issues, including those related to physical health, ageing, cognitive decline, and addictions.

Around 49 per cent of clergy currently had a pastoral supervisor, while 22 per cent had had one in the past. Most current participants (76%) engaged as individuals, while others joined a group or mixed formats. For 65 per cent, costs were covered by their diocese or religious community. Overall, the majority (85%) found supervision beneficial to their ministry, while 15 per cent did not.

Clergy Concerns and Support for Ministry

Around 61 per cent of clergy made comments about negative impacts from cultural or societal changes, with the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse prompting the most extensive responses, including stress, anxiety, shame, and diminished confidence in ministry. Many felt their priestly identity and credibility were harmed, while others feared unjust accusations or struggled with the growing safeguarding workload. The decline in clergy numbers led to increased workloads, stress, challenges in adapting to cultural shifts in the presbyterate and concerns about inadequate leadership formation. Legal changes around gender, same-sex marriage, euthanasia, and abortion raised concerns about hostility toward faith and restrictions on religious expression, while

debates on Religious Discrimination and Freedom of Religion highlighted growing divides between Church and society. Additional impacts included emotional distress, weakened identity, mission and evangelisation, lack of support from bishops and negative media portrayals. Despite these challenges, a few clergy saw opportunities for deeper trust in God and renewed ministry commitment.

Clergy responses to post-ordination changes in identity and ministry varied by age, responsibilities, experience, and formation. The Royal Commission led to reputational damage and increased suspicion, though some saw it as a shift away from clericalism. Many lamented the loss of close community ties and the rise of conservative isolation, alongside broader changes such as an aging and culturally diverse presbyterate, evolving parish life, increased use of technology, and declining Mass attendance and lay engagement. Overseas priests noted the need to adapt to ministry in Australia, while older clergy spoke of greater freedom in their later years. Younger priests described navigating pastoral and societal shifts, and deacons reported improved clarity in their roles.

Contemporary challenges faced by clergy in Australia were grouped into eight key areas: strained relationships with bishops and other clergy; difficulties in pastoral ministry; experiences of loneliness, isolation, alienation and loss of identity; heavy workload burdens; physical and mental health concerns, including sexual problems; uncertainty around retirement and future planning; challenges in faith formation and evangelisation; and gaps in clergy training and mentoring.

Clergy offered key suggestions for better support in eight areas: more personal interest or support from bishops or leaders; stronger peer support; increased administrative help, improved leadership from the bishop; enhanced formation and training; greater spiritual support and supervision; financial assistance and better work-life balance. Despite challenges, many expressed gratitude for their ministry. In advising future clergy, participants encouraged embracing the vocation with enthusiasm but also urged realistic expectations, deep discernment, and local engagement. Deacons emphasised mentorship, spousal dialogue, and making supportive life choices.

INTRODUCTION

Background to the Study

The National Centre for Pastoral Research (NCPR) and the Australian Catholic Migrant and Refugee Office (ACMRO) conducted this study on the profile of Catholic clergy in Australia in response to an invitation by the Bishops Commission for Evangelisation, Laity and Ministry (BCELM) to gather feedback on the wellbeing, mental health, and spiritual health of priests and deacons, and provide them with the opportunity to raise concerns in these areas.

The study's main purpose was to develop an understanding of the health and wellbeing of Australian Catholic clergy (excluding bishops) to inform a discussion at the bishops' Plenary Meetings and to guide the development of future pastoral direction in these areas. The research did not include bishops since an earlier study done by the NCPR in 2022 had focused specifically on this group and covered many similar themes.

The project aimed to answer the following key questions:

1. What are the key issues affecting Catholic clergy in areas of physical wellbeing, mental health and spiritual health?
2. How have recent social and cultural changes in Australia affected Catholic clergy?
3. What are some other concerns with which Catholic clergy in Australia struggle?
4. How can the support available for clergy be improved?

The study was conducted in two phases:

- Phase One - An online questionnaire in which all clergy (excluding bishops) in Australia were invited to participate.

- Phase Two - A one-on-one interview with clergy who expressed an interest in participating in this phase, either via videoconference (Microsoft Teams/Zoom), phone or in person.

A Research Reference group was established to advise and guide the project. The Christian Research Association Human Research Ethics Committee granted ethics approval for Phase One on 8 March 2024 (*Appendix 1*) and for Phase Two on 27 May 2024 (*Appendix 2*). Special care was taken to preserve the confidentiality of survey respondents and interview participants in the study, including standard ethical considerations about anonymity and specific geographical location details, such as a parish or diocese.

The study was initially meant to be completed in October 2024, with the plan to interview 20 priests in Phase Two. However, an unanticipated response rate from 80 clergy who wished to be interviewed meant that further time was needed for data collection, analysis and reporting. The NCPR and ACMRO considered it an unexpected advantage to draw insights from an additional 60 participants. Accordingly, new plans were made to expand the study to accommodate the heightened interest. The scheduling of additional interviews for Phase Two occurred in late 2024 and early 2025, when most clergy were very busy leading up to Christmas or on leave shortly thereafter, thus taking longer than expected. Discussions with the BCELM also resulted in changes to plans for preparing reports and publishing the findings. The study was therefore extended by one year.

Research Methods

The research strategy chosen for this study was a mix of quantitative and qualitative methods to address the key questions and be consistent with the project's overall aims.

Data Collection and Participant Recruitment

In Phase One of this study, data collection was carried out by means of an online survey developed in *Qualtrics,* using a mix of quantitative and qualitative questions. All clergy (excluding bishops) in Australia were invited to participate via a survey link emailed to them through their diocese and/or religious community. A copy of that invitation email can be found in *Appendix 3*.

The survey was conducted from 15 May to 15 July 2024, during which multiple requests were made to improve awareness of the study and ensure a diverse mix of responses across the country. All responses were anonymous and confidential. A copy of the survey can be found in *Appendix 4*. Participants were provided with a Participant Information Letter (*Appendix 5*) and a Support Services document (*Appendix 6*) through links in the survey.

Data collection in Phase Two was done through one-on-one interviews. Clergy in Australia who participated in Phase One were invited to contact the NCPR if they were interested in participating in Phase Two. A copy of the invitation can be found in *Appendix 7*. Participants were provided with a Participant Information Sheet (*Appendix 8*) and were asked to complete a Consent Form (*Appendix 9*) and Demographic Profile Sheet (*Appendix 10*) prior to their interview.

Total Responses Received

According to the Official Directory of the Catholic Church in Australia, as of the end of 2023, there were a total of 3,017 Catholic clergy in Australia: 1,810 diocesan priests, 1,003 religious priests and 204 permanent deacons.[1] At the close of the survey on 15 July 2024, 825 completed responses were received, representing just over 27 per cent of all clergy in Australia.

Eighty-two clergy responded to the invitation to participate in Phase Two, and 78 were interviewed. Interviews were conducted primarily via Microsoft Teams; a small number (nine) were conducted over the telephone, and four were conducted in person.

Interviews were conducted in two batches:

- Batch 1, which ran from 19 September through 28 November 2024, had 45 interviews.
- Batch 2, which ran from 14 January through 5 March 2025, had 33 interviews.

The interviews were guided by a questionnaire that explored various topics and allowed for spontaneous questions and the development of responses. A copy of the questionnaire can be found in *Appendix 11*.

---

[1] Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, *Official Directory of the Catholic Church in Australia 2024-2025* (St Pauls, 2024), 761-762.

Data Analysis

Quantitative results were checked and examined in Excel and SPSS using univariate (frequency) and bi-variate (cross-tabulation) analysis. Statistical tests (Pearson Chi-Square) were run for all cross-tabulations, and, where appropriate, significant differences were commented on in the narrative.

The variables used in the cross-tabulations of the survey were clergy categories (religious priests, diocesan priests, permanent deacons, local clergy, clergy on loan to an Australian), ministry status (active, semi-retired, fully retired), birthplace, age (date of birth), age when entering the seminary and age at ordination. Transitional deacons were not included in the cross-tabulations as the small sample of clergy in this category (less than half a percentage point of the total sample population) could not be considered representative of transitional deacons in Australia.

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 findings from both phases of the research project. It begins with an executive summary, background information and an overview of the research methods. This is followed by a review of key studies on the various aspects of clergy wellbeing, from Australia and overseas. The report includes a summary and demographic analysis of survey participants, details of their ministries and decision-making roles, as well as a brief description of the interview participants.

The remainder of the report provides a detailed analysis of the findings of the research, divided into seven thematic areas:

1. General Wellbeing
2. Ministry
3. Relationships
4. Spiritual Health
5. Mental Health
6. Clergy Concerns
7. Support and Future Directions

In the first five thematic areas, comparative analysis was conducted across various demographic groups, including age, country of birth, age at which they entered the seminary, year of ordination and the year of arrival in Australia. This included comparisons between various clergy categories—local diocesan or religious priests, diocesan or religious priests on loan to an Australian diocese, and permanent deacons—as well as between active and retired clergy. However, due to the very small number of responses from transitional deacons, no detailed analysis was undertaken of this group.

Several sections in the report include numerous open-ended survey responses, which elicited more detailed answers. Due to the substantial volume of these responses, not all comments could be included; only those that illustrate key themes are presented here. Phase Two interviews provided deeper insights into specific issues.

The findings contain some degree of content overlap, as participants addressed similar wellbeing concerns 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 clergy in the interviews are interwoven throughout the report. The final section features insights from six experts on the study's findings, offering diverse perspectives from leadership, pastoral care, psychological insight, and priestly ministry.

Clergy in Australia: Historical and Sociocultural Context

The first Catholic priests in Australia, around 1800, were convicts permitted to say Mass in and around the Sydney area.[2] The Catholic community in Australia began as a very Irish Church because most priests were Irish. It was not until the 1930s that Australian-born priests outnumbered Irish-born priests.[3] Since then, many priests have come from a multitude of other countries: data collected in 2014 found overseas-born priests serving in Australia came from 64 different countries[4], partly to minister to a large immigrant population but also to fill the void created by declining priestly vocations, identified as a major contemporary challenge facing the Church in Australia.[5] Records from the ACMRO data indicate that 727 overseas-born clergy arrived in Australia between March 2012 and September 2022.

Another major change which has taken place in the Church over the past 50 years has been the large number of resignations of men from the priesthood and the decline in the number of men available for the priesthood.[6] Indeed, between 2003 and 2024, the number of priests in Australia declined from 3,158 to 2,813, a decrease of around 11 per cent.[7] On the other hand, the number of deacons increased during the same period from 48 to 204, an increase of around 325 per cent.[8] However, not all dioceses followed similar trends. According to 2021 research, while several Archdioceses have the greatest current counts, a large number of deacons have been regularly present in the dioceses of Parramatta and Bunbury since 1990, while three Australian dioceses have yet to appoint a single permanent deacon.[9]

Health and Wellbeing: Conceptual Frameworks

Wellbeing is defined in several ways in the literature, including happiness, pleasure-seeking and flourishing. [10] The dominant idea in psychological literature is subjective wellbeing, which considers how people evaluate their own feelings and thoughts, with a focus on life satisfaction.[11] Maslow discusses a fundamental needs hierarchy, where, in most cases, basic needs must be satisfied before

---

[2] Robert E. Dixon, *The Catholic Community in Australia* (Openbook, 2005), 1-2.

[3] Dixon, *The Catholic Community in Australia*, 1-3.

[4] Pastoral Research Office, *Called to Serve: A Report on Overseas-Born Priests Working in Australia* (Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, 2016), 3.

[5] Pastoral Research Office, *Understanding Religious Vocations in Australia Today* (Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, 2018), 1.

[6] Dixon, *The Catholic Community in Australia*, 33-34.

[7] National Centre for Pastoral Research, *The Catholic Church in Australia: Parishes, Priests and Deacons, 1981 to 2021* (Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, 2021), 1; ACBC, *Official Directory 2024-2025,* 761.

[8] NCPR, *The Catholic Church in Australia*, 1; ACBC, *Official Directory 2024-2025,* 761

[9] NCPR, *The Catholic Church in Australia*, 6.

[10] Susan A. David et al., "Introduction," in *The Oxford Handbook of Happiness*, ed. Susan A. David et al. (Oxford University Press, 2013), 34-35, https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/acu/detail.action?docID=1591550&pq-origsite=primo.

[11] David et al., "Introduction," 34-35.

higher-level needs can be met.[12] The most basic needs are physiological needs, followed by safety, belongingness and love, esteem and finally, self-actualisation.[13] Therefore, in order to rate oneself as having good wellbeing, each of these levels must be reached.

Good physical health is intimately connected with a person's quality of life.[14] This includes eating well, partaking in regular physical activity and getting adequate sleep.[15] It also incorporates disease prevention, seeking medical support, and following medical advice and treatment when needed.[16]

Safety needs include living in a well-ordered society, having adequate shelter, and being safe from threats or violence—physical or psychological.[17] Psychological safety in the workplace or a similar environment allows people to "grow, learn, contribute, and perform effectively in a rapidly changing world".[18]

Our need for relationships with others is a cornerstone of our humanity. Particularly if we seek to thrive, we need to live as social beings and interact with others.[19] Many factors impact the role of relationships in happiness, including attachment security, social support, and relationship quality.[20]

Esteem refers to a desire to have respect for oneself.[21] It can include both the desire for personal traits such as competence, strength, and achievement and the desire for a good reputation or to be seen well by others.[22] A particular feature is that healthy self-esteem is based on respect earned rather than that inferred by celebrity or other status.[23]

Finally, self-actualisation is "an individual's expression of their full potential".[24] It encompasses a need for creativity, growth and development and a deeper empathy for others.[25] Self-actualisation is often connected with maturity and therefore realised in older age (usually over the age of 35), rather than

---

[12] Abraham Maslow, *Motivation and Personality*, 3rd ed. (Longman, 1987), 33.

[13] Maslow, *Motivation and Personality*, 15-22.

[14] *WHO Guideline on Self-Care Interventions for Health and Well-Being, 2022 Revision : Executive Summary* (World Health Organization, 2021), 2, https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/acu/detail.action?pq-origsite=primo&docID=30477958.

[15] *WHO Guideline, 2.*

[16] *WHO Guideline, 2.*

[17] Maslow, *Motivation and Personality*, 18-20.

[18] Amy C. Edmondson and Zhike Lei, "Psychological Safety: The History, Renaissance, and Future of an Interpersonal Construct," *Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior* 1, no. 1 (2014): 23, https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-orgpsych-031413-091305.

[19] Sam Thompson, "Introduction to Happiness and Society," in *The Oxford Handbook of Happiness*, ed. Susan A. David et al. (Oxford University Press, 2013), 585, https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/acu/detail.action?docID=1591550&pq-origsite=primo.

[20] Melİkşah Demİr, "Introduction to Relationships and Happiness," in *The Oxford Handbook of Happiness*, ed. Susan A. David et al. (Oxford University Press, 2013), 1088, https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/acu/detail.action?docID=1591550&pq-origsite=primo.

[21] Maslow, *Motivation and Personality*, 21.

[22] Maslow, *Motivation and Personality*, 21.

[23] Maslow, *Motivation and Personality*, 22.

[24] Itai Ivtzan et al., "Wellbeing through Self-Fulfilment: Examining Developmental Aspects of Self-Actualization," *The Humanistic Psychologist* 41, no. 2 (2013): 119, https://doi.org/10.1080/08873267.2012.712076.

[25] Ivtzan et al., "Wellbeing through Self-Fulfilment," 120.

in those who are younger.[26] However, it may also be associated with an intrinsic motivation, which has been observed as being more common in recent generations.[27]

Clergy Wellbeing in Australia

The importance of clergy wellbeing to the Australian Catholic community was recognised in the synodal processes of the Plenary Council and the Synod on Synodality.[28] While the diminishing number of clergy and the impacts of the clergy sexual abuse crisis were the primary focus in this area, the unrealistic expectations being placed on local clergy, loneliness, isolation, loss of social status, and questions about a celibate lifestyle were topics of concern.[29] There was a call for greater formation and support, broader formation for seminarians and increased training in collaboration with lay people in ministry to support the demands of administrative work.[30] The clergy's lack of voice in these processes was widely recognised as requiring further attention.[31]

Existing research on the wellbeing of Catholic clergy in Australia is relatively sparse, with a few exceptions. A 2010 study of Australian priests in parish ministry surveyed 542 men and interviewed 55 priests nationwide to gauge their insights on several issues, including the nature of priesthood and their roles, impacts on status, workload and morals, and beliefs and attitudes.[32] While 90 per cent reported their lives fulfilling, the largely negative findings revealed that 47 per cent found their workloads excessive. More than half (53%) disagreed that their seminary training prepared them well to manage their own affairs or to communicate with women (54%). Around 70 per cent believed priestly celibacy should be optional, and only about a third (35%) agreed that the bishops effectively managed the Church in Australia.[33]

A study by NCLS Research, investigating 4,400 senior ministers, pastors, and priests across 25 denominations, including Anglican, Protestant, and Catholic traditions, revealed that 23% of church

---

[26] Ivtzan et al., "Wellbeing through Self-Fulfilment," 121, 126.

[27] Ivtzan et al., "Wellbeing through Self-Fulfilment," 123.

[28] Fifth Plenary Council of Australia, *Instrumentum Laboris: Working Document* (Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, 2021), 19; Trudy Dantis et al., *Synod of Bishops: Australian Summary, 2024 Consultation* (Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, 2024), 4, https://ncpr.catholic.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/Australian-Summary-2024-FINAL.pdf.

[29] Trudy Dantis et al., *Synod of Bishops: Australian Synthesis* (Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, 2022), 8, https://s3.ap-southeast-2.amazonaws.com/acbcwebsite/Articles/Documents/ACBC/Synod_of_Bishops_Australian_Synthesis_-_FINAL.pdf; Trudy Dantis et al., *Synod of Bishops: Australian Synthesis, Continental Stage* (Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, 2022), 5, https://s3.ap-southeast-2.amazonaws.com/acbcwebsite/Articles/Documents/ACBC/FINAL%20Australian%20Synthesis%20Report%20-%20Continental%20Stage.pdf; Dantis et al., *Synod of Bishops: 2024 Consultation*, 4.

[30] 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), 89-90, https://plenarycouncil.catholic.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/FINAL-BOOK-v7-spread-version-LISTEN-TO-WHAT-THE-SPIRIT-IS-SAYING.pdf.

[31] Dantis et al., *Synod of Bishops: Australian Synthesis*, 2.

[32] Chris McGillion and John O'Carroll, *Our Fathers: What Australian Catholic Priests Really Think About Their Lives and Their Church* (John Garratt, 2011), 4, 183-184.

[33] McGillion and O'Carroll, *Our Fathers*, 161-163,168.

leaders experienced burnout as a severe or significant problem, and 56% were considered at risk of developing burnout.[34] Research on Catholic local senior leaders in Australia (priests, deacons and lay people serving as the principal leader in a local parish) who completed the 2016 NCLS Leader Survey showed that while leaders felt very well equipped in areas of ministry such as 'Teaching/preaching' (75%) and 'Pastoral care/counselling' (63%), the areas where they felt the least equipped were 'Cross-cultural ministry' (20%), followed by 'Administration/finance' (16%) and 'Organisation management skills for church leadership' (13%).[35] Most senior leaders (88%) rated their physical health as excellent, very good or good, and when it came to feeling stressed in their role in the last few months, only 17 per cent described themselves as highly stressed.[36]

These results appeared to have deteriorated slightly in 2021, when in a similar study, a smaller proportion (78%) of senior leaders in Catholic parishes rated their physical health excellent, very good or good, and 21 per cent rated themselves as highly stressed.[37] Despite this, 74 per cent were highly satisfied with life as a whole.[38] The research also found that 23 per cent of leaders aged 70 and over had experienced high levels of emotional exhaustion, and overall, 11 per cent of leaders had fairly often or very often thought about quitting their leadership roles in the last 5 years.[39]

The June 2017 edition of *Pointers,* the bulletin of the Christian Research Association, focused on the issue *of Mental health and wellbeing amongst people involved in ministry positions within the Christian Church.* The articles emphasised the profound impact of burnout on clergy and the unique challenges they face in their daily ministry, such as physical and emotional exhaustion, heightened scrutiny, and varied demands on their time, as well as the importance of relying on spiritual resources as a buffer to the stressors experienced in pastoral ministry. Edwards cited statistics from various sources to indicate the prevalence of burnout among clergy and the negative impact it had on their physical, emotional, and social wellbeing. [40] He also emphasised the need for early identification and intervention to prevent burnout.[41]

Passion in ministry was discussed by Pegram who outlined the distinction between harmonious passion, which energises ministry, and obsessive passion, which can lead to damaging effects on relationships and overall health. [42] He cautioned that high levels of commitment and passion in ministry could increase the emotional weight given to work stressors, potentially leading to burnout.[43] The role of beneficial stress i.e., "demands and tasks that are stimulating and energising as distinct from demands that have the tendency to disempower and demotivate" in mitigating burnout was

[34] Peter Kaldor and Rod Bullpitt, *Burnout in Church Leaders* (Openbook, 2001), 7, 10.

[35] Sam Sterland et al., *A Snapshot of Effective and Sustainable Leadership Issues: Catholic Church in Australia. 2016 NCLS Local Church Leaders Report* (NCLS Research, 2018), 6-7.

[36] Sterland et al., *A Snapshot of Effective and Sustainable Leadership Issues*, 10-11.

[37] Ruth Powell et al., *Leader Wellbeing: Effectiveness and Stress. Report for the Catholic Church in Australia. NCLS Research Profile 2419* (NCLS Research, 2024), 9, 13.

[38] Powell et al., *Leader Wellbeing*, 6.

[39] Powell et al., *Leader Wellbeing*, 16 & 18.

[40] Tom Edwards, "Clergy Wellbeing: Strategies for the Prevention and Management of Burnout," *Pointers* 27, no. 2 (2017): 2-3, 5-6.

[41] Edwards, "Clergy Wellbeing," 6.

[42] Nigel Pegram, "Passion and Sustainable Ministry," *Pointers* 27, no. 2 (2017): 7-10.

[43] Pegram, "Passion and Sustainable Ministry," 8-9.

considered by Gallet.[44] She also highlighted three dimensions of spiritual resources: attachment to God, collaborative religious coping, and a sense of calling, and asserted that maintaining a strong connection to these spiritual resources enabled individuals to manage stress effectively.[45]

Overseas Research with Local Relevance

There are many global studies on a range of aspects related to clergy wellbeing, with the most prominent emanating mainly from the US and Europe, with a few from Asian countries. While not all of these involve Catholic clergy, their findings provide comparable and valuable insights for clergy wellbeing in Australia.

Identity and Ministry of US Catholic Clergy

Two significant pieces of research from the American Centre for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) provide a view of how the priesthood and the permanent diaconate have changed over time. Many of the trends and themes echo patterns in Australia.

Research by Gautier, Peri and Fichter (2012)[46] that compared data about priests collected over four eight-year intervals, 1985, 1993, 2001 and 2009, shows that perhaps the most significant factor impacting priests is the aging demographic of the cohort.[47] Part of the changing age profile is explained by newer priests being ordained later in life than in previous generations.[48] However, there was an increasing proportion of retired clergy.[49] One result of this was that new priests became responsible for parishes with less experience than past generations and were isolated from other members of the clergy when required to live by themselves.[50] Another significant change was the increasing ethnic and racial diversity among priests with an increasing number being born overseas.[51]

The research questions focused on attitude to authority, collaborative ministry and multiculturalism and the answers were analysed according to cohorts that were created using ordination dates. They were subsequently found to represent cultural cohorts. One of the main findings was the different models of leadership adopted by the cohorts. Those ordained earlier than the mid-1980s tended to practice a servant leader model of leadership, where they viewed themselves as being a servant to a community of equals.[52] The cohorts ordained after the mid-1980s tended to adopt a traditionalist or cultic model of priesthood that envisioned the priest as being set apart from the laity and has little need to consult with laity or lay employees about parish matters.[53]

---

[44] Wilma Gallet, "Drawing Sustenance from a Strong Sense of Calling," *Pointers* 27, no. 2 (2017): 15.

[45] Gallet, "Drawing Sustenance from a Strong Sense of Calling," 14-15.

[46] Mary L. Gautier et al., *Same Call, Different Men: The Evolution of the Priesthood since Vatican II* (Liturgical Press, 2012).

[47] Gautier et al., *Same Call, Different Men*, 1.

[48] Gautier et al., *Same Call, Different Men*, 5.

[49] Gautier et al., *Same Call, Different Men*, 11-13.

[50] Gautier et al., *Same Call, Different Men*, 16.

[51] Gautier et al., *Same Call, Different Men*, 8-9.

[52] Gautier et al., *Same Call, Different Men*, 196-7.

[53] Gautier et al., *Same Call, Different Men*, 196-7.

Priests' struggles were identified, and included the exercise of church authority, unreasonable workloads, the unrealistic demands of lay people, loneliness and living with a conflict between church teachings and personal beliefs.[54] It is perhaps no surprise that the sexual abuse revelations created negative emotions for priests.[55] They were also caught in a ripple effect created by knowing abusers, and/or victims and/or their families.[56]

CARA's other publication reviews the experience of the permanent diaconate in the United States from 1968 to 2018.[57] Since the restoration of the diaconate in 1968, the number of deacons in the United States had grown to more than 18,000 men in 2015.[58] Unlike priests, deacons did not reflect the cultural diversity of the American Church with 88% being white, but this appears to be changing compared with the diversity of retired deacons of whom 92% were white.[59] They were found to complement the work of priests, act as a gateway to the priest and take on administrative roles and charitable ministries.[60] They created smaller groups that injected a family atmosphere in larger parishes.[61] Deacons struggled with foreign priests, particularly from countries who had restored the order in a minor way or not at all, and they often felt like second-class citizens compared to priests.[62] On the opposite side of the slate, many deacons experience a strengthening of their marriages after their ordination,[63] and they reported satisfaction with life both at work and in general[64].

General Health and Wellbeing

One significant factor that influences the ability of any person to successfully fulfil their vocation or employment is their general health and wellbeing.[65] Holleman and Eagle examined the scholarly understanding of clergy health over the past 50 years, testing the assumption that clergy were an especially unhealthy vocational group, and identified the major correlations of health factors among clergy.[66] Results showed that clergy were not a particularly unhealthy group compared to the general population.[67] Compared to their Protestant counterparts, Catholic clergy were the most likely to self-rate their health poorly, but they also reported the lowest levels of depressive symptoms.[68] The researchers however, cautioned against overgeneralising findings as different religious traditions have

---

[54] Gautier et al., *Same Call, Different Men*, 48-69.

[55] Gautier et al., *Same Call, Different Men*, 112-83.

[56] Gautier et al., *Same Call, Different Men*, 120-1.

[57] The Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, *Word, Liturgy and Charity: The Diaconate in the U.S. Catholic Church, 1968-2018* (Lexington Books, 2018).

[58] CARA, *Word, Liturgy and Charity*, 31-3.

[59] CARA, *Word, Liturgy and Charity*, 48-9.

[60] CARA, *Word, Liturgy and Charity*, 83-5.

[61] CARA, *Word, Liturgy and Charity*, 83.

[62] CARA, *Word, Liturgy and Charity*, 102-8, 110-11.

[63] CARA, *Word, Liturgy and Charity*, 113.

[64] CARA, *Word, Liturgy and Charity*, 102-117.

[65] Jerome M. Adams, "The Value of Worker Well-Being," *Public Health Reports* 134, no. 6 (2019): 583, https://doi.org/10.1177/0033354919878434; Paul Litchfield et al., "Work and Wellbeing in the 21st Century," *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 13, no. 11 (2016): 1065, https://doi.org/doi: 10.3390/ijerph13111065.

[66] Anna Holleman and David Eagle, "Is There a Crisis in Clergy Health?: Reorienting Research Using a National Sample," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 62, no. 3 (2023): 580-600, https://doi.org/10.1111/jssr.12859.

[67] Hollman and Eagle, "Is There a Crisis in Clergy Health?," 599.

[68] Hollman and Eagle, "Is There a Crisis in Clergy Health?," 599.

unique characteristics (e.g., demographics, geographic distribution, and occupational structures) that could impact health.[69]

Other research has examined specific aspects of clergy health and wellbeing. The importance of wellbeing domains such as autonomy, self-acceptance, and purpose in life among Catholic diocesan and religious priests and seminarians in India were examined by Noronha and Braganza. They found that older individuals scored higher on measures of wellbeing, which indicated the need for targeted interventions early in one's ministry and a more balanced approach during formation and ongoing ministry that nurtures clergy personal wellbeing.[70]

Another crucial factor impacting clergy health was reviewed in Tervo-Niemelä's investigation of the relationship between work orientation and wellbeing among clergy members in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland. The paper discussed the impact of an individual's theological orientations and demographic circumstances and emphasised the importance having a multi-faceted approach to ministry in dealing with the challenges of church work. It found that "those oriented towards worship life drew their main support from the spiritual aspects of work, but … were most likely to suffer from a lack of social competence" while "those oriented toward promoting justice and helping received most support from encountering people. At the same time those who were passively oriented in their work experienced the least satisfaction and the least support".[71] The study also highlighted that stress factors such as long hours, bureaucracy and role ambiguity can affect clergy wellbeing.[72]

A small qualitative study in the UK by Edwards et al. explored clergy members' experiences of role demands, coping strategies, and support. "Three major themes emerged: 'the sacrifice you make', 'help along the way', and 'change that's needed'".[73] Many respondents described negative emotional symptoms and distress, and a strong reliance on a relationship with God as a coping strategy.[74] Barriers to support within and outside of the Church were identified along with the need for cultural and practical changes within Church structures to provide better support for coping with demanding roles, normalising help-seeking behaviours and improving access to formal support.[75]

Mental Health

Mental health issues among clergy have also been investigated. Kinman et al. reported significant associations between emotional labour (defined as the effort to display organisationally sanctioned emotions), psychological distress, and intrinsic job satisfaction among UK-based clergy. Her work revealed that work-related stressors like long hours, role conflict, poor compensation, and high

---

[69] Hollman and Eagle, "Is There a Crisis in Clergy Health?," 600.

[70] Konrad Noronha and Dinesh Braganza, "The Wellbeing of Clergy and Vowed Religious," *Pastoral Psychology* 71, no. 5 (2022): 667-676, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11089-021-00961-6.

[71] Kati Tervo-Niemelä, "Clergy Work Orientation Profiles and Wellbeing at Work: A Study of the Lutheran Clergy in Finland," *Review of Religious Research* 58, no. 3 (2016): 365, https://doi.org/10.1007/s13644-016-0247-4.

[72] Tervo-Niemelä, "Clergy Work Orientation Profiles and Wellbeing at Work," 379.

[73] Laura Edwards et al., "Jesus Got Crucified, Why Should We Expect Any Different?: UK Christian Clergies' Experiences of Coping with Role Demands and Seeking Support," *Mental Health, Religion & Culture* 25, no. 4 (2022): 462, https://doi.org/10.1080/13674676.2022.2059068.

[74] Edwards et al., "Jesus Got Crucified," 466-469.

[75] Edwards et al., "Jesus Got Crucified," 471-475.

parishioner expectations impacted clergy wellbeing.[76] On the other hand, a wider social network and satisfaction with social support could protect clergy from the negative impact of emotional labour, and counselling skills training could enhance intrinsic job satisfaction.[77] The authors suggested peer coaching and enhancing social support as interventions to help clergy effectively manage the emotional demands of their work.[78]

Robbins and Hancock provided further insights into protecting clergy mental health. They employed the Francis Burnout Inventory to measure work-related psychological health. They found that extrovert clergy were significantly more likely to report higher levels of wellbeing, higher levels of satisfaction in ministry, and lower levels of exhaustion.[79]

Burnout

Burnout results from "chronic stress at work",[80] and high-quality studies have shown that it has "physical, psychological and occupational" consequences.[81] The study by Rossetti and Rhoades found that, contrary to common assumptions, Catholic priests were significantly less burned out than groups from the general population and other professions[82] The researchers identified four factors that contributed to clergy wellbeing: job satisfaction, inner peace, relationship with God and good friends.[83]

A systematic review of articles relating to burnout in Catholic clergy by Picornell-Gallar and González-Fraile also noted that vocational satisfaction played a key role in preventing and reducing burnout among clergy.[84] Factors identified in this wider analysis of literature found that burnout in Catholic clergy was influenced by age, personality traits, and the type of priesthood.[85] Contrary to Rossetti and Rhoades, however, no relation was found between burnout and social support, self-care, spiritual practice, or workload, although it was noted that clergy members face challenges such as overload, geographical dispersion of work, and a lifestyle characterised by solitude and difficulty maintaining healthy habits.[86]

---

[76] Gail Kinman et al., "The Cost of Caring? Emotional Labour, Wellbeing and the Clergy," *Pastoral Psychology* 60, no. 5 (2011): 672, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11089-011-0340-0.

[77] Kinman et al., "The Cost of Caring?," 672-673.

[78] Kinman et al., "The Cost of Caring?," 678.

[79] Mandy Robbins and Nicole Hancock, "Subjective Well-Being and Psychological Type among Australian Clergy," *Mental Health, Religion & Culture* 18, no. 1 (2015): 55, https://doi.org/10.1080/13674676.2014.1003171.

[80] Denise Albieri Jodas Salvagioni et al., "Physical, Psychological and Occupational Consequences of Job Burnout: A Systematic Review of Prospective Studies," *PLoS ONE* 12, no.10 (2017): e0185781, https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0185781.

[81] Salvagioni et al., "Physical, Psychological and Occupational Consequences of Job Burnout."

[82] Stephen Rossetti and Colin J. Rhoades, "Burnout in Catholic Clergy: A Predictive Model Using Psychological and Spiritual Variables," *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* 5, no. 4 (2013): 335, https://doi.org/10.1037/a0033639.

[83] Rossetti and Rhoades, "Burnout in Catholic Clergy," 340.

[84] Damián Picornell-Gallar and Eduardo González-Fraile, "Burnout Syndrome among Catholic Clergy: A Systematic Review," *Journal of Religion and Health* 63 (2024): 1839, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10943-023-01883-8.

[85] Picornell-Gallar and González-Fraile, "Burnout Syndrome among Catholic Clergy," 1846.

[86] Picornell-Gallar and González-Fraile, "Burnout Syndrome among Catholic Clergy," 1830, 1846.

The interaction between positive affect (satisfaction in ministry) and negative affect (emotional exhaustion) to predict burnout among Anglican clergy in the UK was investigated by Francis et al.[87] Their findings suggested that increased satisfaction in ministry reduced the impacts of emotional exhaustion on burnout, and this was statistically significant in predicting thoughts of leaving ministry and psychological distress. [88].

Demographic risk factors and protective behaviours associated with burnout were researched by Doolittle. He found that younger clergy who had experienced a traumatic church placement were more likely to feel burnt out, and report feelings of depression and dissatisfaction with their spiritual life.[89] Those who engaged in specific protective behaviours (e.g., a variety of interests and activities outside of their vocation) were less likely to experience emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation, and a low sense of personal accomplishment.[90] Clergy who reported higher satisfaction with their spiritual life were also less likely to suffer from burnout.[91]

Spiritual Wellbeing

Another component that affects health and wellbeing is spiritual wellbeing which "serves as a socio-psychological resource for coping with challenging life experiences."[92] Proeschold-Bell et al. found that existing spiritual wellbeing scales predominantly assessed religious practices, meaning in life, beliefs, and daily transcendent experiences, which proved ineffective for clergy as these indicators often led to ceiling effects, thereby inhibiting the nuanced assessment of spiritual wellbeing.[93] They developed a scale focused on the presence and power of God in daily life to measure clergy spiritual wellbeing.[94] The results demonstrated a negative correlation between the presence and power of God in daily life and mental health issues and a positive correlation with quality of life and ministry satisfaction.[95] Whilst the study surveyed United Methodist Church clergy, the findings could also be relevant to Catholic clergy.[96]

Sexuality and Healthy Relationships

The ability for clergy to accept themselves, including their sexuality, and their ability to form healthy relationships with a variety of people influences their social interactions and has the potential to impact mental health.

---

[87] Leslie Francis et al., "Work-Related Psychological Wellbeing: Testing the Balanced Affect Model among Anglican Clergy," *Religions* 8, no. 7 (2017): 118, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel8070118.

[88] Francis et al., "Work-Related Psychological Wellbeing," 118.

[89] Benjamin R. Doolittle, "The Impact of Behaviors Upon Burnout among Parish-Based Clergy," *Journal of Religion and Health* 49, no. 1 (2010): 88, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10943-008-9217-7.

[90] Doolittle, "The Impact of Behaviors Upon Burnout among Parish-Based Clergy," 92.

[91] Doolittle, "The Impact of Behaviors Upon Burnout among Parish-Based Clergy," 90.

[92] Elizabeth Cornelia Rudolph and Antoni Barnard, "The Cinderella of Positive Psychology: Spiritual Well-Being as an Emerging Dimension of Flourishing in Pastoral Work," *International Journal of Qualitative Studies on Health and Well-being* 18, no. 1 (2023):2170767, https://doi.org/10.1080/17482631.2023.2170767.

[93] Rae Jean Proeschold-Bell et al., "Closeness to God among Those Doing God's Work: A Spiritual Well-Being Measure for Clergy," *Journal of Religion and Health* 53, no. 3 (2014): 880-1, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10943-013-9682-5.

[94] Proeschold-Bell et al., "Closeness to God among Those Doing God's Work," 883-5.

[95] Proeschold-Bell et al., "Closeness to God among Those Doing God's Work," 878.

[96] Proeschold-Bell et al., "Closeness to God among Those Doing God's Work," 889-891.

Information about statistics concerning the sexual identity of Australian priests is not available. However, a 2013 study by Kappler et al. indicated that the most commonly accepted estimate is that 30-50 per cent of priests in the US are not heterosexual.[97] In the absence of Australian data, Power and Fallon suggest comparative estimates from subjective evidence, noting the serious challenges to fundamental priestly identity and the healthy integration of a mature sexual identity for such clergy.[98] Nevertheless, the impacts on overall mental wellbeing do not appear too significant. Kappler et al.'s study found that while homosexual priests who experienced a higher degree of internalised homophobia (self-directed prejudice and self-loathing) also experienced a higher degree of depression, for the most part, there was no significant difference in their psychological wellbeing compared to heterosexual priests.[99]

An inability to form healthy relationships with a variety of people, however, could impact ministry. Livingston, speaking from her ministry with priests, reflects on the importance of intimacy to a priest's personal development, life, ministry, and spirituality. Whilst the term 'intimacy' is often associated with romantic involvement, Livingston uses Erickson's broader definition of the term as a "flexible strength for being close to another," seeing intimacy as "an essential task on the road to full adulthood." [100] She suggests that the all-male environment of seminary and novitiate training reinforces men's estrangement from the feminine and prevents them from developing meaningful, or even comfortable, friendships with women, which in turn affects their ministry.[101]

The relationship between a diocesan priest and his bishop is especially important given the promise of allegiance to the latter at ordination. The Catholic University of America 2022 study into the wellbeing of priests in the US, however, found that not only had priests' trust in their bishops declined significantly in over the previous two decades (an average of less than half of diocesan priests across different dioceses expressed confidence in their bishop), but that priests' wellbeing was significantly reduced when they had little trust in their bishop.[102]

Support and Pastoral Supervision

The levels of support experienced by a member of the clergy play a role in their wellbeing. Support can be informal, provided by family, friends and colleagues, or formal support from professional advisors, including undertaking pastoral supervision. In a 1997 survey of Catholic priests in the Dublin Diocese, 'God' was cited as their primary support, along with the Mass and personal prayer.[103] Interpersonal relationships, including family, other clergy friends, co-workers and parishioners, also

---

[97] Stephan Kappler et al., "Roman Catholic Gay Priests: Internalized Homophobia, Sexual Identity, and Psychological Well-Being," *Pastoral Psychology* 62, no. 6 (2013): 806, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11089-012-0505-5.

[98] Georja Power and Barry Fallon, "Sacred and Profane: Gay Catholic Priests in Australia" *Proceedings of the 38th Annual Australian Psychological Society Conference* (2003): 166.

[99] Kappler et al., "Roman Catholic Gay Priests," 822.

[100] Patricia H. Livingston, "Intimacy and Priestly Life," in *Being a Priest Today*, ed. Donald J. Goergen (The Liturgical Press, 1992), 127.

[101] Livingston, "Intimacy and Priestly Life*,"* 141-142.

[102] Brandon Vaidyanathan et al., *Well-Being, Trust, and Policy in a Time of Crisis: Highlights from the National Study of Catholic Priests* (The Catholic University of America, 2022), 6-7.

[103] Dermot A. Lane, ed., *Reading the Signs of the Times: A Survey of Priests in Dublin* (Dublin Diocesan Council of Priests, 1997), 20.

rated highly. The most support was found among personal friends who did not belong to these groups, while the official administration of the diocese was cited as the least supportive.[104]

More recently, Village and Francis' study into the wellbeing and perceptions of support among Church of England clergy during the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic found that whilst there were large increases in fatigue and disengagement among clergy during pandemic lockdowns, there were also positive increases in some areas, such as clergy feeling closer to God.[105] The study also found that clergy had high expectations of support from Church structures like the diocese and national Church, although many did feel unsupported.[106]

Randall's study into Anglican clergy who had considered leaving ministry provides examples which demonstrate the important role of support in ministry. This research highlighted the importance of identifying and supporting clergy at risk of leaving, particularly those who are younger, more liberal, introverted, or emotionally unstable.[107]

Professional supervision is one example of more formal support. An evaluation of pastoral/reflective supervision of Protestant clergy in the United Kingdom, by Gubi et al., found the benefits of such supervision included support, less isolation, increased self-awareness, affirmation of ministry, and improved wellbeing.[108] Hindrances to effective supervision, which were cited in the study, included time commitments, difficulty in sharing openly, and issues with the manner of facilitation,[109] while recommendations for improving pastoral supervision included greater financial commitment across the various denominations, enhanced psychological training for supervisors, and not assuming that line managers make good supervisors.[110]

Impact of Clergy Sexual Abuse

Finally, we turn to the impact of clergy sexual abuse on other members of the clergy and review research that seeks to understand the underlying causes. While there are several studies on the impact of clergy sexual abuse on victims, there appeared to be fewer studies on the impact on clergy themselves. One study that did include the effect on families and colleagues of abusers was by Goode et al., which investigated the impacts of sexual abuse by clergy in Ireland.[111] The central struggle for family members was balancing the provision of support with the sense of condemnation they felt from others because of the perpetrator's actions.[112] Clergy reported a sense of shame, disillusionment and

---

[104] Lane, *Reading the Signs of the Times*, 21.

[105] Andrew Village and Leslie J. Francis, "Wellbeing and Perceptions of Receiving Support among Church of England Clergy during the 2020 Covid-19 Pandemic," *Mental Health, Religion & Culture* 24, no. 5 (2021): 469-470, https://doi.org/10.1080/13674676.2021.1906214.

[106] Village and Francis, "Wellbeing and Perceptions of Receiving Support," 470.

[107] Kelvin J. Randall, "Examining Thoughts About Leaving the Ministry among Anglican Clergy in England and Wales: Demographic, Churchmanship, Personality and Work-Related Psychological Health Factors," *Practical Theology* 6, no. 2 (2013): 184-186, https://doi.org/10.1179/1756073X13Z.0000000005.

[108] Peter Madsen Gubi et al., "An Evaluation of Supervisees' Perceptions of the Benefits and Limitations of Pastoral/Reflective Supervision among Christian Clergy in the UK," *Mental Health, Religion & Culture* 26, no. 3 (2023): 229-230, https://doi.org/10.1080/13674676.2023.2231365.

[109] Gubi et al., "An Evaluation of Supervisees' Perceptions," 230.

[110] Gubi et al., "An Evaluation of Supervisees' Perceptions," 236.

[111] Helen Goode et al., *Time to Listen: Confronting Child Sexual Abuse by Catholic Clergy in Ireland* (The Liffey Press, 2003).

[112] Goode et al., *Time to Listen*, xxiv.

abandonment, as well as a significant loss of confidence in Church leadership resulting from the mismanagement of child sexual abuse by Church authorities.[113]

Other areas of research seek to determine the causes of the abuse. Ryan suggested that responses to the sexual abuse scandal such as 'the crime was committed by a few rotten apples' and 'those in authority mismanaged the crisis', are superficial and that the root problem is the lack of maturity of many priests. He claimed "that institutional processes of education and formation in our Church are frozen at immature stages of maturity which rely too much on fear, law and order and control, and deprive too many of the experience of Christianity as Love."[114] He further suggested that "this truncated formation leaves priests in a prison of behaviour-based spirituality, one which is primarily concerned with externals."[115]

The link between clericalism and the abuse crisis was observed by Wilson, noting the "potential destructive tendencies inherent in the clerical culture – haughty disdain for outsiders, imperviousness to critique, an exaggerated sense of entitlement, etc.". He suggested that the "dark potential of the ordained clerical culture contributed to the abuse of power of offending priests". [116]

Gaps and Opportunities

The research studies reviewed in this chapter cover various methodologies and perspectives on clergy wellbeing, burnout, and related factors. While some papers support and complement each other, others offer contrasting findings or unique approaches. Collectively, these studies highlight the multifaceted nature of clergy wellbeing and the need for a comprehensive understanding of the personal, professional, and spiritual factors that contribute to the overall health and resilience of clergy.

The studies demonstrate the complexity of burnout in Catholic clergy and the need for further research and tailored intervention programs to address this critical issue. The research suggests that younger clergy are more likely to suffer burnout, while those with varied responsibilities are less likely to do so. A person's relationship with God was also an essential factor in reducing fatigue and burnout.

One significant limitation of the research is that few studies specifically relate to Australian clergy. While many of the studies have outcomes for clergy in Australia, it is essential to note the unique contexts in which Australian clergy operate and the growing multicultural nature of the presbyterate over the past decades. The importance of supporting clergy wellbeing and job satisfaction has been discussed in various studies; however, suggestions on ways to improve this are limited. Further research is needed to examine the specific types of support needed by Australian clergy and identify potential sources of support within their community. This research study aims to address some of the existing gaps in these areas.

---

[113] Goode et al., *Time to Listen*, xxiv-v.
[114] John E. Ryan, *Priesthood Imprisoned: A Crisis for the Church* (Coventry Press, 2017), 57.
[115] Ryan, *Priesthood Imprisoned*, 57.
[116] George B. Wilson, *Clericalism: The Death of Priesthood* (The Liturgical Press, 2008), 67.

PARTICIPANTS IN THE STUDY

As previously stated in the report, 825 completed responses were received in Phase One of the investigation. The demographics of the survey participants are detailed in the subsequent sections. The participants of Phase Two are described in detail at the close of this chapter.

Clergy Background

As shown in Figure 1, two-thirds of respondents (66%) indicated they were diocesan clergy, while a further seven per cent were diocesan clergy from overseas on loan to an Australian diocese. Nineteen per cent of respondents were religious clergy, and a further nine per cent were religious clergy on loan from overseas. Nine per cent of respondents were permanent deacons, while just 0.3 per cent were transitional deacons. Finally, 14 per cent of respondents said they were semi-retired, and four per cent were fully retired.

Figure 1: Clergy background – Survey Respondents
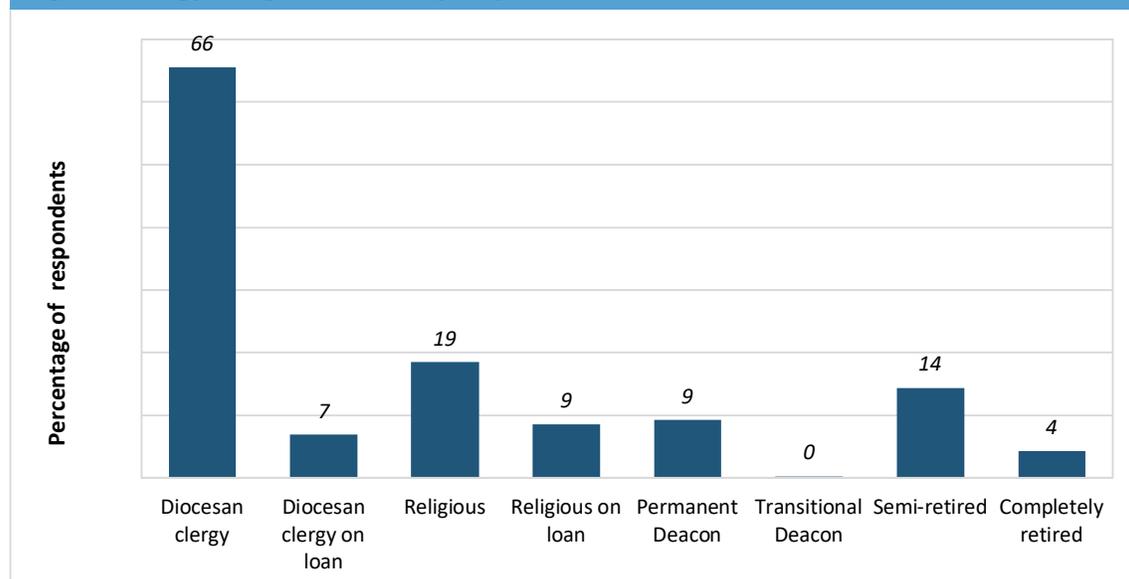
Note: As respondents could choose more than one option, the totals in the chart exceed 100 per cent.

Age

The respondents represented a spread of ages, as shown in Figure 2. Over one-third of all respondents (35%) were aged 70 and over, while 20 per cent were in their sixties. Another third of respondents (34%) were aged between 40 and 59 years. Just 11 per cent were aged under 40.

Figure 2: Clergy age group – Survey Respondents
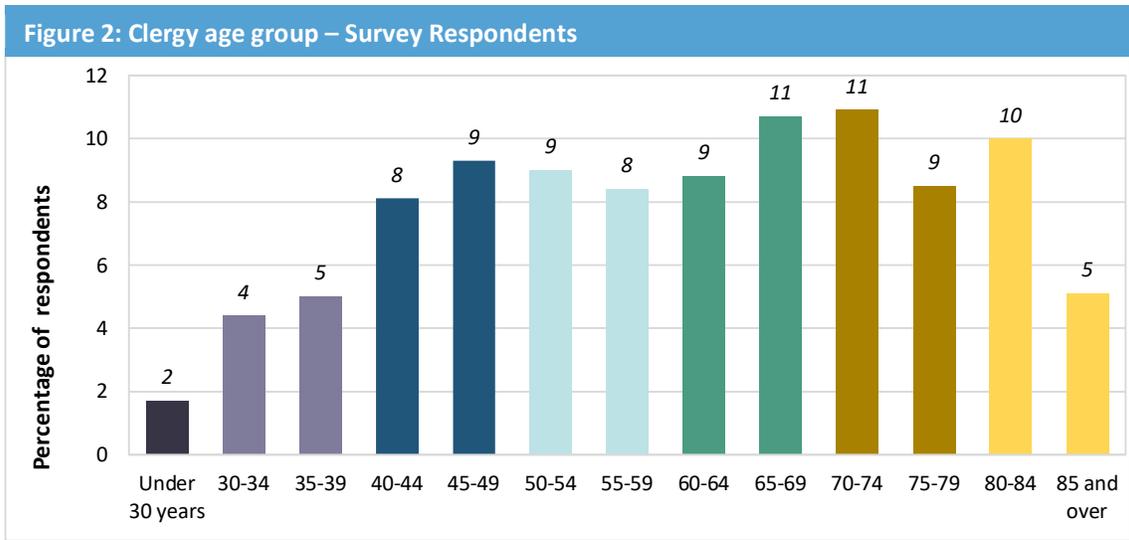
Country of Birth

Respondents were asked in which country they were born, with the option of selecting from a short list of common countries or indicating another country. Just over half of all respondents (53%) were born in Australia, as shown in Table 1. Almost 13 per cent were born in India, while just over six per cent were born in the Philippines, and around four per cent were born in Vietnam. 'Other countries' included 37 different countries of birth with four or fewer respondents.

Table 1: Country of birth	Per cent of respondents
Australia	53.3
India	12.6
Philippines	6.1
Vietnam	4.4
United Kingdom (excluding Northern Ireland)	2.5
Poland	1.6
Sri Lanka	1.6
Lebanon	1.2
Ireland (including Northern Ireland)	1.0
New Zealand	1.0
United States of America	1.0
Nigeria	0.8
Kenya	0.7
Malta	0.7
Other country (37 countries) or born overseas but not described	11.6
Total	**100**

Figure 3: Country of birth summary (%)

- Australia: 53
- Other English-speaking country: 5
- Non-English-speaking country: 41
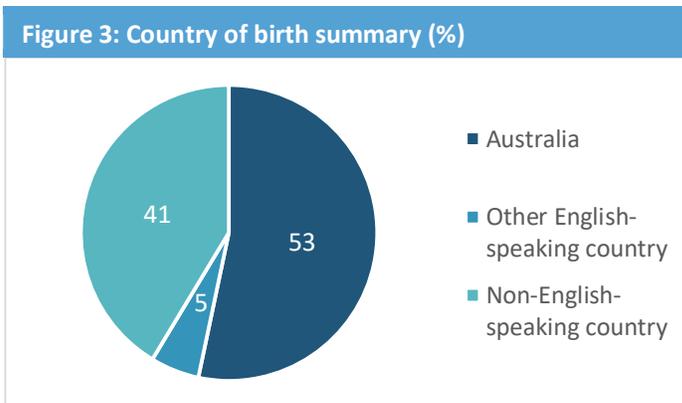
Note: English-speaking country respondents are from Ireland, New Zealand, the UK and the US

As illustrated in Figure 5, while just over half of respondents were born in Australia, 41 per cent were born in a non-English-speaking country, and five per cent were born overseas in an English-speaking country (these respondents came from Ireland, New Zealand, the UK and the US).

The ethnic makeup of respondents contrasts somewhat with that of the overall Catholic population in Australia. According to the 2021 Census, 72 per cent of Catholics were born in Australia, 21 per cent were born in a non-English-speaking country, and around six per cent were born overseas in an English-speaking country.[117]

Of those respondents born overseas, almost half (49%) had arrived in Australia since 2010, while 15 per cent had arrived prior to 1980. In summary:

- 16 per cent arrived between 2020 and 2024
- 19 per cent arrived between 2015 and 2019
- 14 per cent arrived between 2010 and 2014
- 19 per cent arrived between 2000 and 2009
- 10 per cent arrived between 1990 and 1999
- 9 per cent arrived between 1980 and 1989
- 5 per cent arrived between 1970 and 1979
- 9 per cent arrived before 1970.

Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander Clergy

Nine respondents (1.2 per cent of all respondents) identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, of whom four were diocesan clergy, four were religious clergy and one was a permanent deacon. Three of these were retired or semi-retired priests.

Location and Context

To allow greater confidentiality, rather than ask for a specific diocese or precise location, survey respondents were asked to indicate the geographical contexts in which they usually worked, with the option to select multiple contexts. Figure 4 shows the percentage of respondents working in each context, with 60 per cent working in an urban location and 29 per cent working in a regional context. Twenty-three per cent of respondents indicated they worked in a rural context, while six per cent worked in a remote area.

---

[117] National Centre for Pastoral Research, *Social Profile of the Catholic Community in Australia: Based on the 2021 Australian Census* (Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, 2023), 5, 17.

Figure 4: Geographical context
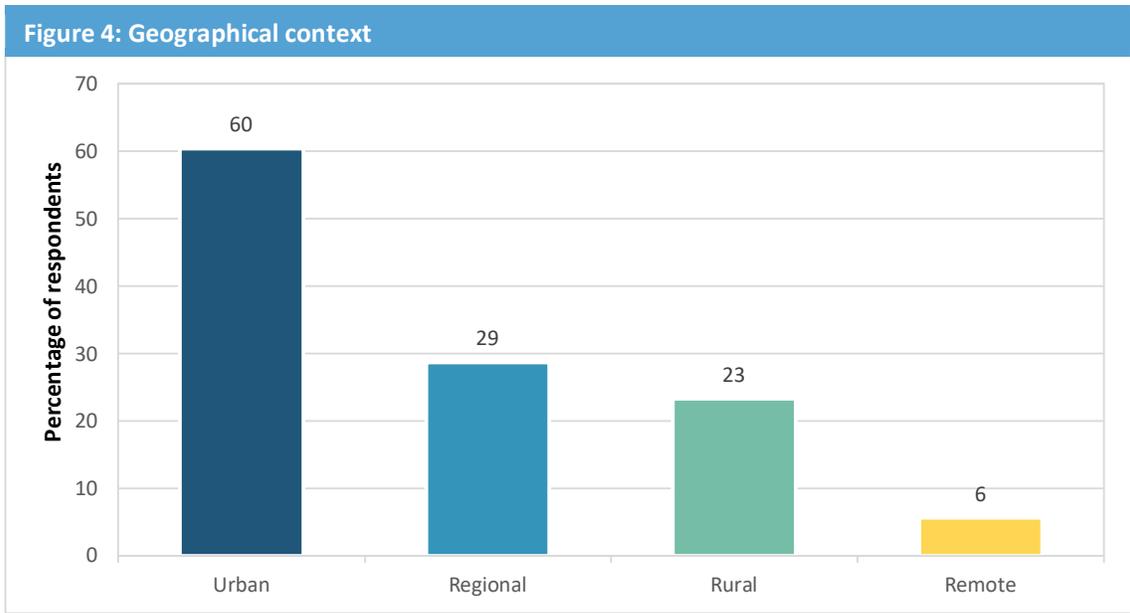
Note: Respondents could choose multiple options, so the totals in the chart add to more than the total number of respondents.

Ministries

Respondents were asked to select their main ministry from a short list. As Figure 5 shows, just under half of all respondents (45%) were parish priests and 14 per cent were assistant priests. A little over one in ten (12%) respondents were retired, and only a few (just over one per cent) indicated prison or hospital chaplaincy as their main ministry. Over a quarter of respondents (27%) listed another area as their main ministry. These included diocesan roles, other chaplaincy roles, roles in education, as a vicar general, in migrancy or as a semi-retired clergy.

Figure 5: Main ministry
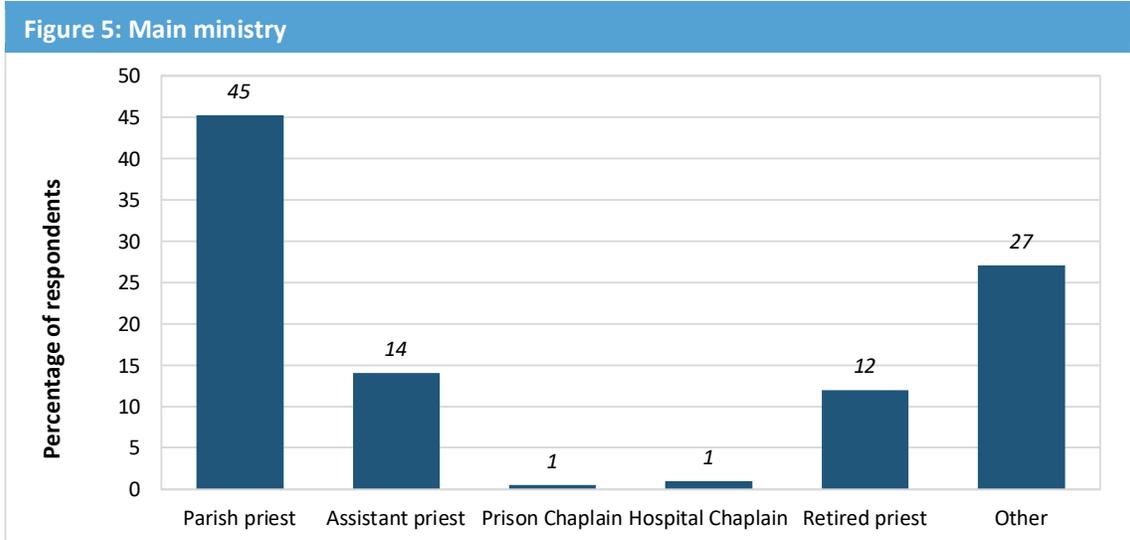
The survey also asked if respondents held another role or appointment in addition to their main ministry, of which almost half of all respondents (49%) indicated they did.

While only a few clergy listed prison or hospital chaplaincy as their main ministry, a sizeable proportion of respondents (12%) indicated chaplaincy to schools, hospitals, aged care facilities, prisons, police, defence forces, and migrant or other communities as an additional role.

Close to one in ten (9%) respondents held official diocesan curial or chancery roles, and eight per cent were on diocesan boards, councils, reference and advisory groups.

Eight per cent of respondents were also involved in deanery roles or assisted in celebrating Mass, either at their own parish or as supply, in addition to their main ministry. A further two per cent were involved in other activities related to the liturgy or sacraments, such as serving as a Master of Ceremonies for diocesan liturgical events, preparing the laity for sacraments, and membership on a diocesan liturgical commission.

The area of involvement most reported was diocesan administration and finance. Around seven per cent of respondents reported additional appointments on the Council of Priests, College of Consultors, and Finance Committees in addition to their main ministry.

Involvement in Decision-making

The penultimate question in the survey asked respondents specifically about their involvement in decision-making at the diocesan level, and their responses are shown in Figure 6.

Fifty-five per cent of respondents were involved in decision-making on a Council of Priests, nine per cent were on a Diocesan Pastoral Council and five per cent were on an Education Council. Close to six in ten respondents (59%) indicated involvement in other diocesan-level decision-making bodies, such as the College of Consultors, Diocesan Finance Council or the Priests' Welfare Fund. Several respondents also indicated they held an appointed role, such as Vicar General or Dean.

Figure 6: Decision-making at a diocesan level
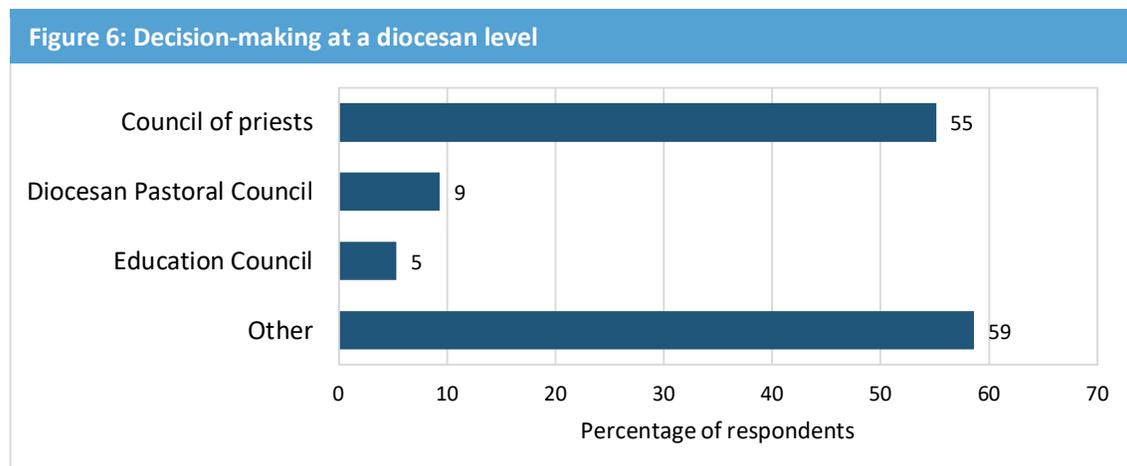
Note: As respondents could choose more than one option, totals in the chart exceed 100 per cent.

There was no specific demographic group of clergy that was significantly more or less likely to be on an Education Council. This was also mostly true with Diocesan Pastoral Councils (DPCs), with the exception of age. Results indicated that older clergy were more likely to be involved in DPCs, with ten per cent of respondents aged between 70 to 79 indicating that they were on a DPC, compared to the two to four per cent of clergy in other age groups.

Some differences were found in the membership of the Council of Priests (CP). Between 28 and 31 per cent of clergy aged 40 to 69 years indicated that they were on a CP, compared to 14 per cent of clergy aged under 40. Around 23 per cent of clergy in their 70s continued to be on a CP. In addition, those who had been clergy for a longer period were also more likely to be on this Council:

- Ten per cent of respondents ordained in the last 10 years,
- 24 per cent of those ordained 11 to 20 years ago,
- 33 per cent of those ordained 21-30 years ago, and
- 20 per cent of those ordained more than 30 years ago.

A more significant difference in CP membership was found between diocesan and religious priests. Diocesan priests were more likely (32%) than their religious counterparts (13%) to be on the Council of Priests. Of religious priests, those on loan to an Australian diocese were nearly twice as likely (19%) as their local counterparts (10%) to be on the CP. There were no significant differences between groups based on country of birth, the age at which they entered the seminary, or the year they arrived in Australia.

Interview Participants: Clergy Background

In Phase Two, 78 clergy were interviewed. The proportions of diocesan and religious priests and permanent deacons in this group were similar to those in Phase One, as shown in Figure 7. Over two-thirds of this group (68%) were diocesan priests, while 22 per cent were religious priests and 10 per cent were permanent deacons. Around 40 per cent were in active ministry, 37 per cent were semi-retired, and just under a quarter (23%) were fully retired.

Figure 7: Clergy background – Interview Participants

Figure 8: Clergy age group – Interview Participants
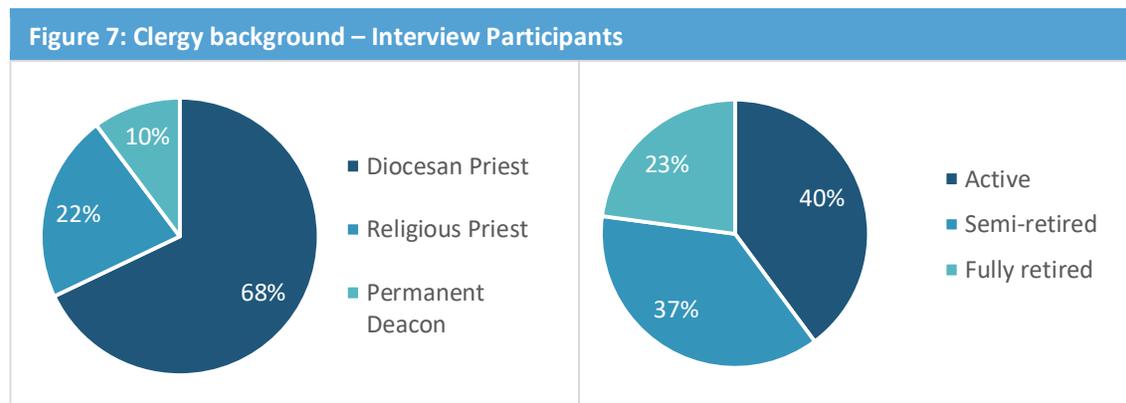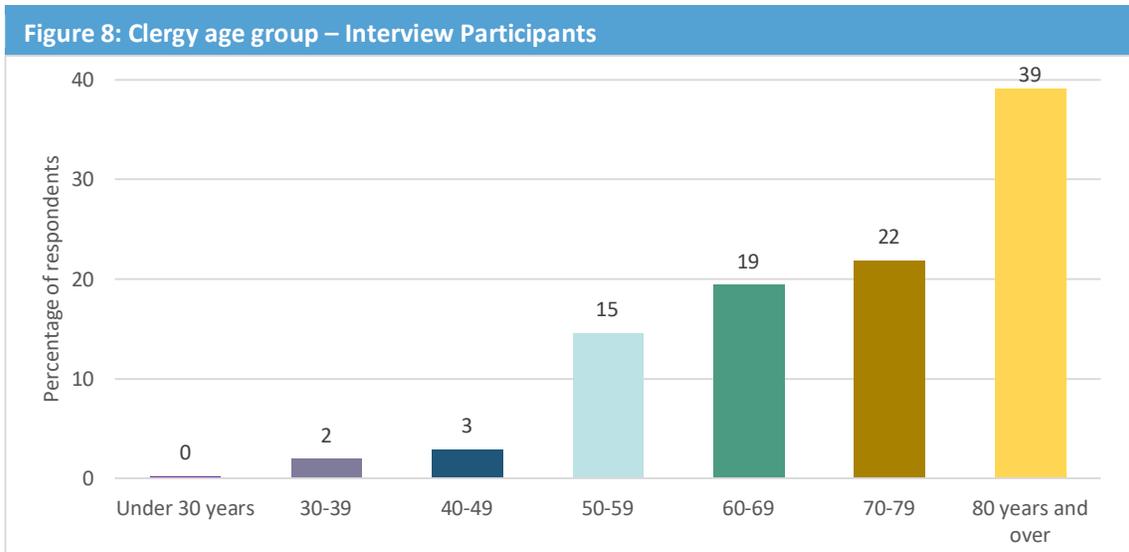
Participants in Phase Two tended to be older (see Figure 8), with six in ten (61%) aged 70 and above. Around 39 per cent were 80 years and over. Less than three per cent were aged under 40.

While just under half (48%) of Phase Two participants were born in Australia, a larger proportion of clergy were born in non-English speaking countries (48%) compared to Phase One (41%). All states and territories were represented among the participants.

My Story

I've been a priest for many years. It has been a challenge and a privilege … I'd been thinking about priesthood for a long time, but I didn't go to the seminary until [my 30s]. It took me a while to get the confidence to believe it was something I could do … I was a [tradesman] first, then invited into youth ministry for two years … After youth ministry, I went into … teaching …I had a strong desire to be fulfilled more than through teaching. The constant call to priesthood was there. The principal at the school where I was teaching gave me a book, 'The Hound of Heaven', which I enjoyed reading … I made the choice, said yes to the seminary. It was difficult, nerve-wracking …

After several years, I was appointed to a large parish in our diocese. It was a wonderful, expansive ministry. It took a long time to settle. When I first arrived, people told me I looked white, stunned, scared, which I was. Giving homilies and that sort of thing, it's a challenge. People have amazing experiences and gifts. And all those big crowds … I ended up working with a parish team. I really appreciated that working together, men and women in dialogue with the same sort of vision. But it fell apart. The staff were very attached to the previous Parish Priest – there were a few issues that were difficult to resolve… [Parish Name] was very demanding. I felt the balance wasn't right. I was living with a constant sense of needing to do more. You're almost carrying the guilt of not being able to minister as much as I'd like to have …

The work-life balance, expectations on being a priest, how do we manage that well? Being able to affirm priests, too. I've come from working professions like teaching, carpentry, youth work, where the boundaries are fairly clear. You do your time, you get paid for that time, there are clear cut off lines. But with priesthood it's sort of blurred. That makes it harder. My Bishop once said, you won't be a parish priest until you've failed. The failing is not the loss, it's where the growth is, too. But I do feel overwhelmed with the demands …

[You need] to be yourself. To not let the fear of all of that overwhelm you so much that you don't embrace community, relationships and life with enthusiasm. To be able to stand in your place and be strong in that place, not feel the intimidation of it …

Leadership is powerful, and how you lead. I'm always looking for ways to grow in my way of leading. Looking for resources that assist your homilies. One of our crucial times is homily and touching community with that. That always requires ongoing formation. And developing skills in that area, communication and relational skills. Those areas I feel are crucial to being priestly.

General Health

The first set of questions in the survey asked respondents to reflect on the last 12 months and rate themselves on a scale of 1 - 5 in five areas of general wellbeing: self-confidence, energy levels, healthy diet, adequate rest and sleep, and daily exercise. As Figure 9 shows, while there were differences in each area, the overall results were generally positive.

Figure 9: Reflecting on the last 12 months, how would you rate yourself in the following areas?
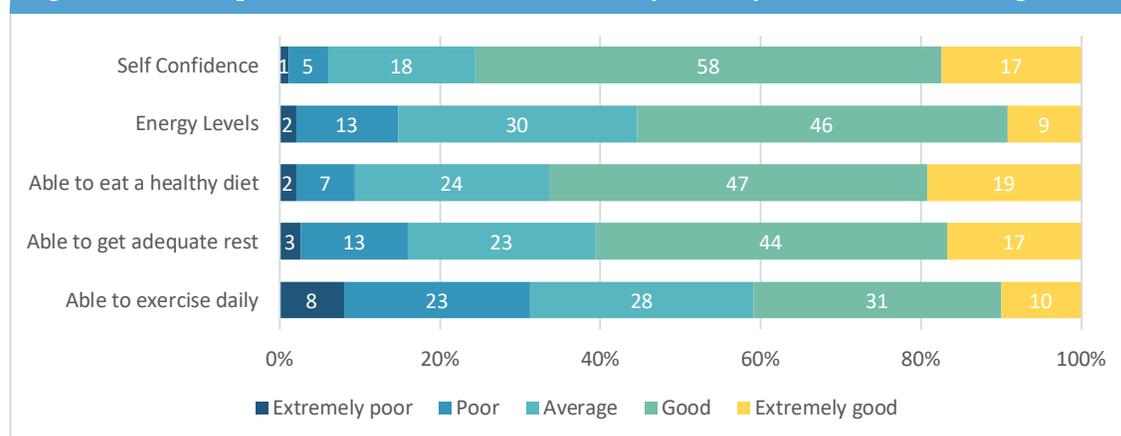
Note: Totals not adding up to 100% and slight differences between the chart above and the analysis below are due to rounding.

Self-confidence

The area of self-confidence had the most favourable results, with three in four (75%) reporting 'good' or 'extremely good' self-confidence. At the same time, six per cent rated themselves as having 'poor' or 'extremely poor' self-confidence, and the remaining 18 per cent rated themselves 'average'.

There was some consistency among respondents' ratings of their self-confidence across various demographic groups (such as place of birth, the age at which they entered the seminary, their year of ordination, arrival in Australia, and age group). Religious priests, however, were more likely (86%) to rate their self-confidence as 'good' or 'extremely good' compared to diocesan priests (71%), while the latter were four times more likely (8%) to rate their self-confidence as 'poor' or 'extremely poor' compared to their religious counterparts (2%).

Diet and Rest

The next area that garnered positive results was the ability to eat a healthy diet. Two in three (66%) respondents rated themselves 'good' or 'extremely good' in this area, while nine per cent rated their ability to eat a healthy diet as 'poor' or 'extremely poor'. The remaining one-quarter (24%) rated themselves as average.

Permanent deacons and religious priests on loan to an Australian diocese were more likely (79% and 77%, respectively) to indicate they were 'extremely good' or 'good' at healthy eating compared to other clergy (63-68%).

Six in ten (61%) respondents rated themselves as being 'good' or 'very good' at getting adequate rest (recommended to be at least 6-7 hours per night[118]) while 16 per cent indicated they were 'poor' or 'extremely poor' at this. The remaining 23 per cent rated themselves 'average'. There were minimal differences between clergy groups in this area.

Energy levels

Some 55 per cent of respondents rated their energy levels being 'good' or 'very good' while 15 per cent indicated this to be poor or very poor. Three in ten respondents rated their energy levels as 'average'.

Figure 10: Energy levels by clergy type
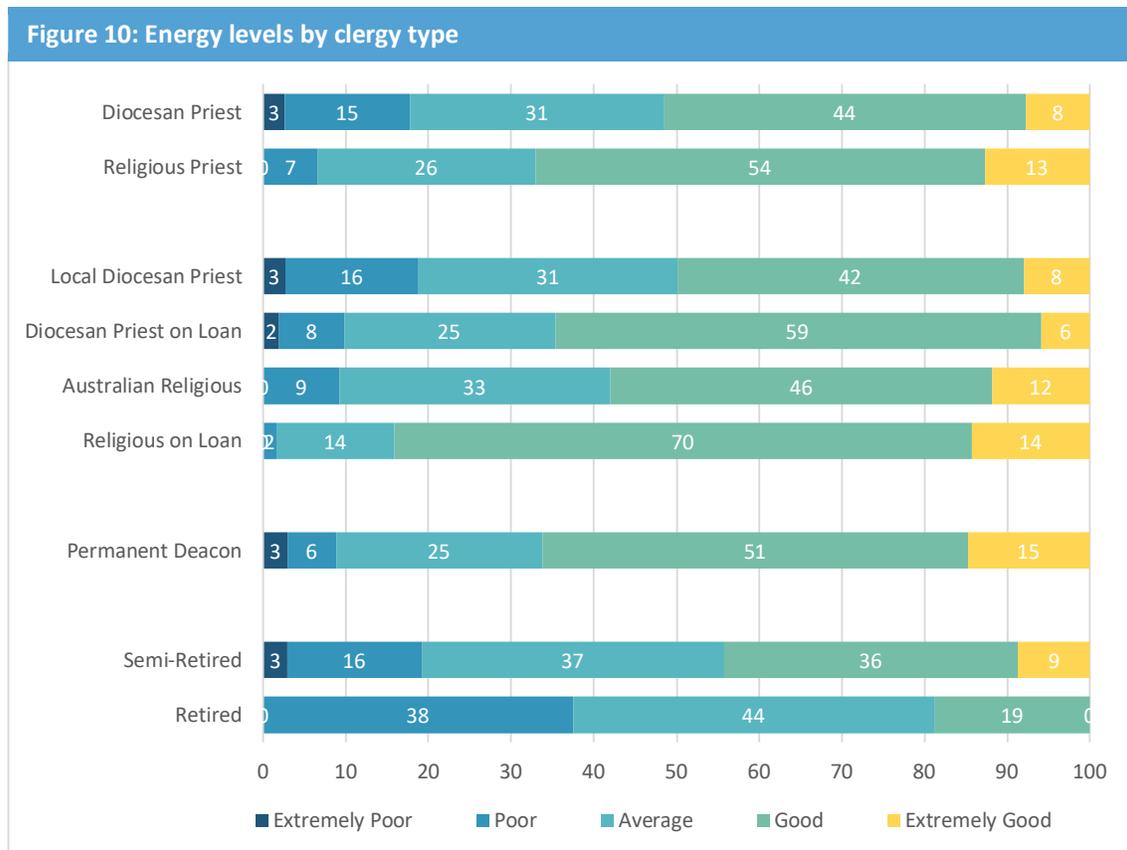
Figure 10 presents Energy levels by clergy type in several different categories. The first two horizontal bars in the chart report the responses of 'Diocesan' and 'Religious' priests, and the next four bars immediately below them provide a further breakdown of these categories. The chart shows that religious priests were more likely (67%) to experience 'good' or 'extremely good' energy levels than their diocesan counterparts (52%). However, more significant differences were identified between clergy on loan to an Australian diocese, local clergy and retired clergy:

- Eighty-four per cent of religious priests on loan reported 'good' or 'extremely good' energy levels, compared with 65 per cent of diocesan priests on loan.

---

[118]"How Much Sleep Do You Need?," Sleep Health Foundation, updated 13 May 2024, https://www.sleepfoundation.org/how-sleep-works/how-much-sleep-do-we-really-need.

A Profile of Catholic Clergy in Australia: Health and Wellbeing

- Fifty-eight per cent of local religious priests said they had 'good' or 'extremely good' energy levels, compared with 50 per cent of local diocesan priests.
- Retired clergy were the least likely (19%) to report 'good' or 'extremely good' energy levels

Exercise

The least positive results were seen in the ability to exercise daily. While four in ten (41%) considered themselves 'good' or 'extremely good' at exercising, 28 per cent per cent ranked themselves 'average' and three in ten (31%) described their ability to exercise as 'poor' or 'extremely poor'. There were no statistically significant differences among clergy groups in this area.

Keeping Physically Fit

Interview participants were asked about their physical health and whether they did anything to stay active and healthy. Most reported having some physical regimen and related partaking in activities such as going to the gym, cycling, swimming, playing football, kickboxing, golfing, paddle-boarding, dragon-boating, bushwalking and playing pickleball. However, the most popular physical activity reported was walking, with many clergy reporting that they combined it with prayer or other meditative reflection.

And so I just got straight back into walking and so yeah, five days a week, so Monday through Friday. So, that's my main exercise is walking half an hour every morning. And it's good physically and also mentally.

Others related to getting exercise through incidental activities such as looking after a home or a rural property, gardening or focusing on achieving 10,000 steps a day.

Several participants shared that they tried to eat healthily, and that such education in living skills had been included in their seminary training.

That was one of the positive things about that initial Ministry to Priests thing. That we even started to check out what we were eating and whether it was healthy stuff, and whether we got the exercise that we needed.

Others, particularly those in religious congregations, reported having cooks who would provide healthy meals. Some, however, reported that they struggled with eating well, particularly if they were only cooking for themselves.

I think, because of a lot of the irregular hours, I tend not to eat well.

Many of the participants commented that they could lose some weight, but most did not seem concerned about it.

I reckon I could probably lose 10kgs and that'd be a good thing. And I think about it a lot but I don't do anything about it.

A significant portion of the clergy interviewed in Phase Two of the project were over the age of 60, and consequently, many of those reported age-related health issues such as hip replacements, prostate issues, atrial fibrillations, cataract surgery, and high cholesterol. A few who reported

spending time in mission overseas reported health issues contracted during that time, such as malaria and hepatitis A.

However, despite some health complaints, most participants reported that they had had regular check-ups with their doctors and were in good health.

> *… people look at me and say, "Oh, you're in pretty good health" and I say, "Yeah. It's the fish oil I'm taking". And I think I am in pretty good health given my age. All our uncles and grandfathers died before they were seventy. So, I'm well past that.*

A few participants reported issues with accessing medical care. Those in rural areas shared difficulties with the availability of medical support.

> *… the problem we have in a place like this [a rural location] is that I had a fairly good doctor here, but that clinic has now closed and that doctor's retired. So, I don't have a doctor. … They're just not around. … If I got really sick, I suppose I'd just call an ambulance or something. I don't know what you'd do.*

Clergy who had come to Australia from overseas reported difficulties with affording health care if they were not a permanent resident and eligible for Medicare, or cultural issues with seeking medical care when needed.

> *I think it's more cultural. Because in the Philippines, we really think of going to the doctor, hospital, as something that we would rather not do because it's expensive … So, I only got my Medicare when … I became a permanent resident. … So, the only time … I felt comfortable going to the doctor now [is] because there's [Medicare] … I don't want to burden my congregation with insurance and all that.*

Clergy Routine

Work hours and activities

Two survey questions asked respondents about their routines. Firstly, respondents were asked to indicate how much time they spent **each day** working at their office, celebrating the sacraments, undertaking pastoral work and attending formal meetings or other events outside the office.

Figure 11: Hours spent each day on work-related activities
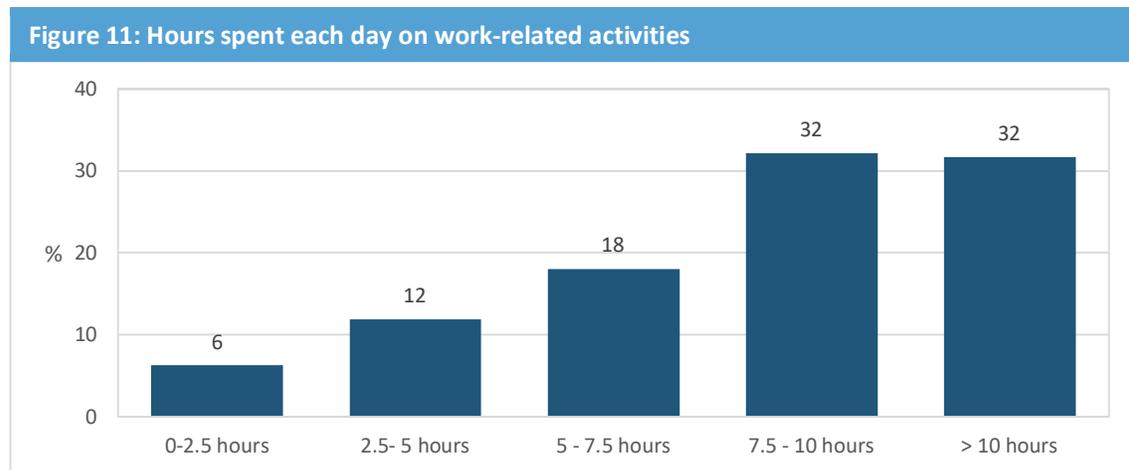
Regular hours of work under Australian law, is up to 38 hours in a week, or 7.6 hours (7 hours, 36 minutes) each day.[119] The data revealed that 64 per cent of clergy spent more than 7.5 hours daily on work-related activities (see Figure 11), averaging 8.6 hours.

The majority (between 69 and 84 per cent) of clergy aged under 70 spent over 7.5 hours in work-related activities. The group that was most likely to do this were those aged under 40 (84%), with 49 per cent working more than 10 hours a day. Clergy aged 40-49 fared slightly better, with around four in ten (40%) spending more than 10 hours a day on work-related activities.

Working in the office was the main activity for close to three in ten (29%) respondents (see Figure 12) who spent more than 5 hours there, while half (50%) spent between 2.5 to 5 hours of their usual day in the office.

---

[119] "What Is the Working Week," Australian Workers' Union, accessed September 13, 2024, https://awu.net.au/work-week/.

Figure 12: Hours spent each day working at the office
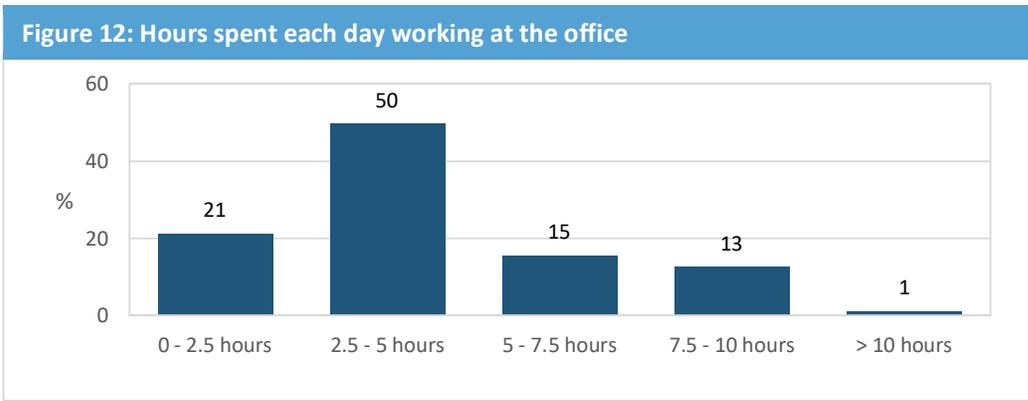
Clergy aged 50-59 years were more likely (22%) to spend 7.5 hours or more in the office compared to 18 per cent of 60-69-year-olds and seven to 15 per cent of those in other age groups. There was little difference between diocesan and religious priests. However, permanent deacons were twice as likely (42%) as local priests (21%) to spend less than 2.5 hours in the office. One possible reason could be that several deacons may work in other paid positions outside their Church roles.

Figure 13: Hours spent each day on other work-related activities
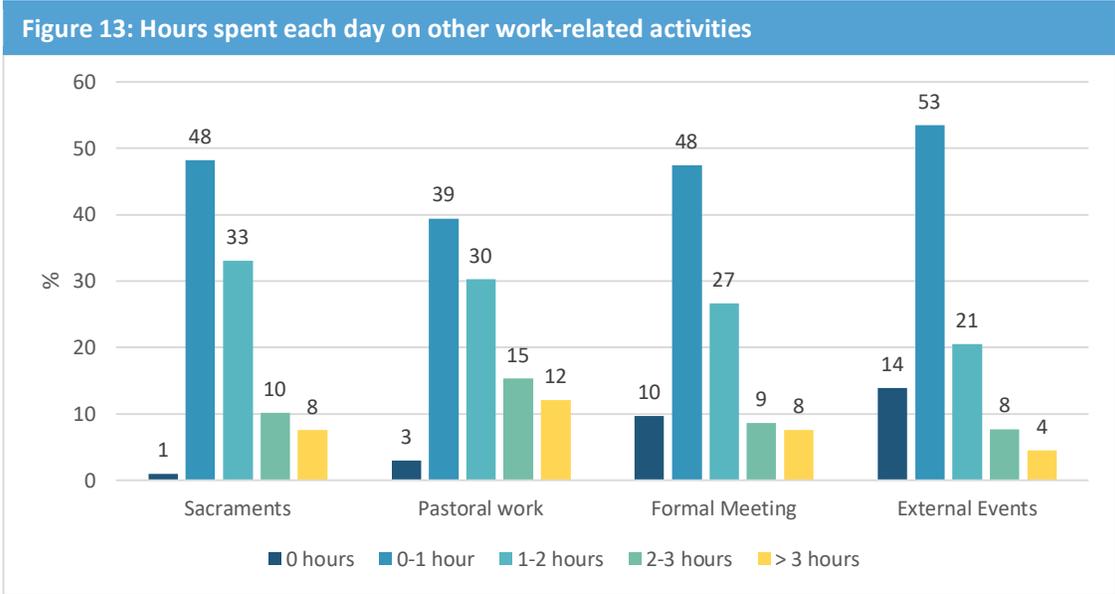
Figure 13 shows the hours spent each day on other work-related activities. After 'working at the office' (as reported in Figure 12), the activity that took the second highest amount of time was pastoral work (e.g., visiting people in their homes and visiting the sick), with 27 per cent of respondents spending more than two hours doing this.

Close to half (48%) of the respondents spent an average of up to an hour each day celebrating the sacraments at their home parish (or regular place of work). Only a few respondents (1%) said they were not involved in this ministry. The findings showed that religious on loan from overseas spent a little more time daily celebrating the sacraments than other clergy. Around 48 per cent of this group spent 1-2 hours per day celebrating/administering the sacraments compared to other clergy groups (9 to 35%), who spent less than an hour daily.

A Profile of Catholic Clergy in Australia: Health and Wellbeing

Similarly, 48 per cent of respondents spent up to an hour per day on formal meetings outside their parish/regular place of work (e.g., at diocesan/deanery/congregational meetings), while 18 per cent spent more than two hours doing this. Clergy aged 60-69 years were more likely (23%) to spend more than two hours per day on this activity compared to those in other age groups (4 to 19%).

More than half (53%) of the respondents spent up to an hour each day attending events (e.g., celebrating Mass) outside their parish or regular place of work such as in another parish or in the local community, and 12 per cent reported spending more than two hours each day doing this.

Time spent on holidays

Figure 14: Time spent each year on holidays
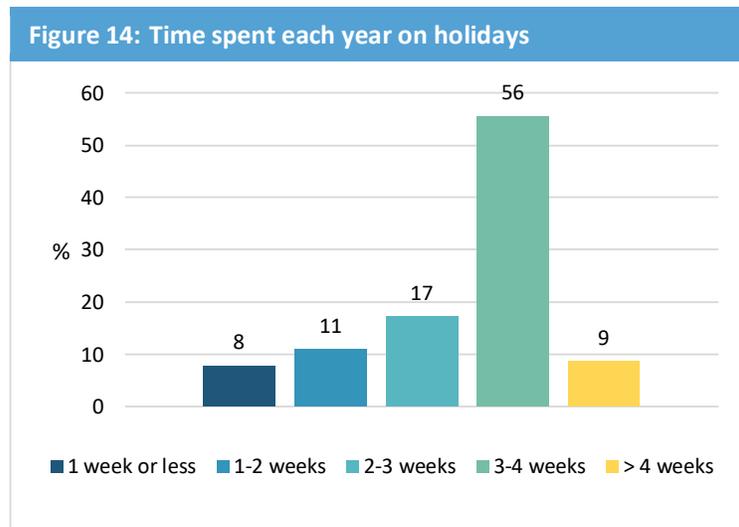
In the next question, respondents were asked to indicate how much time they spent on holidays, attending spiritual retreats/reflection days, and with family and friends.

More than half of the respondents (56%) spent three to four weeks on holiday or vacation per year (see Figure 14). Around nine per cent spent more than four weeks, and a similar proportion spent one week or less.

Clergy born overseas in English-speaking countries were less likely to take more than a couple of weeks' holidays per year (63%), compared to clergy born in Australia (78%) and in non-English-speaking countries (87%). Deacons were also less likely to take more than a couple of weeks' holidays per year (61%) compared to diocesan or religious clergy (83 to 89%).

My Story

I was ordained [after 2000] … I'd been a schoolteacher … and had been studying theology as a layperson … I got to the point where there was something more. I thought I'll just apply to the seminary, get it out of my system, and I'll be back after a year. But seven years of seminary and [over 20] years of ministry, here I am.

The thing I've noted is how the paradigm has changed over my time. It's no longer one priest, one parish. Caring for a small community. More and more is being asked of us …

[This parish] has a really high sacramental load. Most of the baptisms and funerals we do are from outside the parish … My fear is that the workload will kill me. There's no down time … I feel perpetually tired. There's always something to be done. It rarely lets up. It's hard to maintain a healthy and good spiritual life. It feels like my spiritual life is shredded, sometimes. I can do my morning prayer, all that, but sometimes it feels like the Xerox version …

My assistant priest has gone on annual leave … I end up with lots of funerals … A funeral takes about eight hours of work time all up. So it's a bit, how do I fit in everything else around doing that? … If you say to people, we can't do that, or we can't do it that way, they seem far more likely to complain. They complain to head office, and we get bashed up by head office …

Seven years in a seminary, it's the old … monastic model. I don't think it's fit for purpose in the modern world … In [Diocese], students spend a year in a parish with an experienced priest. Then back to the seminary. Why can't they stay in that parish for the following years while going to lectures and having formation sessions? That's much more the reality of parish life … Diocesan priesthood isn't about religious life and community, it's often about how you manage and handle solitary life. Living in a presbytery will be far closer to what their life will actually be like rather than the seminary model.

Time spent in spiritual activities

Figure 15: Time spent on spiritual retreats/ reflection days *(days per year)*

Days per year on spiritual retreats/reflection days
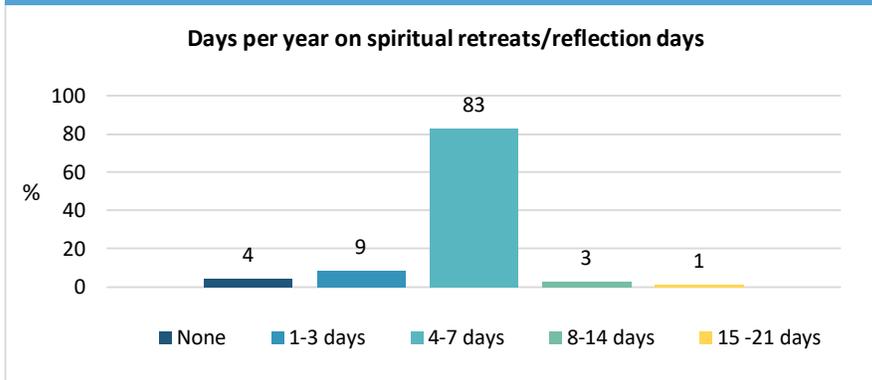
As shown in Figure 15, a majority of respondents (83%) spent between four to seven days per year on spiritual retreats/reflection days while four per cent did not spend any time on this activity.

In the comparison between demographic groups, clergy born overseas in English-speaking countries were more likely (19%) to indicate that they did not spend time on spiritual retreats compared to their counterparts born in Australia (6%) and non-English-speaking countries (1%).

Permanent deacons were unlikely to spend more than a week on spiritual retreats/reflection days, while religious priests were over four times as likely (9%) to do so compared to their diocesan counterparts (2%).

Time spent with family and friends

Figure 16: Time spent with family *(hours per month)*
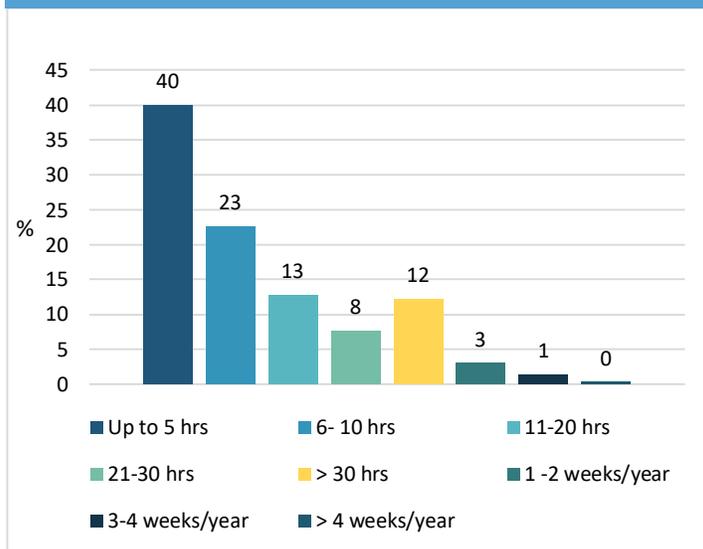
Respondents were also asked about the **number of hours per month** spent with family, both in-person and online. Four in ten (40%) indicated that they spent up to five hours either in-person or online with family (see Figure 16). A further 23 per cent spent between 6-10 hours online or in person. Some respondents indicated that they spent their vacation with family, with three per cent spending one to two weeks per year, and a further one per cent spending three to four weeks per year with family. Less than one per cent spent more than four weeks.

It is acknowledged that respondents with family living in the same town or close by may have very different patterns of spending time with family compared to respondents with families interstate or overseas, where contact may be online and/or during an extended period over their annual vacation.

Figure 17: Time spent with friends *(hours per month)*

Time spent with friends (including online)
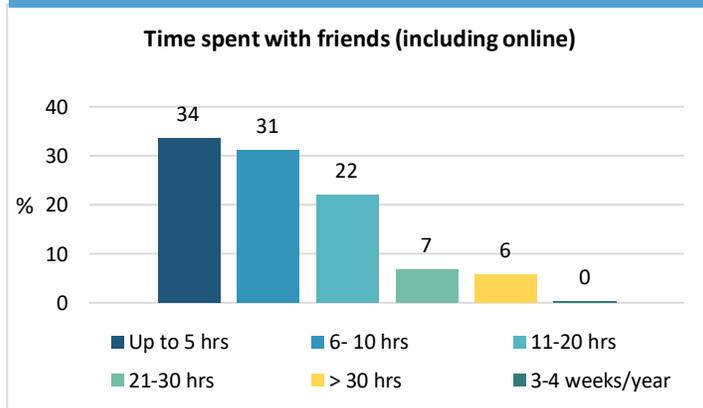
Concerning spending time with friends, one in three (34%) respondents spent up to five hours per month with friends, with a further three in ten (31%) spending six to ten hours per month (see Figure 17). Similarly to the time spent with family, some respondents replied in terms of days per month or that they spent their annual vacation with friends.

It was evident that the ability to take time off for a holiday/vacation affected the wellbeing of respondents. Close to two in three (65%) of respondents who took 3-4 weeks of vacation per year reported good/very good levels of energy, while this was only true for 35 per cent of respondents who took a week or less of vacation in a year.

Clergy Workload and Work-Life Balance

Interview participants were asked to comment on their workload, including whether they had a good work-life balance or felt burned out. For those who were parish priests, several participants discussed the overwhelming volume of work and the unpredictable nature of the role.

> It's always a challenge, especially when you're on your own. … Here, because work in a parish is never consistent; it can be very quiet for a few weeks, and then, all of a sudden, everything hits you all at once. So, you can't really plan. Every week's different, in that sense.

> I work crazy hours in my current position. I've just secured something last Friday with some neighbouring priests, but work-wise, I'm on call 24/7, seven days a week for the last two years to [Hospital Name] Hospital. That's not sustainable, but I've had to do it.

> My fear is that the workload will kill me. There's no downtime.

A few participants identified themselves as "workaholics" and that they continued to work well past the limit of what was healthy. Others identified there was a guilt associated with the impression that there was always more work to do, but they did not have the resources to do so. Some retired clergy reported feeling an expectation to keep working after retirement.

> Well, I'm a workaholic … I know that that's wrong for me; it's not healthy for me. So, I'm trying to regulate that now with time off.

> I think it's the bishop's job to supply a priest to say Mass, not a retired priest. And retired priests traditionally have been very helpful, but not necessarily every Sunday in the same church. It sort of defeats the purpose of being retired.

A few reported that they had previously experienced burnout or had had senior clergy or parishioners intervene so that they would take time out. Others identified the opposite problem of not having enough to do, particularly in rural parishes, which caused other issues.

> *Yes, I have experienced burnout. That was six years ago when I had the breakdown in [Location]. Essentially, it was burnout. Yeah, so yes, I have experienced burnout. That was horrible.*

> *I went through a period when I didn't have a good work life and I had to be told by my [bishop] … and I had to shed certain things that I'd taken on. … I had to be told and in a way given permission not to do some things. … I constantly felt obligated to say yes when a better option would have been sometimes to say no.*

> *Actually, I am on the other hand. Some people, they burn out because too much workload. I am dried out, because … because … they just make me feel like … "you are not needed."… They just make me feel like I'm too tired to run away. So, that's the dryness. When the well runs dry.*

Many of those who were in assistant priest roles felt that the workload was more evenly shared, and several clergy commented that they had taken conscious steps to set boundaries or to be disciplined in how they managed their time.

> *… And it was a process of, alright, who are we delegating this to? Who could be—who can help me? So, when that was addressed, in a way, and then I can sense that I have work/life balance.*

> *… the decision to say no is so vitally important, to the demands that would be there.*

Married clergy identified some specific issues with balancing not only the workload of the Church, but also family life, and the impacts not only on them but on their family members.

> *But yeah, I must say the biggest challenge in terms of family life and ordained ministry … particularly when the families are little, cos you've got commitments to sport, you've got commitments to school … so you've got to fit that in around other things. Then on the weekend it's very hard, particularly for wives, I find, that they're in the congregation and I'm up there on the altar with the priest and there's that distance, so the only time we sit together is when we're somewhere else, not in our own parish.*

Personal and Professional Development

Another interview question asked participants if they pursued personal and/or professional development opportunities, and if so, which ones. They were also asked if they had appropriate opportunities to pursue such development. In addition to spiritual direction and professional supervision, a number of participants related other development opportunities they had accessed.

A majority of the participants shared that their diocese delivered an annual retreat and various safeguarding training. Beyond that, the responses were quite mixed. Some participants related opportunities to study overseas in the US, Rome or Jerusalem. Several participants talked about opportunities for university study including Masters degrees and PhDs, with some qualifying in other professions, such as lawyers or a psychologists.

> I did do a one-month program in the Holy Land at Tantur Ecumenical Institute, which was excellent.

> During that time I did my Bachelor's degree in Psychology. … After finishing up I applied for the Master of Clinical Psychology, and I was accepted. … In the meantime, we got a new bishop, who said 'I want clinical psychologists in my priesthood'. He put me on study leave to do this degree. He wanted me to work as a clinical psych.

Some participants shared the opportunities that had been made available in their diocese or religious congregations.

> So, while we're on professional development, the [diocese] put on a thing on voluntary assisted dying, which was very informative … And I went to a symposium on pornography a month ago … what can I say? It's a huge part of our confessional work, and just what it's doing to people's lives is staggering.

Several participants spoke about a program called 'Ministry to Priests' which offered training, mentorship and support to priests, and a few related that their support groups from that program still met regularly. Others talked about undertaking regular professional training for their secondary profession (e.g. psychology) or because of the environment they ministered in, such as the military.

A significant number of clergy, however, reported that they were not afforded opportunities for further development. Some related that this was because they were too busy and did not have the time, while others lamented that the opportunities were not available to them. A few reported that they were not interested in development opportunities. Several discussed having to be proactive in seeking development opportunities for themselves.

> I think probably we've got to do it ourselves. There probably needs to be more structure, but I think because we really don't know what it means to be a priest in 2024 in the Australian context, which is a multicultural Church.

> … in terms of further studies, like, I wanted to, probably, pursue Masters in Biblical Studies … So, the reason why I'm not able to entertain [that] at the moment is because I don't know how to balance that with the current role that I have. Nor can I find time.

> There's been the odd course or conference here or there. Nothing structured or sustained though. Some of the things that are on offer, I'm not interested in. I haven't been to a clergy conference for a long time. The stuff they're talking about doesn't do much for me. My assistant priests have wanted to go, but two of us can't be away with the level of work we do.

The funding for such opportunities was also raised as an issue. For non-stipend clergy, several reported having to fund course fees and travel themselves. This included for annual diocesan retreats at which all clergy were expected to attend.

> *The difference, of course, is that the payment for the retreat, they are expensive. And the priests get a stipend and in a way, you know … the presbytery account can be used by them for that. But a deacon has to pay the full amount for the retreat.*

Despite these challenges, there were several clergy who ensured that they undertook various professional development training opportunities, attended retreats, undertook regular sabbaticals, and attended relevant conferences. Others noted that they continued their professional development through regular reading or meeting up with other clergy members.

> *Now and then meeting up with other priests and having a chat, just being together. You get [a] different, and I think better, input if you're together with others. Without purpose. Other opinions or whatever else you're exposed to, it might rub off rather than you go there and get a talking to. Meeting up with other priests is personal development.*

My Story

I was [in my 30s] when I went into the seminary; I'm what they used to call 'a late vocation'. I have a different outlook on a lot of things from the guys who went straight after school … I've hit compulsory retirement age … over sixty years as a priest. I've had enough. I'm in a rural parish. I cover [several] churches, roughly 8000 square kms …

[The challenges are] fatigue, with all the driving. There's been a couple of times when parishioners have noticed that I'm grinding down. They've contacted the diocese, and I've been told to take a break … Both times it's happened, I knew I needed to take a break … but I couldn't see a time to get away. I have to keep going because I can't get a supply. The parish [has] financial issues too. It's a conflict. Not guilt but a perception that I need to keep going and I owe it to them …

The isolation is the problem. That I'm here on my own. [Several] churches, just myself, it's an hour's drive each way into the city. Sometimes I just can't be bothered. I don't have a lot of contact with other clergy, simply because of the mechanics of it. I'm [close to 20 years] in the parish, so I know I'm going to be moved soon, but when and where I don't know … One thing I won't miss when they move me is leaving at half past seven on a Sunday morning and getting home at one o'clock that afternoon, having driven 200k and read two Masses …

If I could hand the admin and finance to someone else, I would do it in a heartbeat … Our culture values doing it on your own, being the strong one. That's a bit of a problem. At least in the privacy of my own mind I'm happy to admit to myself that I'm not.

Involvement in the Wider Community

A survey question also explored clergy involvement in the wider (non-parish) community. As shown in Figure 18, sixty-two per cent of respondents indicated that they were involved in the wider community in some way.

Figure 18: Involvement in the wider community
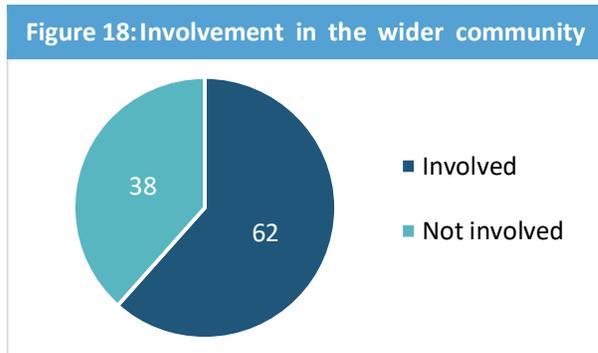
Of the four specific categories listed, the most common involvement was in a social club or group (37%), followed by sporting activities (36%) (see Figure 19). Close to one-third of respondents (32%) worked and/or volunteered in the local community in areas such as:

- community welfare (e.g., with St Vincent de Paul, Rosie's Place, Winter Night Shelter)
- hospitals and aged care
- Returned and Services Leagues, police and prison
- Education

Just over one in four respondents (26%) indicated that they were involved in a welfare society, although this number may be higher, as several had also reported working or volunteering in community welfare organisations.

Close to half of all respondents (49%) were involved in other areas not specifically listed, including:

- migrant communities
- ecumenical/interfaith
- Catholic groups

Figure 19: Types of involvement in the wider community
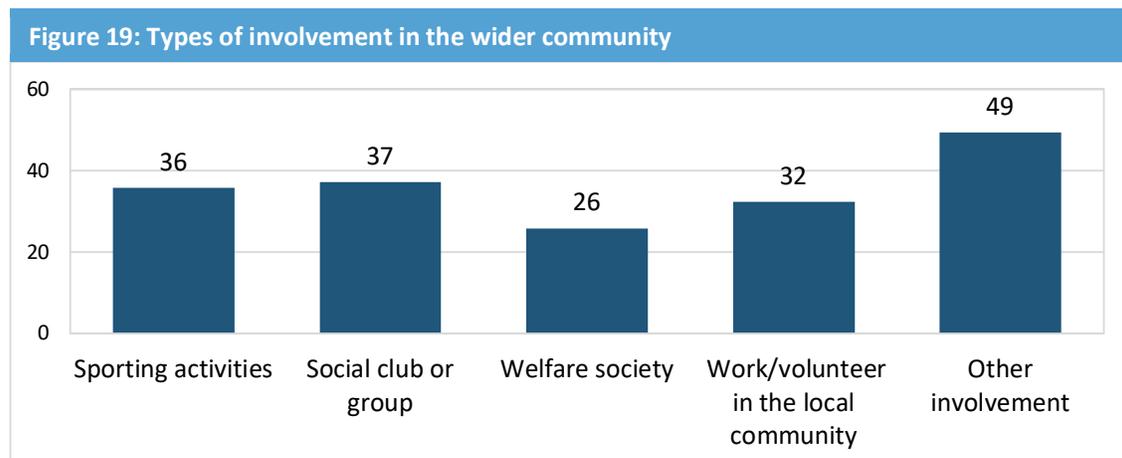
My Story

I joined a [religious congregation]. I was ordained a priest in [the 90s]; two and a half years here in Australia. I was sent to serve in [a Southeast Asian country] for [more than 20] years. Back in Australia for [a few] years …

[I] had a lot of positive experiences in my missionary assignment working a lot with the poor. Just being confronted with the absolute, dire poverty many have to cope with, and then thinking, "how do we respond to this?" You can't just bring the Gospel; you've also got to bring human development to these people. If somebody doesn't have food, they're not terribly interested in what God says about anything unless they've got some food in their bellies. So, the experiences of bringing aid to, whether it's floods, earthquakes, typhoons, and then just general situations of poverty are probably my most memorable experiences from my time as a missionary.

When you start working with people and you find out what their background is and all the sorts of things they have had to deal with, "well, it's not surprising that you've done that given that all those sorts of things happened to you back then." So, those individual pastoral situations; the privilege that you have of walking with people, and they open up to you largely—well, a large amount of why they open up to you is because they trust you because you're a priest. So, that's the privilege of the priesthood…

I'm grateful that I belong to a religious congregation; in a sense, we automatically have layers of pastoral care in our congregation … I think the most significant challenge is being able to read your situation, read your ministry situation. The culture and what is needed to evangelise it…

And the other thing that I've realised, too, is that the difference from, I'd say, a hundred years' ago to now is that if you were a parish priest 100 years ago, you were probably the best educated and the most well-formed person in your parish, and people would defer to that. It's not the case now. If you're the parish priest today, probably close to 30, 40% of the parish is better educated than you are, or more broadly educated than you are, so you can't fudge it …

I've been looking at in my life is what do I find to be life-giving? And I find that I can handle the heavy workload as long as I've got those life-giving outlets or avenues whereby I can recreate and refresh.

Social Media

Survey respondents were asked whether they were active on social media and, if so, their main reasons for using it and the amount of time they spent on it.

Fifty-two per cent of respondents indicated that they were active on social media. Around half of those who did use social media (49%) spent an hour or less on it per day, while a further 32 per cent spent between one and two hours and 16 per cent between two and four hours. Three per cent of respondents reported using it four or more hours per day.

The most common reason cited for using social media was to communicate with family and friends, with some 87 per cent doing so. Other common reasons for using social media included relaxation (47%), communication with parishioners (46%), and communication with the wider community (45%).

Sixteen per cent of respondents also described other reasons for using social media, which included:

- checking the news and being aware of what is happening around the world
- ministry
- education, research or self-improvement
- communication
- personal prayer and inspiration

Six in ten (59%) clergy born in a non-English-speaking country spent over an hour a week on social media compared to their counterparts born in Australia (41%) and other English-speaking-countries (33%).

Hobbies and Relaxation Interests

The survey also examined respondents' hobbies, interests, and/or relaxation activities. Table 2 below shows the percentage of respondents who indicated each activity.

Table 2: Main hobbies, interests or relaxation activities	
Type of Activity	**Percentage of respondents**
Watching TV, videos, movies at home	74
Reading	73
Listening to music, radio, podcasts	69
Outdoor activities	64
Sports	37
Other indoor activities	31
Other activities	21

Overall, just under three-quarters of respondents indicated that they spent time watching TV, videos or movies at home (74%) or reading (73%). Slightly fewer respondents (69%) said they spent time

listening to music, radio or podcasts. Almost two-thirds (64%) indicated they undertook outdoor activities, while 37 per cent said they spent time on sport, which could include playing, watching or volunteering in sporting activities. Just under one-third (31%) said they spent time on indoor activities, while a similar proportion (31%) spent time on other activities.

When asked to provide further information about the types of activities they undertook, respondents listed a range of hobbies, interests and relaxation activities, and most respondents chose multiple additional activities to those listed in Table 2. Of course, many of the types of activities overlapped or could be categorised in multiple activity types, and this was evident in many of the responses. For example, some outdoor activities can also be undertaken indoors (such as rock-climbing). Is running or jogging for fitness an outdoor activity rather than a sport? Is 'shopping' a domestic chore or an activity undertaken for leisure? Similarly, is 'cooking' done as a hobby, for entertainment, or as part of a household routine? These irregularities were taken into account in analysing the variety of responses.

Outdoor activities

The most popular outdoor activity was walking, of which 40 per cent of respondents said they undertook. This did not include bushwalking, hiking or trekking, of which a further six per cent of respondents spent time doing. Gardening was popular with around 14 per cent of respondents. Fishing was popular with some respondents (3%), while just a few indicated they spent time hunting or foraging (for mushrooms). A smaller proportion of respondents (just under five per cent in total) spent time in other outdoor activities, ranging from camping, rock-climbing, snorkelling or bird-watching, to four-wheel driving, gliding, plane and train-spotting, skiing or astronomy.

Sports

In terms of sporting activities, the most common were those related to general exercising, such as going to the gym, personal training, Pilates and yoga, of which around 14 per cent of respondents indicated they spent time doing. Overall, around 13 per cent of respondents indicated they spent time on one of the codes of football, such as soccer (4%), AFL (3%), rugby league or union (2%) or 'football' (3%). Swimming and running/jogging were the most popular individual sports undertaken, with just over seven per cent of respondents undertaking each activity. Around seven per cent of respondents said they spent time cycling (including mountain-biking), five per cent enjoyed cricket, five per cent spent time playing golf, and three per cent enjoyed tennis. Sports listed by around two per cent of respondents included basketball, table tennis, badminton and volleyball. Respondents also spent time on a variety of other sports, including motor sports, water sports (kayaking, sailing, rowing), bowls, boxing, horse sports, hockey, squash, surfing and baseball.

Indoor activities

Respondents listed a variety of board games (chess, carrom), puzzles (jigsaws, sudoku) or card games as their most popular indoor activities, with just under five per cent spending time on such activities. Other common indoor activities included cooking (4%), music (playing, singing, learning; 4%), housework (3%), crafts, woodwork or art (2%), renovating (1%) and billiards/snooker/pool (1%).

Other hobbies and interests

Respondents said they spent time doing many other activities, the most popular ones being visiting or spending time with friends or family (4%), travelling (4%), going to the theatre, movies, galleries, opera or concerts (4%), and dining or entertaining (2%). Other activities included spending time with pets (e.g., dog walking), photography, shopping, learning a language, or other non-defined hobbies.

2: MINISTRY

Experience of Ministry

In the second set of survey questions under General Wellbeing, respondents were asked to indicate on a five-point scale the extent to which each of a list of five statements was true or false for them:

1. I appreciate the value of my work/ministry
2. I get adequate support from others for my work/ministry
3. I receive adequate remuneration for my work/ministry
4. I get appropriate medical treatment when I need it
5. I am able to get at least one day of rest per week

As Figure 20 shows, the overall results were generally positive.

Most respondents (95%) indicated that they appreciated the value of their work/ministry (see Figure 11). Of the remaining respondents, two per cent rated the statement as false and three per cent rated it as neither true nor false. Close to three in four (73%) of respondents believed they receive adequate support from others for their work/ministry, while 13 per cent indicated the contrary and 14 per cent rated the statement as neither true nor false.

While still positive, fewer respondents rated the statement 'I receive adequate remuneration for my work/ministry' as being definitely or generally true (64%). Some 16 per cent rated it as definitely or generally false and the remaining one in five respondents rated it as being neither true nor false.

Nine in ten respondents indicated that they receive appropriate medical treatment when they need it while five per cent did not believe that they do. The remaining six per cent indicated that the statement was neither true nor false.

Close to three in four (73%) respondents were able to get at least one day of rest per week while 14 per cent indicated that they were unable to do so. The remaining 12 per cent rated the statement as neither true nor false.

Figure 20: To what extent are the following statements true or not for you?

Statement	Definitely false	Generally false	Neither true nor false	Generally true	Definitely true
Appreciate value of ministry	2	3		37	57
Adequate support	4	9	14	50	23
Adequate remuneration	7	9	20	39	25
Appropriate medical treatment	2	2	6	41	48
At least 1 day per week rest	5	9	12	39	34
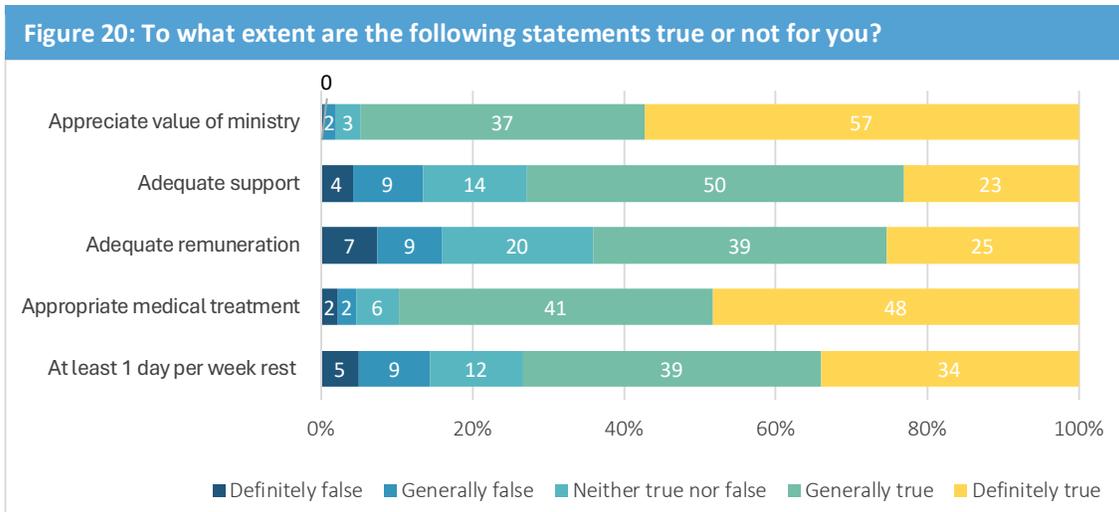
Appreciation of the value of their work/ministry was consistent among most groups surveyed with only a slight difference in the strength of response seen between religious and diocesan priests, with religious clergy more definitive about the statement (65 per cent said it was definitely true) than diocesan clergy (54%).

Religious priests were also more likely (84%) to rate the statement "I get adequate support from others for my work/ministry" as 'definitely true' or 'generally true' compared to their diocesan counterparts (70%). This was also true of clergy born in non-English-speaking countries (81%) compared to those born in Australia (68%) and other English-speaking countries (72%).

Adequate remuneration was the issue with the greatest diversity in this set of questions. Except for groups based on their year of arrival to Australia, differences were seen between all other groups surveyed, as follows:

- Three in four (76%) clergy who entered the seminary as teenagers rated the statement "I receive adequate remuneration for my work/ministry" as generally true or definitely true compared to 59 per cent of those who entered the seminary at other ages.
- Only three in ten (29%) permanent deacons rated the statement true compared to 68 per cent of other clergy.
- Diocesan priests were also less likely to rate the statement as true (66%) compared to their religious counterparts (73%).

Most diocesan (90%) and religious (97%) priests rated the statement "I get appropriate medical treatment when I need it" as generally or definitely true, while around 70 per cent of deacons said the same.

Also significantly varied in their responses was the ability of clergy to get at least one day of rest per week. Semi-retired (87%) and fully retired (90%) clergy were the group most likely to be able to do so. When comparing the various categories of clergy, religious priests (78%) and diocesan priests (84%) on loan to an Australian diocese were more likely to do so, compared to Australian-based clergy (72%). When comparing age groups, clergy aged in their 80s (85%) were most likely to indicate they could get at least one day of rest per week, while those aged in their 50s (62%) and 60s (66%) were least likely.

Important Aspects of Ministry

Interview participants were asked to identify the most important aspects of their ministry. Numerous clergy spoke of the importance of the Mass in their ministry, particularly celebrating the Eucharist, preparing homilies and 'breaking the Word open'.

The important aspect of ministry for me is ... the Eucharist. The sacraments in general, but the Eucharist. Particularly, making sure that the Eucharist, as the source and summit of our faith, is done well. And that it's done with reverence and care. And that my homilies are done really well, as well.

A number of clergy talked about the importance of the sacramental aspects of their ministry, and a few priests linked those aspects to the servanthood role of the priesthood:

The seven sacraments of the Church is a huge part of your ministry. You have to service them. Whether they are in Eucharist, and baptism, and funerals, and marriages, and confession, anointing, and all this stuff. This is very important. Serving the people, being close to the people.

[It's about] serving the people. The sacramental life of the Church. Bringing people to Jesus. It's not just about bums on seats, I think is something that we've lost in terms of living relationships.

For some clergy, the confessional aspect of their ministry is also important, even though, as one priest pointed out, not many people go to confession in many places.

Many clergy spoke personally as pastoral carers and noted that the most important aspects of their ministry focused on the pastoral care of people and the often simple act of being with people, whether sitting with them at various life stages or engaging them in their faith.

Several clergy spoke about ministry in terms of journeying together with others through life. One military chaplain aptly expressed sentiments mentioned by other clergy:

It was a great blessing and gift by God to let me be such a support and guide and accompanier on the journeys of people, whatever they might be, whatever faith they were. I never made a judgment about anything, you know.

Similarly, other priests reflected on the importance of journeying in hope with people as the most important aspect of their ministry:

Identifying with the joys and the sorrows of your people. Not being distant from them but being embedded in their lives to the degree that they know you're walking with them, and leading them at times, but walking with them.

Being with people in their darkest moments. Or their liveliest or most potent. Trying to give them a sense of hope and bring healing into their lives.

A number of clergy pointed out the many privileged moments in their ministries, such as celebrating weddings and baptisms, and walking with families through grief or times of loss. Many of those interviewed had roles as chaplains, often in hospitals or in aged care, and spoke of the multi-faceted nature of such ministry. One priest expressed the joining of pastoral care with the sacramental aspects of the ministry:

I can celebrate the sacraments of anointing, reconciliation and funerals. But not just funerals but being with people in their grief and visiting them afterwards as well, which is something a lot of priests don't get the time to do.

Helping parishioners to understand their faith was considered an important aspect of a Catholic clergy's role. As explained by one deacon:

I think the most important one is to be a presence, just to actually help people understand what the Catholic faith is all about. The Mass is a focus . . . a focus of our whole faith and we really need to understand that, and we really need to understand the message that Christ gave us, to love one another. And that is shown through the Mass.

Some clergy discussed the importance of leadership within a parish and all that entails. One aspect, as identified by two priests, was the importance of building a worshipping and caring community:

I think worship... is at the heart of things. It's about bringing the community together to praise God. But I think flowing out of that, it's just the whole idea of community: building community that cares for each other, and particularly cares for the community around them.

So I believe being a priest, a diocesan priest and a parish priest, that the worshipping community is my primary responsibility, I have to grow a community of faith.

Positive Experiences

Participants were also asked to provide some examples of positive experiences of their ministry, and clergy shared many stories to illustrate these varied experiences of their priesthood.

While many clergy noted that celebrating weddings was generally a very positive ministry experience, a number of participants noted that baptisms or funerals were also positive experiences that provided opportunities for them to connect with others.

The parish gets to do quite a few funerals, and it's an opportunity to reach those that haven't reached out to the church or been in the church for a long time, so I've found funerals a great opportunity to get people to reconnect as well.

Being with a group of people in hatchings, matchings, and dispatching. The whole gamut of life.

One priest reflected upon the positive privileges he had in undertaking the sacramental aspects of ministry:

Every sacrament is like that [connecting with the Lord], and the priest buggers it up when he thinks they've come for him. That's been the good part of the priesthood. Millions of experiences like that, where I got an insight. Where God was telling me to get off my high horse and realise that I'm nothing. It's Christ that's working in this Church and in his people.

Along the same lines, some clergy shared how ministering with people going through life and death circumstances could be positive pastoral and learning experiences. As noted by some participants:

I spent a lot of time as a hospital chaplain, and occasionally some really useful pastoral encounters occurred in that situation. As a priest [once] said, you learn more from the parishioners than you teach them. I learned as I went. In life and in pastoral ministry, we learn as we go, and it's hard to tell people in advance how to do that.

Funeral ministry is probably one of the gems of our Catholic faith. It's something we do much better than some of the other denominations. Especially civil funerals. The funeral ritual itself just helps people start the grieving process. It helps people come to terms with what's happening or happened to them. It's a good opportunity to sit there with people and listen to their story about the loved one who's passed.

Another participant highlighted the role of the priest and parish in building community at times of community loss or disaster:

Firstly, we had a mother and two daughters who were killed in an accident. I mean, it was a harrowing time, but it was made so much easier. The parish team we had and the school team and all of that, that working together, I mean, it obviously sticks in my mind, but it was a real sense of what community can be and can do.

A number of clergy, particularly religious priests who had spent time overseas as missionaries, shared their experiences of ministry in other countries. Some spoke about the positive, yet vastly different, experience of being a Catholic priest in often very different cultures and contexts.

Other clergy shared their great experiences of being part of a ministry team with a common mission. One priest summarised his thoughts about it: *Working as a team, listening to one another, respecting one another, that's always been a peak experience.*

One participant noted that there are often just simple everyday examples of doing ministry which can be very enriching and community-building:

This Sunday just gone we had some different people stay behind for the tea. The sun was shining. Mass had gone well. It was a really good morning, everything came together. The people who stayed behind enjoyed being there and wanted to be there. Connections were made. It was a simple thing to build community.

In the interviews, clergy were also asked about the challenges and struggles they faced in their ministry. Their comments have been included throughout later sections of this report.

3: RELATIONSHIPS

Current Relationships

The third set of survey questions investigated the topic of relationships. Respondents were asked to reflect on the previous 12 months and rate, on a scale of 1 - 5, their relationship with their parish community, peers, bishop, contacts at Catholic agencies, family and school community.

As Figure 21 shows, respondents generally enjoyed positive relationships.

Relationships with family members rated highly among respondents with just under half (49%) describing these relationships as 'extremely good' and a further 38 per cent rating these relationships as 'good'.

An even higher proportion of respondents rated their relationships with the parish community positively. Nine in ten respondents rated these as 'extremely good' (41%) or 'good' (49%).

Around two-thirds of the respondents rated as 'extremely good' or 'good' their relationships with their peers (68%) and the school community (66%) while close to six in ten (59%) gave their relationship with their bishop the same rating.

Although not ranking as highly as other relationships, those with contacts in Catholic agencies were nevertheless still rated positively with 53 per cent of respondents indicating this.

Figure 21: Reflecting on your relationships in the last 12 months, how would you rate yourself in the following areas?
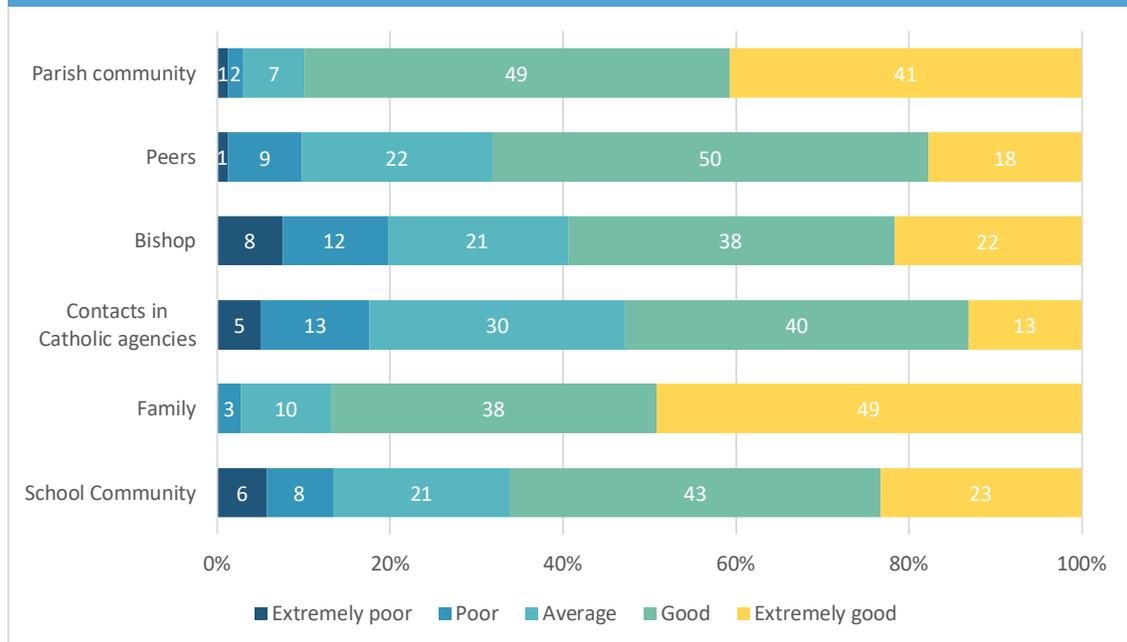
There was little difference between respondents' relationships based on country of birth, age group, age they entered the seminary, year of ordination or arrival in Australia. Permanent deacons, however, mostly rated their relationship with their family positively. Three in four (74%) deacons rated their relationship with family as 'extremely good' compared to 46 per cent of diocesan and 49 per cent of religious clergy.

Differences were also seen between various clergy groups in terms of their relationship with their peers. While there was little difference between groups based on place of birth, year of ordination or their arrival in Australia, the following trends were noted:

- Clergy who entered the seminary when they were under 20 were more likely (72%) to rate their relationships as 'good' or 'extremely good', compared to those who entered at other ages (65%).
- Clergy aged in their 50s when they entered the seminary (41%), were at least twice as likely as clergy who entered at other ages (between eight and 20 per cent) to rate their relationship with their peers as 'extremely good'.
- Religious priests were also more likely (77%) to rate their relationship with their peers as 'good' or 'extremely good', compared to diocesan priests (64%).

How clergy rated their relationship with their bishop was consistent between most clergy groups. However, variations were found between diocesan and religious priests. Seven in ten (71%) religious priests rated their relationship with their bishop as 'good' or 'extremely good', compared with 54 per cent of diocesan priests. Religious priests on loan to an Australian diocese (78%) rated their relationship with their bishop highest (78 per cent said it was 'good' or 'extremely good'), while local diocesan priests rated their relationship with their bishop the lowest (53 per cent said it was 'good' or 'extremely good').

There were some differences between clergy of different age groups and countries of birth in the respondents' relationships with Catholic agencies. Clergy born in Australia (53%) and non-English-speaking countries (54%) were slightly more likely than those born in other English-speaking countries (48%) to rate their relationships with Catholic agencies as 'good' or 'extremely good'.

The relationship of clergy with their school community was consistent between the various demographic groups. The exception was place of birth, where close to three in four (74%) clergy born overseas in English-speaking countries rated their relationship with the school community as 'good' or 'extremely good', compared to the 64 per cent of Australian-born and 68 per cent of clergy born in non-English-speaking countries.

Supportive Healthy Relationships

A separate question asked respondents about other healthy relationships where they felt strongly supported. 'Friends' and 'relationships developed in communities' were the two most commonly identified sources of healthy relationships.

Friends

Around 40 per cent of respondents mentioned friends as sources of support, although the types of friends differed vastly. Many clergy spoke of supportive friendships with other priests, deacons and religious, some from their seminary days or their religious community, others from elsewhere, such as clergy support groups, in retirement homes, or clergy in other dioceses or overseas. A few mentioned good relationships with religious sisters. For the vast majority, non-cleric friends outside immediate ministry or clergy circles featured prominently. These included long-term friendships, some prior to ordination, and a range of personal networks, including friends from current social circles, those living interstate or overseas, and other close male and female Catholic, non-Catholic and non-religious friends.

> *I receive strong and constant support from my priests' fraternity group.*

> *I reside with 10 retired priests—good support.*

> *Friendships outside Church. A few friendships I've had over 50 years have survived and helped me.*

> *With a few close (non-clerical) friends. Very important in terms of keeping me grounded.*

> *I have a number of friends—single/married; male/female that I spend time with regularly.*

Communities

Another source of healthy relationships was found in various communities of which clergy were a part, with parish communities being one main source. Current and past parishioners provided healthy relationships for many priests, especially where close friendships had been developed with individuals and families over the years. Some clergy mentioned supportive parish staff and lay leadership teams that provided moral and pastoral support. Religious clergy also mentioned religious communities, with several identifying healthy and supportive relationships with their superiors and community members.

> *Yes, from some of my closest parishioners/friends in the parish. These people help keep me balanced and accountable to the overall mission of the parish. I really appreciate their input.*

> *I socialise with a small number of parishioners outside of parish events, e.g. married couples my age.*

> *I am strongly supported by the members of the religious congregation that I belong to.*

> *I am retired, but family, friends and former parishioners still keep a friendly eye on me.*

Another source of support came from various communities in which clergy participated. Several mentioned lay ecclesial movements like Cursillo, Teams, Passionist Family, Marriage Encounter, and other groups. Other groups commonly mentioned were ministry groups (e.g., school communities, youth groups, prayer groups, SVDP, RCIA), local community groups, priests' associations, and ethnic

community groups. Other sources of support were sports groups and social clubs and, in one instance, an online community.

With the men and women who seek out Christian formation through the apostolate of Opus Dei.

I have been invited to join several groups, e.g., Passionist Family, Teams (very supportive), a weekday luncheon group (men), and a fortnightly coffee group of all faith, and none.

We have monthly meetings with other church ministers (ecumenical gathering) for prayers and sharing our ministerial experiences.

I catch up with my mates once a week for a game of golf.

My principal recreational activity is via a Club. This [is an] important part of my life and is going well.

Professional connections

Professional connections were many and varied. Pastoral supervisors, spiritual directors, therapists, coaches, confessors and support groups were common sources of support. Those working in specific ministries found support from colleagues, office staff, people within their professional networks or people within the communities they ministered to (e.g. chaplains). Older clergy mentioned support personnel, pastoral carers, nursing staff and health and wellbeing or medical teams.

My supervisor and spiritual advisor are both very understanding and supportive by listening and empathising.

For the past five years … I have been the Executive Officer of the Diocesan Safeguarding Ministry. Colleagues in the Diocesan Catholic School Office and colleagues in a similar position in the other Dioceses … have provided strong personal and professional support.

I feel strongly supported by the Vietnamese Catholic Community of which I am the chaplain.

At the age of 90, I have good relationships with my GP and the Diocesan Health Care Team.

Family

Finally, several priests mentioned healthy relationships with family members. In particular, respondents who identified themselves as deacons or married priests named their wives as their greatest supporters.

In my marriage. My wife is my greatest supporter and very dedicated to my diaconate and to the Church.

My sister, brother and my former girlfriend are all good friends who support me.

My Story

So, I came here to join the [religious congregation]. I was already part of [them] … in the Philippines, but then left the seminary there … [I had] almost five years in formation, and then left outside for nine years … I worked and did my thing in the outside world. And then … I came back … to join [religious congregation], and I did that [in] Australia …

The challenges …is that you'll be working with people … It came slowly in terms of being trained—the way we were trained in formation as priests, where the ones that you were at home with—literally at home with—were your [religious congregation] brothers. And you'd only probably just get a few hours in a week to be in a parish or work with people … And then the reality sinks in that when you're on actual ministry … the percentage of time that you'll spend with people would be quite a big flip … from when you were trained. So, it was a slow learning process, that this was going to be a big adjustment…

And even until now it's quite a change and a constant reminder … the different aspects of that: specifically, making decisions; that you're probably going to be hearing others' opinions or take on how they think about things in ministry; that you're dealing with people … who are non-religious in terms of … laity—so, not fellow [religious congregation members] … And the different dynamics of dealing with decisions coming from women and men, … and others, … probably teenagers, as well, where you're dealing with young adults or young people …

Especially when you deal with different cultures in ministry … it's not quite easy to deal with it, either on my part, as [born overseas], having to have difficult conversations, and for the other party, like a ministry leader, perhaps, who might be from another culture … I think the culture, even from younger years, makes it quite easy for Australians just to express things, … and give feedback. And so there is that expectation, as well, from ministry leaders to hear that from me. … But that doesn't— in terms of giving feedback, that doesn't quite come naturally for me …

It was a slow learning process … what are the decisions I have to let go [of] and give to others … do I have to be the one who would fill the door water font? … Or who will I give the key to open the church? Am I the one holding the keys? Very small details, … but necessary ones—I have to probably be very conscious of listing down and being aware of … And it was a process of … who are we delegating this to? Who could … help me?

Building Relationships

Interview participants were asked whether forming relationships as a priest or deacon was easier or harder than usual, and what differences or difficulties they faced. There was a broad range of responses, with some participants stating it was harder, while others reported that they found it easier. Several participants reported that it depended on the context, or on the personality of the person who was seeking to form relationships.

> *No, it's no different. If you're who you are, and who you are is first. Who you are as a person. If you have to have a collar and that stops you from relating, maybe it's not necessarily the other person, maybe it's me.*

Those who declared it was easier offered reasons such as being automatically included in social gatherings because of their role, being more likely to be offered hospitality, having a conversation starter, or being able to continue relationships formed before their ordination.

> *No, no, it's actually easier. Easier because people respect your position, and your title … they trust you; because they trust the position, but it's more helpful for them—you bring them closer, they open up when they you see your way of life as well.*

Some noted that it was easier for married clergy to build relationships, or it was easier if they avoided sharing that they were a priest when they first met people. Others said they found it easier to form relationships with other priests than with people outside the Church. A few discussed the need to take the initiative to build relationships with others.

> *And you can't be sitting back and thinking, "Well, I've got to … I'm not invited". No, you do the invitation. You ring up and say, "Can I come to go to the movies with you on Sunday?", or "Let's have lunch together". You've got to, you as a single priest, you have to take the initiative there.*

Of those who thought it was harder, the reasons included difficulties in navigating relationships with women due to attraction; facing suspicion or a lack of trust from people; having to avoid any kind of physical contact; avoiding situations that could be perceived incorrectly; navigating being in a pastoral role with parishioners, not a personal one; being isolated during seminary training; not being able to socialise on the weekends when most people were available; having a lack of free time to connect with people; or facing a changed attitude when people found out you were Catholic clergy.

> *I think now it's definitely much harder. Because most of us—and I know I'm not the only one, because I have spoken about this with some other priests—we constantly feel like we're being watched. … because of everything that's gone on, we not only have to do the right thing, but we have to make sure that we're being seen to do the right thing. And that can put priests in straitjackets.*

Remarks about Relationships

Both survey and interview participants were invited to comment positively or negatively about their relationships.

Positive comments

Around 29 per cent of survey respondents responded positively, generally reinforcing the supportive nature of various relationships mentioned above, while other comments referred to relationships in general:

> *Former parishioners who have maintained contact and friendship are very supportive and helpful in my retirement.*

> *I have two sons, a daughter-in-law, and a granddaughter; they provide enormous support and balance.*

> *I work to maintain good relationships at both work, family, and friendship levels.*

> *I have greatly appreciated friendships in different parishes, ministries and communities in which I have been involved in the course of fifty years of priestly ministry.*

> *My relationships are crucial to my life as a man and a priest.*

> *The experience of being a deacon amongst the laity has been very positive.*

> *I can say nothing further. On second thoughts, I also have some very good women friends.*

Negative comments

Around one in three respondents had negative comments. Of these, a little under half referred to their strained relationship with their bishop and/or the diocesan office:

> *I usually find that the bishop and his office [are] generally not interested in the welfare of priests and supporting them on a personal level.*

> *My bishop is a good man, but he doesn't know his priests. I feel that being [a] father to his priests is one of if not the prime duty of a bishop, and not something that can be delegated. I lament that our bishops don't prioritise this.*

> *I feel abandoned by the Bishop and the Diocese.*

> *I do not feel very well supported by the bishop or curia, which can make ministry difficult at times. Appointments are made thoughtlessly and there are no proper grievance procedures or protections for priests.*

> *There seems to be little trust or encouragement from the bishop. He will often bypass clergy or take seriously any meaningful collaboration or consultation and opts more [for] his chancery employees. I definitely feel that it is difficult to fully engage in ministry and make difficult calls as I would not be supported by the bishop.*

A similar proportion described difficulties in relating with other clergy, many of which related to personal experiences of lack of connection and support:

I sense serious underlying differences with them about very basic and important issues of doctrine, especially as regards women in the Church and 'LGBTQ+' issues. So one does not raise these issues in social gatherings with other priests, in order to avoid possible unpleasantness and blow-ups.

I began losing my vision six years ago and now have poor vision. I have found that there is little contact from fellow clergy to keep in touch with me.

Get no support from the diocese. There is no communication between permanent deacons, no longer annual training or retreats.

There is unnecessary interference from the superior of the religious community to which I belong to who does not allow me to practice my role as the parish priest.

Other negative comments largely referred to difficulties in building relationships with Catholic schools and agencies, and other specific situations the respondent was in.

I have had little contact with acquaintances and friends since I was stood down as PP of my home parish on a false allegation.

I feel isolated in a multicultural church. As an Anglo-Australian working in the Australian city of my birth, I struggle to relate and be relatable to my multicultural community. I was in a presbytery with a Filipino priest, and we never shared a common meal or community together. His Filipino community would look after him and take him out for meals. The Caucasian community in the parish did not extend the same hospitality. I felt disconnected from my parish.

Schools have moved away from the wider Church, such as parishes. If the school leadership aren't expected to be involved in the wider Church then it makes the relationship very difficult.

Not all Church agency relationships are collaborative. I find some of Centacare's approaches anticlerical.

Concerns

Finally, in responding to this question, several respondents expressed concerns about specific relationships or relationships in general:

I just find it hard to have relationships with others due to the constant workload. It is just go, go, go.

For a mutually beneficial relationship, it seems that cultural factors influencing the connection between priests and parishioners could use deeper exploration and understanding.

Relationships are generally fine, but the faithful of my parish don't seem to be interested in me as a priest. They appreciate having a local "good bloke", but don't seem to want what I bring as a priest.

I am in my seventies, and as you get older, your world shrinks; apart from life-long friends, relationships are work-related.

Friendships are a wonderful gift; however, they require great maturity to maintain healthy boundaries. It is a challenge to find women who are able to support and rejoice in priestly ministry.

In my senior years, I've realised how much I missed in possible healthy relationships.

The hardest thing is being away from family and close friends in other states.

My relationship with a woman friend strays across boundaries at times.

My Story

[Over 40 years] a priest … I was born in [city], and grew up in a Catholic family; Catholic parish … And when I finished school, I thought, "I'll go to the seminary" as we did in those days … I was there for about two and a half years, and then I left to get some life and work experience… some time later I went back to the seminary because others thought that I should test the sense of ministry in my life, not because I thought it was a good idea at the time. I never had an overt sense of God calling me to anything. God and I have a relationship in such a way that this mystery of life sort of infuses everything …

When I was finally ordained, I was appointed fairly quicky … as a parish priest of a little country place … and I was part of the change management of that parish … I wasn't a traditional kind of priest … I was awakening to my own sexuality at the time, as a gay man. Not that I was the only gay priest in the diocese, but I was the only one who was prepared to tell, at least in confidence, those in the diocese that had some sort of sway over things, which I believe they would have shared with the Bishop in any case …

The time in the seminary was awkward, because it was never an issue that was publicly spoken about, and there were a number of gay boys in the place … I was very conscious of the fact that a gay lifestyle that the world would expect and accept … was not the kind of lifestyle that I was interested in in any case, and it wasn't something that I was going to equip myself for … I was very careful not to sublimate my feelings or my interests, but I did talk it out with people. I always had confidential support in my spiritual direction, and other things, too … Which made it a lot easier in terms of ministry, because I understood some triggers, and I understood some situations that I didn't want to be involved with or shouldn't be involved with.

But it also made me more sensitive to the needs of others, too. And not just to other gay people, but to those who suffered abuse, violence, all that kind of stuff. So, for a little while, when I was away from the seminary—away from ministry per se, I helped with the Aids [ministry] in [Diocese], as a personal and spiritual support to people who were dying at that stage, … to help them ritualise things when necessary … I never got up to any compromising behaviour that might embarrass anyone. But I think it makes me more sensitive to where people are. To where other ministers are, too. And I'm more able to talk about it with others, too, should the need arise.

4: SPIRITUAL HEALTH

Relationship with God

In the first set of survey questions on Spiritual Health, respondents were asked to reflect on the last 12 months and rate themselves on a scale of 1 (extremely poor) to 5 (extremely good) regarding their relationship with God and their ability to find adequate time for prayer and other spiritual practices.

Figure 22 shows that, overall, the ratings were average or good in most areas.

The respondent's relationship with God had the most positive results, in which nearly four in five (79%) rated themselves 'good' or 'extremely good', and a further 18 per cent considered themselves 'average'. Some three per cent reported being 'poor' in this area, and no respondents reported 'extremely poor'.

Figure 22: Reflecting on the last 12 months, how would you rate yourself in the following areas?
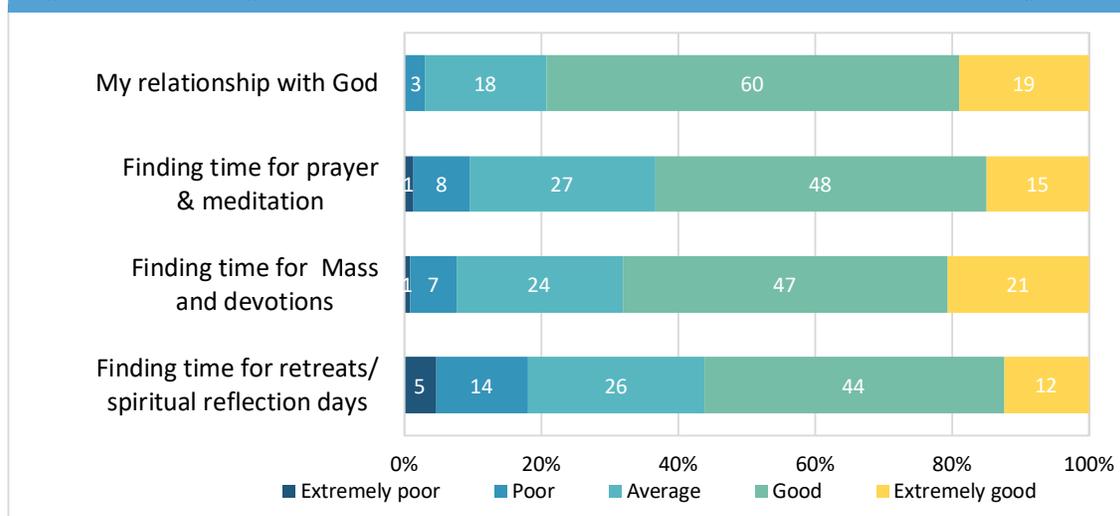
Time for Spiritual Practices

In terms of finding time for daily prayer and meditation, 63 per cent reported being 'good' or 'extremely good' in this area, 27 per cent rated themselves 'average', and almost ten per cent rated themselves 'poor' or 'extremely poor' in this area.

Sixty-eight per cent of all respondents rated themselves 'good' or 'extremely good' in their ability to have time for daily Mass, the Divine Office, the Rosary and other devotions. Just under one-quarter (24%) considered themselves 'average' in this area, while around eight per cent ranked themselves 'poor' or lower.

The least positive results were seen in finding time to attend retreats or spiritual reflection days. While 56 per cent of all respondents considered themselves 'good' or 'extremely good', around 26 per cent ranked themselves 'average', and 19 per cent described themselves as 'poor' or 'extremely poor' in this area.

A Profile of Catholic Clergy in Australia: Health and Wellbeing

Maintaining a Healthy Spiritual Life

Interview participants were asked to comment on their spiritual health and describe what they did to maintain a healthy spiritual life. While there was a range of answers, most talked about the role of prayer in their life. Many reported starting the day with prayer, praying the Office, praying with their religious congregation or with other people they lived with, or connecting prayer to their everyday activities.

I keep my morning prayers. I won't leave the house before that.

The guy I live with, we pray together. Not every day but three-four times a week. Morning and night, and I find that that's easy to do and its life giving.

… every time that I do my garden, it's … for me, it's like a prayer. Just like … doing ordinary things, but putting things in a prayerful context, something like that.

Certainly, prayer and the habit of prayer is critical. Whatever that looks like and however that looks like. Sometimes it can be said—or it's been said to me—that 'Oh, prayer is you pray the Office or you go to Mass or whatever'. But sometimes being aware; when I go for a walk is part of that prayer.

Other spiritual practices that clergy shared included meditation, going on retreats, attending professional development days, saying Mass daily, participating in the Eucharist, Eucharistic adoration, praying the rosary, reading spiritual books, listening to theological podcasts, engaging with support groups, walking the Camino or engaging in spiritual discussions with other people.

For my own spirituality, that daily celebration of the Eucharist was important.

Retreats and things I really appreciate and enjoy that. And even the input from our seminar days or our professional development days.

I do a lot of spiritual reading and find it enriching and fulfilling and something quite profound, challenging and very helpful and stimulating and all that stuff.

And I think too, connecting with priest friends, whether it's in person or by phone, and you might share a particular article that you're reading, insights that can be intellectual, but can also be spiritual formation as well. Many participants discussed the value of meeting with a spiritual director or receiving professional supervision.

One of the most important things, I suppose, for all of this is [that] I have had excellent spiritual directors. They are positive, an absolute must in a priest's life.

And I think having the supervision is great, and having a good spiritual director, that's very—that's why I do the spiritual direction now, … And it's really important because, you know, a priest's got to be able to talk about to somebody what he's feeling and what he's going through, and to make sure that he's being accountable to someone that he's living a healthy life.

Spiritual Direction

Two questions focused on spiritual direction. Firstly, respondents were asked to select which of the following statements was true for them:

- I currently have a spiritual director
- I have had a spiritual director in the past, but not currently
- I have never had any form of spiritual direction

Figure 23: Spiritual direction (%)

- Currently have
- In past, not currently
- Never had
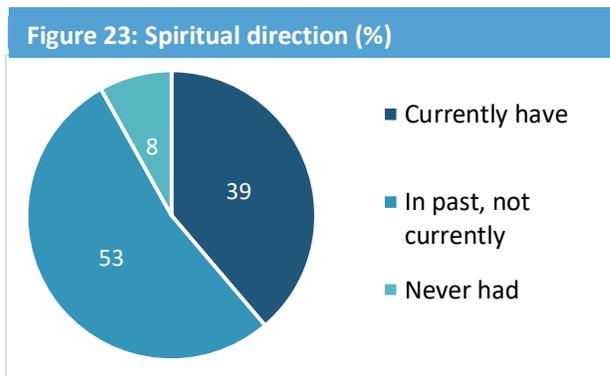
As Figure 23 shows, close to four in ten respondents (39%) indicated that they currently have a spiritual director, while more than half (53%) indicated that while they had one at some time in the past, they did not at the time they completed the survey. Eight per cent indicated that they had never had any form of spiritual direction.

Difficulties in spiritual direction

A further question asked respondents to list any difficulties they encountered in spiritual direction. A majority of participants reported that they did not have any difficulties. For those who had indicated a difficulty, finding a spiritual director was the most frequently reported challenge for three main reasons:

- Availability—The scarcity of directors available for in-person meetings within reasonable proximity, particularly in rural or regional areas where distance and travel presented significant challenges. It was also difficult to identify suitable candidates due to a scarcity of younger directors to replace the deceased.
- Suitability—Finding a director with whom clergy could easily relate or an individual with the appropriate experience and approach. Some clergy commented on the lack of directors with training or expertise in a distinctive spirituality and practice.
- Affordability—Finding the right person was expensive, especially when clergy were financially responsible for the cost themselves.

Tyranny of distance and inadequate people resourced for such a ministry

Finding a spiritual director who is easily accessible and to whom I can relate I especially feel a need to relate to a priest who understands the ministry

Hard to find someone who is both compassionate and also calls you to holiness. Also the difficulty of a generational and ecclesiological divide. Most spiritual directors are old and hard to connect with. I feel that they do not understand my life/ministry/struggles.

My SD passed away and finding another that I would trust is difficult if you are not from a home diocese.

Yes- can't get one locally and can't afford the ones available and diocese won't pay for it.

Other difficulties included Zoom sessions for spiritual direction, which had proved to be unhelpful for many; a lack of time due to busy schedules or long-distance travel; trust and vulnerability issues; difficulties in having honest conversations; prior negative experiences leading to present fears or disappointment at not receiving proper counsel or direction; language difficulties; difficulties in putting advice into practice or setting aside adequate time for prayer; and the burden of a heavy workload leading to exhaustion and laziness. A few clergy members reported that they found the process unhelpful and sought spiritual nourishment through discussions with other clergy members, confession, Mass, or spiritual retreats instead. A small number were also waiting for a new director after the death of a previous one.

> *Primarily time management and arranging meetings between two very busy schedules.*

> *I am reluctant to enter into a formal SD relationship. Trust and vulnerability are issues for me.*

> *My experience has not been positive.*

> *Conveying the challenges of parish life and relationships when the director is not a diocesan priest. Having an older director can make it challenging to relay contemporary challenges in parish life and personal struggles.*

> *I see my director at least once per month. He is a good & experienced priest, but he doesn't 'direct'. We engage in small talk, he hears my confession and says some general things, but there's no direction.*

> *Not continued this year. The Zoom sessions [are] not nourishing. A kind of 'client' relationship. [The] person I chat with now is a holy old priest who has been in the trenches here for generations.*

> *Spiritual direction is not a part of my spirituality. Confession is like spiritual direction to me.*

Personal Confession

A similar question asked respondents if they had encountered difficulty in personal confession. About 70 per cent of respondents reported no concerns, with a few indicating that they accessed the sacrament regularly, with varying frequencies. For those who struggled, the main challenge was availability, which included finding appropriate confessors in remote locations, accessing confession at convenient times and consistently, and overcoming restricted access due to mobility or health issues and time constraints.

Yes, I live in a remote and isolated place from everybody else.

At present I haven't got a regular confessor. So I tend to not go to confession, though adequate opportunities exist.

It is hard to find a wise Confessor, but I know where to go if needed.

Another common problem was trust and fear of recognition, with respondents having difficulties obtaining "an anonymous venue" or "access to anonymous confession". Others could not trust confessors or be completely honest with them, and some had negative experiences with previous confessors.

Many parishes have only half an hour availability on a Saturday, either morning or evening. But another priest can rarely if ever attend this time. The priest is thus forced to sacrifice anonymity by personally contacting another priest. He, like every other penitent, has a right to anonymity, but the very poor availability of confession forces him to sacrifice this.

Unavailability of confessionals with a screen; priests who do not use the words of absolution!

Sometimes an emotional dullness. Going through the motions. Not feeling sorrow or emotion.

Awkwardness confessing to fellow priests I know well.

[It is] difficult to trust young clergy.

I was let down badly once.

Other challenges included language barriers and distractions with other matters. A few respondents also indicated difficulties with the concept of confession or the regularity of the practice. Some did not make use of the sacrament at all:

Yes, The format seems infantile and sometimes mechanical.

I do not use the Sacrament of Reconciliation very often. Once a year at Retreat.

Many times, I don't feel like going for confession, so [I] ignore it. Instead, I make my personal confession to God and ask for his forgiveness. I don't use the service. I tell God or my friends.

Personal Confession is not part of my spiritual life. Mass each day suffices.

Why go for a chat when not conscious of any serious sin?

Concerns in Spiritual Matters

The final question in this section of the survey asked respondents if they had any other personal concerns regarding spiritual matters. Around two-thirds of all respondents had no concerns, while the remaining one-third spoke of various issues.

Concerns regarding prayer and spirituality

Several respondents spoke of spiritual dryness, a lack of spiritual growth or feeling disconnected from and distant from God. Many hungered for a deeper connection and expressed a need to deepen their prayer life.

God seems far away at this time; a dark night of the soul, perhaps.

The workload and speed of life in pastoral ministry makes maintaining any sort of spiritual life and discipline extremely difficult. Spiritual life is almost a "don't ask, don't tell' area in conversation with other priests; it's hard to be encouraged and supported in this difficult area because we are supposed to be models of prayer.

Yes. [I'm] conscious of the serious contradiction of some of my behaviours to the life I'm called to live.

I don't know where I stand in my vocation anymore.

There were many concerns regarding a lack of time for prayer, regularity and consistency. For most, workload demands were the main reason, and a few permanent deacons struggled to balance work and family commitments. Other concerns included laziness, distractions, boredom, addictions, a lack of motivation and physical and mental health struggles.

I do not have a good habit of prayer, and it is often nudged out due to other commitments.

I am part of a monastic community where we spend about 4 hours a day doing the Divine Office. As a consequence, I don't get enough sleep. I am overworked, and so find it difficult to devote proper time and energy to personal spiritual activities. We also 'chant' the majority of the Divine Office, which I find destroys its value as prayer, and makes it a formal performance.

Lack of time, [I] need to have time for spiritual stuff at least once a month but cannot do it.

Living on one's own is not good for accountability. With the rise of the digital world, it is very hard to grow in virtue.

Due to my depression, I find it is hard to pray and celebrate sacraments.

As I get older and more tired, I have to re-calibrate the way I do things.

Pastoral difficulties

Several respondents indicated concerns such as a lack of support from the bishops or diocese or difficulties dealing with theological differences and pastoral matters concerning other clergy and/or people.

With state legislations requiring priests to break the seal of Confession when abuse is reported, I do not feel enough support and clarification has been offered when the only two options are to either break Canon law or civil law.

I find it difficult to trust the priests after all the scandals, corruption, and abuses in the Church.

I perceive things differently from the establishment. Thus, I know I must keep silent or otherwise be chastised.

Yes, dealing pastorally with people not able to keep the teachings of the Church for a variety of reasons and not wanting to cut them off from the Sacraments.

Spiritual abuse from fellow clergy who insist on imposing their, sometimes infantile, spirituality when there is a power imbalance in the relationship.

Yes. I don't quite understand the conservative movement among young people in the Church... why go back to a world they weren't born into?

I find it difficult to operate as a traditionally minded priest in a Novus Ordo world. It's hard to maintain my spirituality when everything I do is undermined by an inadequate liturgical expression (Novus Ordo Mass) and prayer-life (modern breviary vs traditional Latin Breviary).

Lack of spiritual formation

Several concerns related to a lack of opportunities for retreats and spiritual sharing and formation occasions. While for some, the availability of such opportunities was the important factor, for others, current offerings did not meet their personal needs.

There is no real priority at all given to sharing spirituality or spiritually based pastoral vision in the presbyterate of the diocese. Clergy gatherings feel deeply spirit-lacking and vision-lacking.

Going on retreat has its difficulties in retirement - access to a suitable place and person.

There are too few priests who really understand the spiritual life, how to really connect with God, and can give really good advice … I've been to a number of priest-led retreats or days of recollection and it's rare to hear a talk that really move me.

Finding people who I can have a spiritual connection or a conversation at a level of satisfaction and enrichment for both engaged.

5: MENTAL HEALTH

Positive and Negative Feelings

In the first set of survey questions about Mental Health, respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which they had felt a certain way over the previous 30 days.

In general, Australian clergy tended to be hopeful and joyful. As shown in Figure 24, seven in ten (71%) respondents were hopeful 'a lot of' or 'all of the time', while 23 per cent indicated that they felt hopeful 'some of the time'. Some six per cent indicated that they felt hopeful either 'none' or only 'a little of the time'. Six in ten (61%) respondents indicated that they felt joyful 'a lot of' or 'all of the time', while a third indicated that they felt joyful 'some of the time'. Some seven per cent indicated that they felt joyful either 'none' or only 'a little of the time'.

Having negative feelings are a part of normal life and feelings of anxiety and anger can elicit positive outcomes such as increased alertness, preparedness to face a challenge or motivation to take action. These feelings only become disorders when they will not go away, or if they prevent one from functioning at home or work.[120]

The most common negative feeling indicated by respondents was anxiety. While just under half (47%) of the respondents said they did not feel anxious at all or felt anxious only 'a little of the time', four in ten (41%) had felt that way 'some of the time' in the previous 30 days. Another 11 per cent indicated that they had felt anxious 'a lot of the time' and almost one per cent had felt that way 'all of the time' during the previous 30 days. For context, the results from a longitudinal national study on men's health, conducted by the Australian Institute of Family Studies, found eight per cent of men aged 18 and over had suffered from an anxiety disorder over the previous 12-month period.[121] The Australian Government's Department of Health and Aged Care notes anxiety disorders as the most common mental disorders, affecting 14 per cent of Australian men and women every year.[122]

Another common experience was that of feeling worn out or exhausted. Some 16 per cent of respondents felt worn out or exhausted 'a lot of' or 'all of the time', while one in four (24%) felt that way 'some of the time'. Close to six in ten (59%) felt worn out or exhausted only 'a little of the time' or not at all.

Feeling irritable can be normal, but if it persists, it may indicate a mental health condition such as depression or anxiety.[123] Some eight per cent of respondents felt irritable 'a lot of' or 'all of the time', while three in ten (29%) felt this way 'some of the time'. However, a majority of respondents (63%) felt irritable only 'a little of the time', if at all.

[120] "Anxiety Conditions," Department of Health and Aged Care, Australian Government, accessed July 22, 2024, https://www.healthdirect.gov.au/anxiety-related-disorders.

[121] Sonia Terhaag et al., *Mental Health of Australian Males: Depression, Suicidality and Loneliness* (Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2020), 5, https://aifs.gov.au/sites/default/files/2022-10/2020_ttm_insights_report_chapter_1.pdf.

[122] Department of Health and Aged Care, "Anxiety Conditions."

[123] "Irritability and Feeling on Edge," Department of Health and Aged Care, Australian Government, accessed July 22, 2024, https://www.healthdirect.gov.au/irritability-and-feeling-on-edge.

Figure 24: Respondents' feelings over the previous 30 days

	None of the time	A little of the time	Some of the time	A lot of the time	All of the time
Hopeful	1	5	23	57	15
Joyful	1	6	33	54	7
Anxious	9	38	41	11	1
Irritable	14	49	29	7	1
Deeply depressed	64	25	9	3	1
Worn out or exhausted	24	36	24	14	2
Worthless or insignificant	57	22	14	5	1
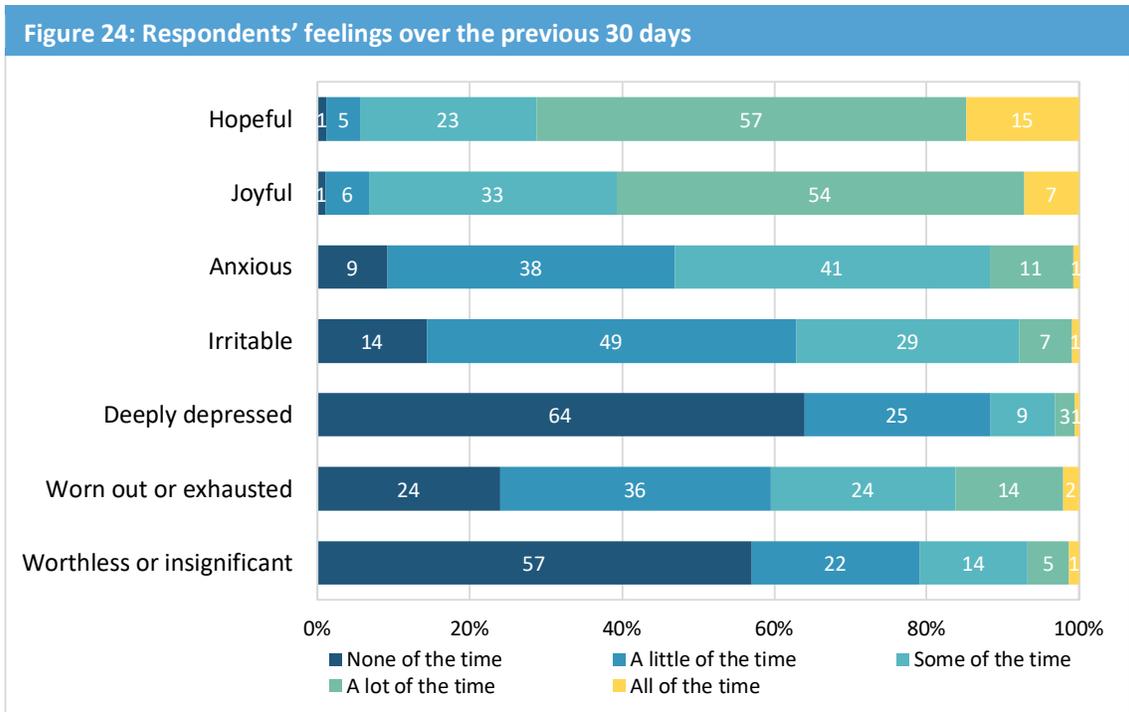
Positive feelings were fairly consistent across various demographic groups of clergy. The data did indicate, however, that clergy born in non-English-speaking countries, were more likely to indicate that they are hopeful (76%) and joyful (69%) 'a lot' or 'all of the time', compared to their counterparts born in Australia (68% and 54% respectively) and other English-speaking countries (66% and 56%). Religious priests were also more hopeful (82%) and joyful (69%) compared to their diocesan counterparts (67% and 57% respectively), indicating that they felt this way 'a lot' or 'all of the time'. In contrast, nine per cent of diocesan priests and three per cent of religious priests indicated that they felt joyful only 'a little' or none of the time.

In terms of negative feelings, however, there was less consistency between the different demographic groups of clergy. For example, the feeling of anxiety was greater for younger clergy compared with older clergy, with 17 per cent aged under 40 feeling anxious 'a lot' or 'all of the time', compared with around eight per cent of respondents aged 70 and over.

Australian-born religious priests (5%) and permanent deacons (9%) were least likely to feel anxious 'a lot' or 'all of the time', while local diocesan priests (15%) were the most likely to indicate that they felt this way 'a lot' or 'all of the time'.

Mental Health Struggles

Another survey question asked respondents about whether they had **struggled** with various experiences in the previous 12 months. Respondents were able to select more than one response from a list. Around 24 per cent of clergy did not respond at all to this question.

As shown in Figure 25, the most common experiences were:

- stress (65%)
- lack of sleep (49%)
- anxiety (44%)
- loneliness or isolation (43%)

Figure 25: Struggles over the previous 12 months
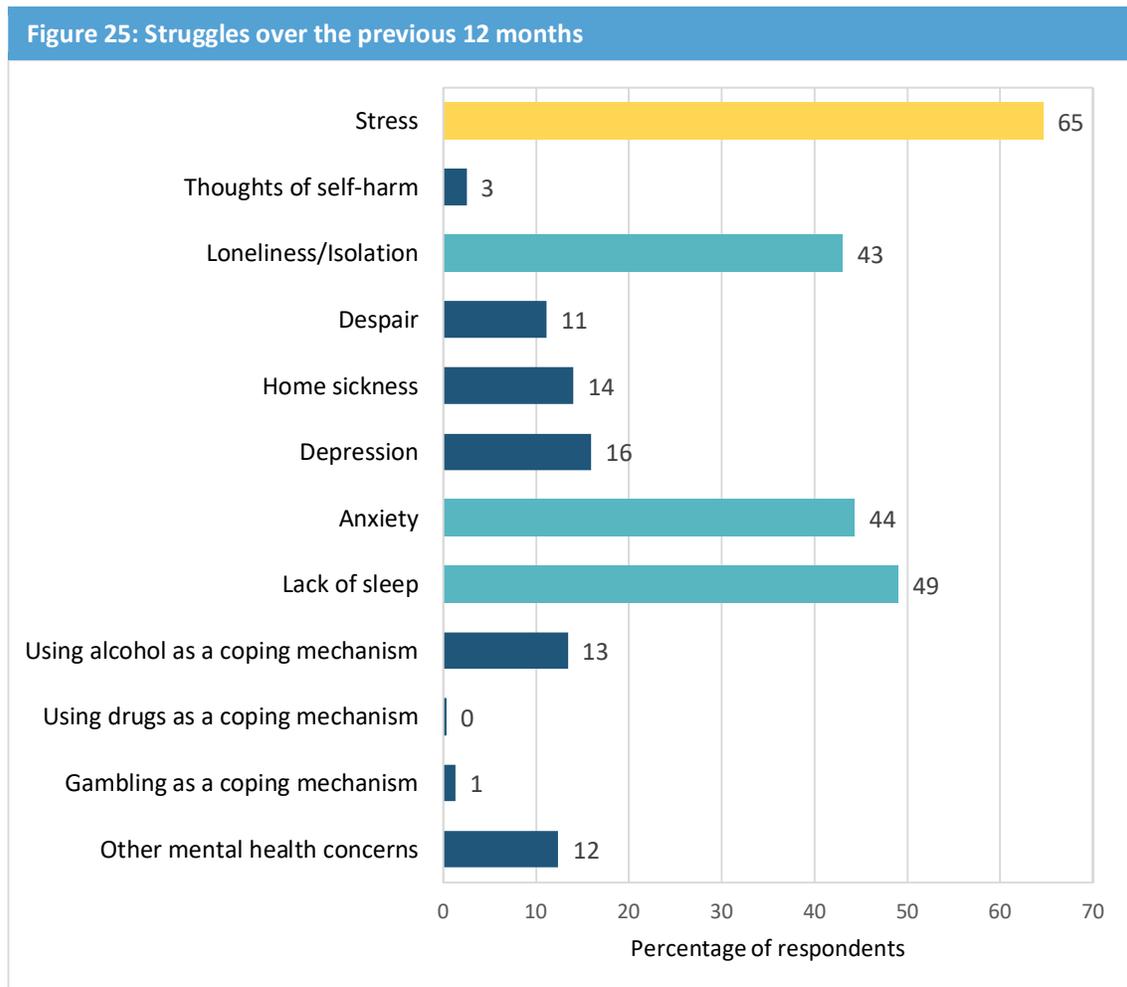
To frame these results in the context of the Australian male population, the Australian Institute of Family Studies' report on male health found that around four per cent of Australian men said they were lonely (i.e. had no close friend), and that men who were not lonely had significantly better mental health.[124] The Better Health Channel of the Victorian State Government reported that one in

---

[124] Terhaag et al., *Mental Health of Australian Males*, 2.

five men will experience anxiety at some point in their lives, and ongoing stress that is not dealt with appropriately can lead to issues with physical and mental health.[125] Further to that, Fisher et al. reported that young males who felt they had low levels of control experienced high levels of interpersonal stress, which led to increased physical anxiety symptoms such as headaches, loss of appetite or body tremors.[126]

Other Concerns

Survey respondents were also invited to list other areas of mental health concerns. Although 12 per cent noted other mental health concerns, just under seven per cent of respondents provided additional comments to this question.

While this question asked about mental health, the most common response was related to physical health, such as physical illnesses or fitness, ageing, mental decline and general ailments.

There were additionally a few respondents who noted struggles with addictions of various kinds, including pornography, overeating or internet overuse.

Another concern related to burnout and stress, which, for some, were part of ministry:

I have celebrated 57 funerals in six months, and that takes a toll.

The point is that I have learned to live with stress and to grow strong.

A few respondents also expressed their disappointment, anger, resentment or frustration with other people, the Church or themselves. Some examples of these included:

Anger and resentment of Catholic Church and leadership over the years.

I get frustrated when I can't get my way on certain things and when I am reasonably certain I am right (that's life!). Those negative thoughts can sometimes build up, but thankfully I usually get over it after a couple of days or so. I do extra-parish activities (sport, Toastmasters) to clear my head, and it helps.

On occasion, I have struggled with the misunderstanding regarding the role of the permanent Diaconate. At times I have felt it was undervalued by my brother priests and some diocesan administrators.

---

[125] "Anxiety and Depression in Men," Department of Health, Victoria State Government, accessed January 15, 2025, https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/health/conditionsandtreatments/anxiety-and-depression-in-men#bhc-content; "Stress Busters," Department of Health, Victoria State Government, accessed January 15, 2025, https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/health/healthyliving/Stress-busters.

[126] Krista Fisher et al., "Men's Anxiety: A Systematic Review," *Journal of Affective Disorders* 295 (2021), 698, https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jad.2021.08.136.

Pastoral Supervision

Respondents were then asked four questions related to pastoral supervision, which inquired about the extent, type, payment and perceived benefits.

Figure 26: Extent of Pastoral Supervision (%)

- Currently have
- In past, not currently
- Never had

As shown in Figure 26, around half of all respondents (49%) indicated that they currently had a pastoral supervisor, while 22 per cent indicated that although they did not have one at the time of the survey, they had previously had a pastoral supervisor in the past. Twenty-nine per cent indicated that they had never had any form of pastoral supervision.

Figure 27: Type of Supervision (%)

- As an individual
- In a group
- Both
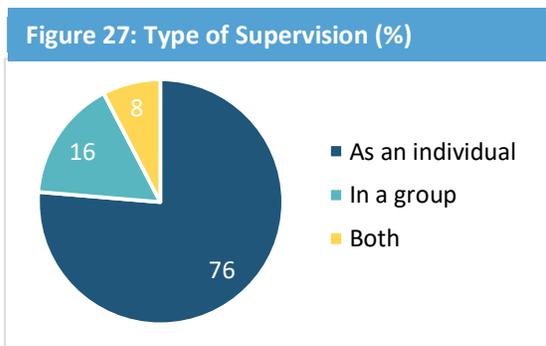
For those respondents who indicated that they currently had pastoral supervision, Figure 27 shows that just over three-quarters of them (76%) did so as an individual, while 16 per cent did so in a group setting and eight per cent did both.

Figure 28: Payment for Supervision (%)

- I pay
- Diocese/Religious community
- Shared
- Other arrangement
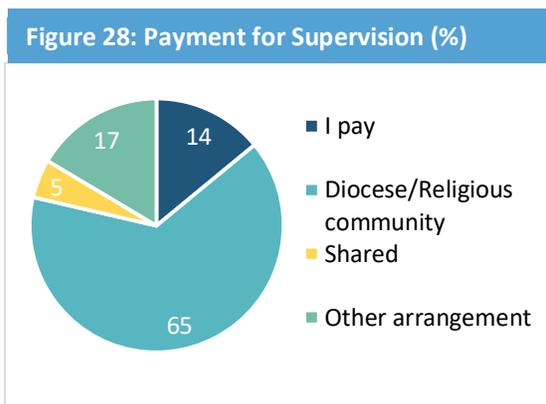
As shown in Figure 28, two-thirds (65%) of respondents who currently had a pastoral supervisor indicated that their diocese or religious community pays for their pastoral supervision, while 14 per cent paid for it themselves. Five per cent said the cost was a shared payment arrangement. Fourteen per cent of respondents indicated another arrangement was in place. Of those, many (42%) indicated their pastoral supervision was paid for by the parish. A similar proportion received their supervision free of charge, while 15 per cent indicated other arrangements, such as friends, benefactors, bulk-billing or payment in kind.

Figure 29: Is Pastoral Supervision Beneficial? (%)

- Yes
- No
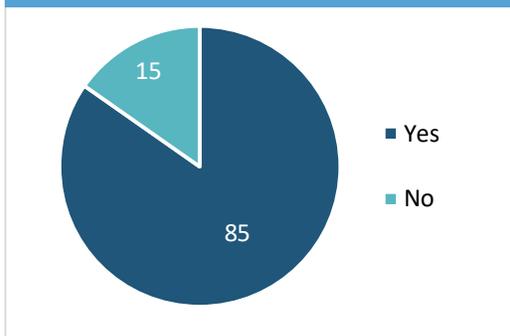
Figure 29 shows that the vast majority of those who had undertaken pastoral supervision indicated that they had found it generally beneficial to their ministry, while 15 per cent said they had not.

These findings are similar to those identified in a study carried out by Gubi et al. into Christian clergy in the UK. The study found that benefits of pastoral/reflective supervision for clergy included feeling supported, gaining insights into their personal processes, lessening isolation, affirmation of their ministry and a better sense of wellbeing.[127]

My Story

I just celebrated 30 years of being a priest this year … I was a late starter. So, I wasn't ordained until I was [in my 30s] …I was an assistant priest, then I was 12 years in the Navy, then I got appointed as a parish priest for the first time 13 and a half years ago. And 18 months ago, I moved, for the first time, as a parish priest.

My first four years were in [Parish Name] … Great community; lovely Italian food; loved all that. And the culture that goes with it. But the parish priest was Italian … He didn't interfere with me in any way, shape, or form, but that was a bit of a negative. I never got any feedback. "Did I do that right? Should I have done something differently?" He was just not capable …

We didn't do things like pray together and stuff like that, which I know other people did. He was also of the old school, that the parish priest had to do certain things. So, I didn't do certain things, which, by and large, didn't affect us too much, but there were just occasions where I would have liked to have done things. But all the Easter ceremonies, he always did them.

So, I wasn't getting any experience …. So, I suppose, what I'd say is that the first appointment is … incredibly important. You know, easy to live with and so on and so forth, but I didn't get much feedback about what I was doing or how I was going …

I think bishops and those people who decide where assistant priests go, that choice of where that brand new priest gets sent on his first appointment is incredibly important. And it's not just filling a spot over there where there's a vacancy. It could be very detrimental to have … not a good experience, in the first instance. So, I think that's something. And I think people are thinking more that way, but they didn't use to.

---

127 Gubi et al., "An Evaluation of Supervisees' Perceptions," 226.

A Profile of Catholic Clergy in Australia: Health and Wellbeing

Impacts of Cultural and Social Change

The first two questions in Section Four of the survey related to the impact of cultural and social changes in Australian society. The following factors that contributed to these changes were listed in the questionnaire:

- The decline in the numbers of clergy and religious congregations
- The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse
- Laws surrounding gender, same-sex marriage, euthanasia, abortion
- Debates on Religious Discrimination and Freedom of Religion

Respondents were asked whether or how the factors above had negatively impacted their morale, wellbeing, or sense of self-worth. Around 61 per cent of all respondents provided a comment to this question.

The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse

The most extensive set of responses received were related to impacts from the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse. These included personal negative impacts, a diminished value of priestly identity, false claims and unjust accusations, and an ever-increasing safeguarding workload.

Personal negative impacts

Reported personal impacts included increased stress and anxiety, feelings of shame, anger and hopelessness, low morale and a lack of confidence in ministry. Several clergy had colleagues who were charged, and some clergy had served as support persons for those accused, which contributed to the difficulties they faced. A few clergy were working in locations that had a history of sexual abuse. Some were survivors of sexual abuse themselves, which exacerbated the issue.

The sexual abuse crisis has given me the most sadness and challenges in my ministry.

I am ministering in a parish now where there have been many occurrences of sexual abuse, and this has had enormous impact on the people of God, and has affected me as well.

Dealing first-hand with offending priests and brothers leads to a certain despondency.

Royal Commission into sexual abuse sometimes makes me feel like I am a sexual deviant when I have actually been sexually abused as a teenager myself.

I find it hard to see myself as someone worthwhile in a society inimical to the vocation that I chose. Unlike from where I come from, ordained ministers are regarded as useful members of the society. Here in Australia, being a priest could just be a nuisance or a relic of the past. While safeguarding seminars are quite informative, it feels like most of the clergy are automatically seen as paedophiles and sexual predators. It is sad and, at times, affects my morale in doing my ministry. It somehow pushes me to do less. My level of enthusiasm goes down.

Diminished value of priestly identity

The impacts on the value of priestly identity and ministry mainly concerned severe reputational damage and a loss of authenticity and credibility in their work and mission. Several clergy spoke of anxiety and fear of being around children, women, and young people. Others spoke of the loss of trust and the perception of suspicion that surrounded them. All these appeared to have impacted the role and purpose of the priesthood, both within and outside the Church.

> [The] Royal Commission has demoralised priests and put the blame on us. We are anxious to be around young people for fear of being accused.

> The parish in which I minister has had instances of historical sexual abuse. It is an ongoing wound which features routinely in the local media. People are sometimes suspect of my presence within schools or the broader public.

> I knew all this before I entered the seminary. However, I probably underestimated the burden of constantly thinking society views you as weird or despicable.

> Royal Commission - All well-behaved clergy have become easy targets, the topic of ridicule, jokes, etc. You can see it in people's eyes when you tell new people you meet that you are a Catholic priest - sometimes, it doesn't even take words.

> With the recurring theme of the Children's Guardian on keeping the children safe, I find it unhealthy to perpetuate a system that makes everybody believe that every adult, especially clerics, is an abuser. I find that this is not really solving an issue but creating a new toxic culture of hostility between an adult-child relationship.

False claims and unjust accusations

Many clergy were concerned about being unjustly accused and the prevalent lack of support for false claims. A few clergy provided personal accounts of such situations.

> I am concerned about the injustice of the National Redress Scheme, expecting to receive an anonymous and false claim at any time. Little or no proof is required to receive compensation.

> An unfounded and unsubstantiated complaint of adult sexual abuse led me to hospitalisation for mental/emotional therapy.

> In [Year], I was accused of abusing a child during my early years. The investigation found the allegation false and cleared me of any wrongdoing. However, the person would not accept this as fact and set out, with the help of an advocate, to pursue and persecute me … This went on for ten years, during which I lost my public ministry, my [teaching role] at university, … I became depressed and suicidal. The bishop's eventual response was to retire me (not the current bishop). …The issue was investigated five times … with the finding being in my favour each time … I am presently emotionally and spiritually unwell …I fear what the future holds for me and find myself looking over my shoulder continuously.

> I was rang up by my superior, the provincial superior, and told there'd been an allegation against me. It was unproved. They had the wrong [Surname], and they had the wrong decade. The only thing that matched was the same school, … I rang and said it's a false alarm, but it didn't establish much faith in me in the system that was investigating … at that time, when the Royal Commission into abuse was on … I'm still an allegation as far as I know. So, that doesn't convince me very much of the authenticity of that Royal Commission. There were, I think, eighteen thousand allegations against Catholic priests. I'm one of them, and it's untrue.

Safeguarding workload

The increasing workload brought on by safeguarding policies and procedures had impacts that limited time and energy for many clergy, causing complexities for supply work and increasing demands for compliance.

> *Safeguarding responsibilities can be very time-consuming, especially preparing for an audit. But I understand the importance of doing this work.*

> *The feeling that the Church focuses more on structure and process rather than building healthy relationships. Decisions seem to be made at the centre with little understanding of the impact on the people they most affect. The amount of information that is produced requiring compliance and administration. This causes a sense of trying to triage what is important from what is urgent.*

> *As a retired priest doing many weekday and weekend supply work, one is frequently confronted by the local parishioners with their anxieties about all the above questions. The need to get permission to even concelebrate Mass every time for a funeral or supply or even on holidays, is a chore. The different demands in every diocese need to be harmonised.*

Other impacts

Finally, a few other comments about the negative impacts of Royal Commission included parishioners walking away from the Church, damage to the credibility of the Church in the wider society, a perceived lack of attention to current Church issues and some disagreement about the attitude of Church leaders – while some commented on "overreaction", others believed leaders had not fully appreciated the implications of the Royal Commission and bad practices still existed.

> *Yes. Especially the child abuse cover-up and also the legal antics the diocese has got involved in to try and stop cases. We have lost parishioners because of how the diocese has treated survivors. Many people question how the diocese is willing to argue to the highest courts while still looking after convicted clergy.*

> *The lack of appropriate cultural change in the Church in light of the Royal Commission is astonishing. All the same cultural issues remain - it's just that the issues are different... Clergy are not abusing children, but adult boundary violations and general bad behaviour from Clergy remains and is allowed to continue.*

> *The Royal Commission was needed but I do not agree with all that was concluded or the way the Catholic Church was singled out without attention to public and civil institutions where the problem also existed.*

Our Stories

Story 1

When I was a leader, ... I was in charge of [Country 1] and [Country 2], and then I also held international responsibilities for [Continent]. So, the homosexual abuse was a really ... coming to the fore and in my term as provincial ... I dealt with forty-six cases. I know that's a precise number, but that ... was an enormous challenge ... The lawyers at the time said, ... "Just sit there. Don't show any emotion". I remember very clearly and, of course, that's what we did and that's how we handled it ... facilitated meetings and meetings with lawyers and all that ... When I think back on that, how wrong that advice was, and I knew at the time. I needed to respond in other ways, but they were very adamant ... it really affected my work and my interactions with others and so, I had to debrief from that and get some help, which I did ... All those experiences as a leader have led me to be a better person now ... I would say that I'm a probably more compassionate leader ... show a lot more empathy now.

———————

Story 2

When I was first ordained, you could walk into a school playground, and little Johnny or Mary would fall over and you could pick them up and brush them down—well, now you can't do that unless there's another adult around. That freedom and the respect that we had, and that place of honour—in one sense it was honour, a humility, a humble honour, I would say—that's now been tarnished, and we have to operate within the legal systems that are in place, and we do, but it means that we are probably less ... Less of our personality comes forward because we are more concerned about making sure that we're not misinterpreted by things that we say or do. Keeping on guard, I suppose is one ... And there are people out there in the community and in the Church who are just waiting for you to fall as well, there's a sense of that at times, too. So, just being extra careful all the time.

Decline in the numbers of clergy and religious congregations

The impacts of the decline in clergy numbers were largely an increased workload and a lack of vocations. Many clergy faced an increased workload in their ministries that placed increasing demands to perform more tasks and duties. This led to more stress and anxiety and diminished their ability to get enough rest and adequate peer support and provide appropriate pastoral care.

The decline in clergy numbers creates a difficulty in terms of workload—more parishes are being cared for or overseen, and fewer clergy members are available for diocesan-level responsibility.

Declining numbers of clergy/religious often means facing expectations that things can run as they always have with less people, this leads to being spread thin over many things. There is a reduced number of younger clergy/peers for social and professional support.

[A] lack of younger clergy makes it hard to organise retirement from full-time parish ministry.

It is not easy organising a replacement for me whilst I am on holidays. So, this becomes quite a deterrent and hinders other types of trips away, such as visiting family.

The lack of new vocations, mainly from Australia, appeared to have impacted community life and hindered future planning for many congregations and dioceses. Several clergy expressed frustration about the lack of programs to sustain future ministry, while others were anxious about how clergy would cope in the coming years.

The decline in the number of local Australian-born Catholic priests is a continual source of disappointment and discouragement to me. Coupled with this is the lack of tangible, concrete, passionate, committed and visible efforts/programs/procedures/strategies to encourage/support/ nurture/nourish and call forth local Australian-born Catholic vocations to the Diocesan Priesthood!!! This requires immediate attention!!!

Being a member of a religious order, I can see that there is some attraction, but with the majority of religious orders dying out as well as housing old, disgruntled members, it is not conducive to promote vocations and, in many ways, almost scares young people away.

Other impacts in this area included difficulty coping with the changed cultural makeup of the presbyterate, concern for the lack of adequate formation provided to clergy in leadership and other specialised ministry roles, low morale and self-worth and other negative wellbeing effects.

At times 'importing clergy' is seen as a solution to declining numbers, which presents challenges of culture and integration in mission and ministry, especially when clergy are put into leadership roles with minimal time for becoming familiar with the Australian leadership culture.

The decline in numbers of clergy and religious congregations affects a sense of self-worth, as it can feel like the priest is not wanted or needed in Australian society (even though I know this is not the case).

One clergy member expressed hope for newer emerging models of church.

I think that it's the beginning of a new era in the church. Since the end of the Vatican II Council, we are now in the [era] of the laity. They are more educated and capable of forming a new church where they become more involved with married clergy men and women. Unfortunately, the bishops have not realised that yet and are slow to solve the problem. Religious Orders have completed their work, and it's now up to the laity to get involved in forming a new model of Church.

My Story

I am the [assistant priest] of [Parish Name]. I've been ordained a priest for a year and a half … so this is my first posting as a clergy …

In [Parish Name], the biggest parish in [Diocese], you never finish work. It could be eight o'clock at night and the emergency phone rings and you need to drive 30 to 40 minutes to go and give someone an anointing … And because you're at the end of the line … My analysis is that they [people] stop seeing you as a person, but more of an answer to their problems …

On any given week, I do between 60 and 70 hours a week of work … You take away one day for a day off, most of the time. That's 70 hours into six days. Which doesn't leave a lot of time for anything else. But I do get up around five o'clock every morning and go to the gym, and I do that five days a week. And then, when I can, I see family and do other things. But that's basically my life.

I know that [Diocese] has some opportunities for ongoing formation but it's unpractical for me. Because they're always in [city], which is potentially two hours. And the meeting … could be one and a half hours long. So, it's not just a trip down the road to engage in a one-and-a-half-hour meeting; this is a five to six-hour stint taken out of my day to go and engage in whatever it might be.

If you're brave enough—sometimes I am, sometimes I'm not—you talk about that with your supervisor and your spiritual director. But not all the time. Usually, what happens is you just get on with work and work provides you with the meaning that you're looking for …but at the same time, the more you work—the more you engage in your mission …. the less time you have for anything else. So, that can lead to great bouts of loneliness, sometimes.

I think a huge issue—and fear, I guess you could call it—is that we've had no managerial experience. We've had no managerial training. But in less than a year, I could be put in charge of a multi-million-dollar business and expected to hire and fire staff. Expected to look at spreadsheets, come up with a budget, make sure that we're earning money and not wasting away money and gaining parishioners. You know, all of these things, which I, of course, don't have to do myself. And there's plenty of help around. But at the end of the day, when it goes wrong, it's my fault …And there's been no—not little training; no training—on that … I could tell you what the catechism of the Catholic Church says, but I can't tell you how to run a multi-million-dollar business. Which is what is seen at the end of the day.

More support and training regarding the governance side of the Church [would help] … perhaps someone that's been a property manager in the diocese can be made aware of these things. More dialogue, I guess. Or coaching. The priest still can make the decision, but perhaps more coaching could be done in a more strategic way.

Laws surrounding gender, same-sex marriage, euthanasia, abortion

The main impact felt in this area was a concern that these laws "were increasingly hostile to the faith" and infringed on religious freedom, preventing clergy from "preaching the Good News" or saying anything openly on these matters for fear of being victimised and condemned. Many clergy expressed disappointment, confusion, sadness, anger, shock and helplessness, while others voiced disappointment at the Church's perceived lack of action in these areas.

The laws around gender and gender alteration are disturbing because of the pain and suffering it is causing young people. A feeling of powerlessness to change these laws. Similarly, a sense of powerlessness and impotence as a Church to change laws and form people well in the value and dignity of life.

Disappointment that euthanasia is now generally accepted and that most Catholic views on [controversial] bioethical issues have been rejected by the general community.

The cultural climate of Australia regarding gender diversity issues is getting to the point of being impossible. The multiplication of genders is totally ungrounded philosophically; impossible to implement in any rational way shape or form and because of the lacking philosophical grounding, effectively impossible to have a meaningful dialogue about the issues.

The rapid change in our culture around issues of gender and sexuality is a big challenge- it is hard to navigate this and you can be easily left feeling isolated while trying to hold onto Church teaching in these regards. To try and lead people through this sensitively- supporting families trying to raise their children in the faith, walking sensitively with those struggling to live up to the teaching, and living with the tension of interacting and working with many who outright reject the teaching (including within Catholic institutions like schools) is very difficult.

I believe we need more definite proclamation of the Church's teaching on the WOKE issues pervading our society and get our Church communities to move away from a growing tendency toward humanism and a reluctance to proclaim our values and the true value and dignity of the human person.

Some clergy desired the Church to have a different stance on certain issues:

I never felt so disappointed with this vocation and with the formal mainstream Church as I did around the same-sex plebiscite. Church leaders virtually let ordinary people believe that it was a plebiscite about same-sex relationships. It wasn't. It was a legal, civil issue about a category of identity for relationships and family structures that were already legal. This would have been an opportunity for the Church to garner great respect from the society by identifying the issues at hand, accurately, and encouraging conscience responses on a civil matter. Even if the Church formally held a different ultimate view, I believe such an approach would have enabled a true spirit of respectful dialogue, etc.

Church attitude rightly condemning abortion but forbidding the use of condoms. [The] poor response of the Australian Bishops to the Referendum when virtually no Aboriginals attend our churches. Social justice groups waffle ridiculous and irrelevant to making an informed decision. The Bishops' letter on assisted suicide [was] light at the end of a very long dark tunnel.

My Story

One of the challenges is about how we enculturate the gospel, how you do evangelisation in the multiple facets of life. So, it's quite difficult because it's not simply [about] one's ethnicity … How do you evangelise? How do you preach? How do you give your pastoral ministry to different people? … at the same time, the challenge is how do you become hospitable by not offending others?

I think the struggles from …when I [was] ordained … overseas, then came here— they're quite shocking for me, … yes, legal things are important. But again, … we emphasise so much about it, so we forget our [voice] as a Church. And that's a … problem that I see. The bishops are voiceless at the national level, at the federal level, so … I cannot see any teeth.

Regarding the stand on abortion, same sex [marriage] and the other moral issues. There is no common stance. There is no common pastoral … letter given to the faithful Catholics. So, …that's the thing that I miss. Because back home, the bishops would really speak up. The Catholic Bishops Conference in [Southeast Asian country] would have a unified letter as a pastoral guide to the people. I think that's what I see … lacking in the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference.

We know that we have Catholic doctrine, but sometimes people… in the pews, they do not really grasp the doctrine … We know in our hearts that … the moral issues are really an issue, but sometimes the bishops don't speak up. That's why for me, sometimes, I have [a] hesitancy to touch [upon] it in my homily, not to touch [upon] it in the congregation.

Debates on Religious Discrimination and Freedom of Religion

A small group of clergy commented on the impacts of Religious Discrimination and Freedom of Religion debates. The growing divide between Church and state and between clergy and the wider community was one of the typical impacts mentioned. This was primarily a negative experience for many in this group, as some perceived it to be blatant discrimination against the Church, while others saw it as a political tool to silence religious voices, spurring the loss of Christian foundations in society.

> *I am from a country where religion is always practised strongly, so when I came to Australia for the first time, this situation made me a little bit worried in terms of doing the ministry in this situation.*

> *I feel out of touch with the community -- that is, I have a largely unpleasant sense that the society in which I was ordained has become more hostile both to Christianity and the clergy.*

> *Yes, it seems that society is trying to reduce the influence of Christian (Catholic) teaching.*

Clergy voiced concerns about the impacts on the education provided in Catholic schools and the spread of false ideas about belief and religion in society, leading to a lack of trust in Church authorities and an "anti-religion" culture. A lack of clear guidance from Church leaders led to confusion for some.

> *Debates on Religious Discrimination and Freedom of Religion cause me [to] worry about the future for myself and the Church and Catholic schools and other Catholic institutions.*

> *Often, the failure of Church leadership to articulate clearly and argue convincingly for our faith-based views has been disheartening. The problem is not entirely that the majority of society is adopting different views to us, but also that the Church herself seems uncertain about what we believe. I feel like the institutional future of the Church is threatened by an anti-religious society and that puts me in an uncertain position.*

A few clergy saw these societal developments as an opportunity to further the Church's mission.

> *I am very conscious that we live in a very secular society - that makes our Mission very significant & challenging!! I relish general interaction in the community.*

> *I am constantly embarrassed that the Catholic Church so strongly identifies with right-wing evangelicals about this stuff! We need to appreciate SO much more that the way we engage with society and the way we are seen to engage and dialogue with society … is critical to the mission of evangelisation. The first step of evangelisation … is to be AMONG PEOPLE in their stories!*

General impacts

While many clergy identified impacts from particular issues, others provided information on general impacts from all four matters mentioned in the question. A second question in this section of the survey questionnaire also asked clergy to name additional impacts on which they wished to provide information. Since many of the responses to these two sections were similar, they have been combined and reported in the sections below.

1) **Feelings of sadness, fear, anger, discouragement and anxiety.**

Many clergy expressed negative feelings as a typical response to the four issues. Others named a few personal impacts.

I'm sad to see people don't understand and believe in the sacrament of marriage and the sacredness of family.

Feeling that my opinion is automatically diminished at a social level because of what I believe. And by association, the fear of being ridiculed or dismissed in public (in a secular environment) because of it.

The changes (all of the above) have caused confusion and upset in me and for many people because my beliefs/world have collapsed. I have to adapt to the new environment and re-learn to fit in with the new world.

The above issues have made me, a young clergyman, feel disheartened, depressed, and anxious at times.

I continue to be interested and concerned about all the above. Generally speaking, I find myself frustrated and largely disappointed by the hard line and unwillingness to listen, which is so often displayed by official Church statements.

Yes, dealing with false accusations of sexual abuse and the harm it does to your reputation and wellbeing.

One's self-worth as a Catholic ordained minister in front of the whole Australian society is challenging. I hope to see it as opportunity for me to grow and perhaps mature in such a challenging environment. Hopeful that in my limited time ministering in Australia will not go in vain. I may not witness fruits, but I'm glad I'm just doing my part, no matter how meagre it may seem.

2) **Difficulties in clergy identity and mission.**

Apart from the impacts in this area reported in the section above on the Royal Commission, many clergy reported difficulties in a common shared understanding of the priestly role and ministry, as generational, country of birth and theological differences caused priests to have diverse outlooks on faith, ministry and moral issues. Some examples of these differences were differing attitudes to pastoral ministry and the understanding of celibacy and gay relations. It was very apparent from the responses that different clergy sought diverse outcomes.

The inconsistency in the believed role and ministry of clergy with the insights, theology and understanding from Vatican II and Pope Francis is paralysing the growth of the Church.

Gap between older and younger priests in our diocese. We get along but have different outlooks and sometimes [are] theologically divergent.

At a personal level, I find the camp culture in my archdiocese a stumbling block; but not in terms of being threatened or repelled by different orientations, but rather the cognitive dissonance inherent in a generally homophobic institution attracting so many gay men. Thus, fear abounds as those in positions of leadership learn to pretend - "Don't mention the war," so to speak.

Even more concerning than the decline in numbers of clergy and religious congregations is what feels like a lack of effort or care on behalf of local parishes, dioceses and the ACBC to address the issue. It seems that more concentration is given to promoting the priest as "a man like any other" rather than highlighting the vocation of priesthood - one who is yes, equal in dignity with all others, but set apart as a servant of the Church and Her children. It is unclear for young men these days as to who the priest is.

The number of international priests and their very different approach to ministry is very disheartening. There seems among a lot of them such an emphasis on Mass and the sacraments that pastoral ministry is weak …. The younger clergy are a different breed. Some seem more intent on the "image" of being priest - black suit and collar, even at clergy BBQ - and the apparent hard line they take in their preaching. They do not seem to want to be in partnership with the laity. There is an alarming disrespect for Pope Francis among some young and international priests, which is a cause of great sadness.

Another challenge reported in this section related to being authentically formed for ministry and mission. Some requests were made for better formation (especially for overseas clergy), more resources on contemporary topics, better remuneration, attention to "elderly priests in danger of elder abuse", assurance of legal support for clergy when needed, and greater attention to transition support and succession planning for aging and sick priests.

A consumerist model of religion means less volunteers and an 'expectation of service' rather than a communal approach to shared mission and ministry.

I feel like a chess piece being moved around the board to fill spaces rather than listening to my desire to grow in a relationship with God and the community. I find that I often feel forgotten and on the margins of the life of the community that I am called to lead. I often feel swamped by information rather than being formed into Christ.

I am also very disappointed at the failure of the institutional Church to put the formation of missionary disciples first. We get involved and burnt out by so many activities which no longer bear any fruit. So much of the Church is satisfied with mediocrity and minimalism.

The reluctance to ordain married men as priests and women as deacons diminishes our leadership pool. I have no one to replace me.

   3) Difficulties in ministry and evangelisation.

Several clergy discussed impacts that made their ministry more challenging due to changes in society and the communities they ministered to, while others discussed difficulties in evangelisation. A few raised questions or had some thoughts on how ministry should continue in the new context, with some suggesting leniency while others advocating a firmer approach.

How do we evangelise in a post-Christian world - even the students in the Catholic High school where I work do not know Jesus. Am I equipped to do this?

Lay faithful coming to us confused because other clergy have said certain practices are "ok" even if not the teaching of the Church.

More of a sense of ... stress around homilies and speech interpreted as offensive.

People far too often see me as having to defend positions and resent a more 'enlightened' conversation. This is made difficult when other clergy find it easier to hide behind a safe 'clericalism'.

Yes. The manner in which I can engage with children of the parish. There is a clear message from the Archdiocese to not be in a position to touch another in any way. This makes it naturally very difficult to be present to people who may be mourning, suffering or in need of comfort.

The lack of clear 'high-resolution' practical procedures to practice 'transparent' ministry. The many scenarios where a priest might find themselves alone with another parishioner: someone knocking on the presbytery door for help, Parent wanting a school reference. Visiting a family and someone has to leave the room. A priest and secretary alone in the same building.

As a father of three adult children and with many friends with children, the challenges of dealing with the practical realities of LGBTQI+ persons as well as related moral questions, is much easier said than done. It does not affect my self-worth but does affect my concern for them and those around them, and also, how to relate and minister.

We should be standing firmly as a Church to defend Our faith in Christ and His teachings.

We could well do with demythologising some of our teachings…take modern learnings into our understanding of what the Church teaches, in dogma and scripture and be less strident on sexual matters, considering our own fallibility.

4) Lack of support from bishops.

Several clergy expressed strong views against their bishop's perceived lack of support. This, however, differed widely; some were concerned about a lack of response, while others were critical about the type of response provided.

I felt due to these above-mentioned even the leaders of the Church are afraid of doing their duty in a proper way. So they try to adjust or dilute the value of religious practices, and I personally feel that gives a negative impact on the community.

My bishop's indifferent attitude towards the Marriage Equality Bill and LGBT issues considerably angers me. It's difficult to respect my bishop when he doesn't defend or explain the Church's position and moral stance on homosexuality and related issues.

The responses of the bishops as a group don't seem prophetic, and at times, they push agendas, e.g. VAD. I was very disappointed in the final document.

I feel the bishops should be speaking more in defence of faithful clergy and being true Fathers. Many Priests have suffered due to a lack of being listened to by their Bishops, by them often being unapproachable and autocratic.

5) **Negative media portrayal.**

A few clergy commented on adverse media reporting of the Church, especially since the Royal Commission, noting that this diminished respect for clergy and added pressure to being a member of the Church.

People in parishes are good and understanding, but social and mainstream media are disruptive and divisive at worst and less than helpful at best.

The many problems [are] not only in the Church but in society's portrayal of the Church, e.g., Can the ABC go more than one day without attacking the Catholic Church but praising the gay and lesbian community as though the Catholic Church rejects such people without showing the love of Christ for all people? While these things can hurt, I also find strength and help in my faith through them and gratitude for the gift of faith.

6) **Positive impacts.**

A few clergy reported some positive impacts from these new developments, stating that they invited greater trust in God and provided encouragement for ministry. A few agreed with some recent changes, while others expressed hope for the future.

I have been happy to see the changes in law over same-sex marriage and some of the areas around gender.

If anything, they give a sense of purpose and motivation because they show the need for my ministry.

I am very impressed by the younger priests and so the decline in clergy is not so much a concern for me.

The Changing Face of Priesthood

Interview participants were invited to reflect on when they were first ordained and to describe any changes they had perceived to the identity and ministry of priests and deacons since then. They were also asked if and how these changes affected the perceptions of themselves and their ministry, as well as if they saw opportunities or challenges in these changes.

Numerous perspectives emerged in the responses to these questions, depending on the participants' age, ministry role, number of years spent in ministry, seminary formative experiences, and ministry experience. Some clergy did not see any significant changes to their identity and ministry at all, perceiving it to be much the same despite changes that had occurred in society. From those who did, a large number spoke about the greater presence and standing priests had in the community in earlier years. However, they described the mistrust, doubt and suspicions about priestly ministry that had crept in since then, particularly brought on by the impacts of the Royal Commission and the negative portrayal by media.

> *One of the politicians spoke to one of our Bishops, the local member, and he said, 'Your brand is damaged'. That's the biggest change from when I started.*

> *The identity of the priesthood no longer holds any power or influence in the secular community.*

> *When I was around, the priest was near the top with judges in status in the community. Now … they're second only to used car salesmen—very low status. And that's had a big impact on a lot of people.*

Some clergy viewed this as a positive change, noting that it facilitated a move away from a clerical mindset and the harsh, authoritarian attitudes that accompanied it and brought clergy closer to people.

> *There's a change in recognition of the role. You were on a pedestal, which perhaps wasn't good, because it separated you from the people. Now you're more amongst the people, which isn't a bad thing.*

> *The priest used to be this social community leader, but that wasn't a theological thing; it was purely social. They're the educated and connected person in this rural town, so of course, people consult them as such. That's now changing. We're finding experts, we're finding other services which provide what the Church used to ... It's a change of the social perception around priesthood, which I think could be quite healthy. I enjoy working with people as a peer more than as some kind of God figure.*

> *The Church becoming more aware of the needs of what the laity might like, not what the priests would like, what the hierarchy would like, all that change has taken place over the last 55, 60 years … And to have the whole clericalism turned upside down—sorry, an effort to turn it upside down— and to involve religious, lay people in administration, leadership and authority of the Church has been probably the most important part of the changes.*

From another perspective, some clergy described their roles as priests in earlier years as "for the people" and described their previous close and friendly relationships with families. They lamented the creep of more conservative attitudes since then, which caused priests to remain set apart from their community. Safeguarding policies were seen as the main reason for exacerbating this situation.

In my formation, we were always encouraged … you're called to relate to people and to be with the people and to be of the people and … you join a community, so you're part of the community. … You're not there [to] remain aloof … whereas, I think, with Diocesan guys, they tend to live on their own and they can establish these pedestals or whatever it might be.

We have now a highly suspicious priesthood. Priests will now often have nothing to do with kids or families. Or they'll see families and children as being potential threats.

I found that most of the younger priests—I'm generalising now—don't go into visiting homes. All the older priests did that. The personal contact is cut. Many priests double up in parishes, but I think if you want to, you can make it a point to announce you're available … Younger priests don't have that. They're official. They are priests of the Catholic Church. The collar or a red/black soutane. Without that, my identity's gone. Whereas the older priests don't bother about that so much. They wore secular clothes. They… were loving pastors.

Other changes commented on by clergy included an ageing, culturally diverse and diminishing presbyterate, changes to the busyness and structure of parish life, the greater reliance of technology in ministry, the loss of a close relationship with the bishop and the decline in Mass attendance and the involvement of lay people in parish ministries.

When I left Australia, congregations were largely still white, Anglo-European. When I left Australia in 1990s, different cultures were coming in, but when I came back in [the last few years], the change was enormous. You've got entire congregations in parish areas in eastern [Archdiocese], they're all ethnically based, with a smattering of Anglo-Europeans. That's the huge change.

I found a real change in that priesthood. It's been more of an emphasis on, in my opinion … a clerical type of priesthood. And that's more competitive, more ambitious among some. And … the close relationship with the bishop isn't there. I don't see that so much now. And I find there's sort of like different levels, layers of priests. So, I don't find that the camaraderie is there as much now as it used to be.

I do think we've gone backwards as a Church, with regards to the involvement of people in parishes and in ministries. It has gone back to the leadership wanting a priest in every parish, we've become very clericalised in that sense … And many priests would be frustrated with their own leadership and being able to bring forth lay people into leadership, because they can't—we've clericalised it. It's challenging.

The numbers have decreased. When I went to [Location], there were four parishes and anything from 11 to 13 priests. … If I was being ordained tomorrow, I don't know if I'd be in this diocese. It's in its death throes, but nobody wants to admit it.

A few priests on loan from overseas spoke of specific ministry changes, such as having a lesser workload than they did back home or slowly becoming part of the community over time.

No, in the [Asian country] [the workload] it's more—much more … Because of probably all the Catholic population … You have so many lay people who would volunteer for you. Here, there is almost, sometimes, no volunteers, so you do it by your own. But the load, the Masses, the sacraments, is not that much compared to my previous experience.

In the beginning, they appointed me administrator, and I was worried because I had no connections here. I had no idea about people, situations, cultures, or anything else. If I had a doubt, I had nobody to call. But slowly, I have developed good connections with the community and the entire congregation in the parish here … Now I feel like I'm completely a part of this community and feel very relaxed and comfortable.

One Australian priest, commenting on the experiences of overseas-born priests, recognised the challenges that differences in perspective had brought to ministry.

> When you meet some of our priests from overseas who are used to four Masses on a Sunday with 1000 people every Mass, and they're asked to say Mass for 25? Some of us would think, "Great! We've got 25." They particularly start to wonder, "What's all this about?" It's a big challenge.

In reflecting on their years of ministry, a few senior clergy spoke of greater "freedom" in later years of life as they felt genuinely part of a community and worked collaboratively with people in ministry, rather than telling them what to do.

> I think one of the big changes is that the priest now has to be much more courageous in working with teams, with other people, and acknowledging that he is simply part of a network of ministries in a parish, over which he probably has little to say, over most of them.

Newer priests largely reflected on their transition to pastoral ministry or commented on the cultural changes in the Church and wider society.

> I think it has changed, for sure. When you're in the seminary and working towards ordination, priesthood is in your head, and now you're living it. … It's become more real; it's no more just up here. I think now it affects you emotionally and even spiritually … I think what changed with ordination, with priesthood, for me, and slowly, more and more, the identity of you becoming a pastor …You're learning to be a pastor, and you're feeling it; you're carrying people's burdens and hopes and dreams with you.

Finally, deacons mentioned how perceptions of their role had changed over the years, from being "father's helper" to serving more intentionally in parishes, prisons, with police and in hospitals. Others commented on the firmer intentionality of newer candidates for the diaconate.

> That's been a big change. Deacons are employed for what the Vatican Council envisioned them to be: missionaries in the world. The deacon bridges the clergy and the laypeople, a foot in the Vatican and one in married life, that lived experience of life in the trenches as a member of society. That's the big shift, and it's a positive one.

> I think, with the diaconate, is that we're seeing less of them coming in who think, "I really wanna be the assistant priest," … they probably even in their earlier life thought they want to be a priest, [now] they can't be a priest, they'll be a deacon … We're seeing less of that; we're seeing more of guys who are seeing that there is a bigger horizon for my ministry than just parish in that kind of pastoral associate type role. That's been a shift that I've been seeing.

Challenges Faced by Clergy

The survey questionnaire invited respondents to submit comments on problems they struggled with and those with which other clergy struggled. A similar question was asked in the interviews. Based on the responses from both sources, there were eight main areas identified:

1. Strained relationships with the bishop and other clergy
2. Challenges in pastoral ministry
3. Experiences of loneliness, isolation, alienation and loss of identity
4. Heavy workload burdens
5. Physical and mental health concerns, including sexual problems
6. Uncertainty around retirement and future planning
7. Challenges in faith formation and evangelisation
8. Gaps in clergy training and mentoring.

1. Strained relationships with the bishop and other clergy

Several clergy expressed concerns about their relationship with their bishop and other clergy. This area received the most responses from those who answered this question. The bishops' apparent lack of leadership and pastoral care was a prominent theme, with numerous respondents expressing a lack of trust, personal connection, care, encouragement and support. Some spoke of elitist attitudes and clericalism among church leaders, the diocese's "corporatisation", a lack of adequate consultation with clergy on essential matters and a general disconnect with the reality of people's lives. Others commented on the mismanagement of human resources and the disregard of individual gifts and skills.

> *There is also the challenge of feeling little support or encouragement from above- from our bishops or even the Holy Father. Sometimes, it seems like the only messages we are receiving are reminders of everything we are doing wrong or are failing to do.*

> *Bishops who use vague motherhood language in place of vision. Ecclesial jargon that many of our people have no clue about. Clergy who are seen as parish/ministry 'one size fits all', disregarding our gifts and charisms or the context of the communities we minister in.*

> *Several of my peers struggle with the apparent lack of personal contact they have with their bishop.*

> *The bishops of Australia are too afraid to speak out against the evils besetting the Church, and as someone on the front line, it feels like there is no one backing me up. We feel sold out by the bishops who seem more interested in wining and dining and protecting their comfortable lifestyle than in teaching the Catholic Faith and instructing on the spiritual life.*

Another prevalent issue was the absence of opportunities for clergy to engage in social activities and establish connections. The absence of collegiality, fraternity, and support networks, as well as the presence of excessive individualism and cliques, were noted by numerous clergy. Others observed the absence of opportunities for open communication and discussion among diocesan clergy and within religious communities. The cultural shift in the presbyterate and the decrease in the number of clergy were identified as two factors that appeared to have exacerbated this issue. These negative

experiences appeared to have significantly impacted certain religious priests and permanent deacons, and other clergy who were born overseas, or lived in regional and rural areas.

> *I struggle to find group support as our [diocese] is quite culturally diverse among priests. There are so-called closed-off groups which just allow only like-minded fellows in. As a young priest, I still navigate the path ahead. I don't want to be a lone ranger in my mission and priestly ministry.*

> *On the whole, I find that clergy are not encouraged to share about their lives, their beliefs, the importance of a healthy view of sexuality, the impact of modern scientific thinking, and the fact that so many people are walking away from the Church.*

> *I feel a lot of ... issues are swept under the 'Oh, they're a different culture'. And we blame culture for all of those problems. But it's a lack of understanding of self and how to be in a relationship. How to talk and how to understand each other—How to be human and care for my brother. How does that happen and how do I understand that and how do they understand that. And mutually meeting somewhere so that we can both continue to walk down the path, with me being from Australia and somebody being from the Philippines, Vietnam, Nigeria, Poland. Whatever it is.*

The diversity of theological and ideological differences among the clergy was another divisive factor in unity, which further exacerbated the issue. Numerous comments were made regarding the "left vs. right" debate, the tensions or divisions surrounding Pope Francis and Vatican II, political divisions on contemporary issues, culture conflicts, and generational divides. Although some expressed apprehension that "conservatives" were incapable of adapting to change, others were concerned that the Church would be harmed by beliefs that were not strictly orthodox.

> *Divisions between factions in the Church, especially a growing traditional-progressive divide. This is apparent within parishes, within the presbyterate, in chancery offices, between young clergy and senior clergy, between bishops and their priests. There is a looming sense of animosity, and it isn't being addressed overtly. Rather, it is being swept under the rug. But this division can give rise to gossip, quarrelling, tribalism, demonisation, lack of fraternity and unity, political manipulations, etc. I think it is incumbent on bishops to work for the unity of heart and mind in their dioceses.*

Other factors that were named in the responses included instances of discrimination, bullying and racism and difficulties dealing with the slow response on matters of clergy misbehaviour and concerns about the way in which those simply accused of improper behaviour were treated.

> *Racism and discrimination are experienced by the overseas clergy. But many of the overseas clergy are afraid to speak about it because of the repercussions.*

> *Witnessing the lack of accountability that is expected of a priest by the episcopal office when the priest does something that is contrary to both Christian values and morality.*

> *I am concerned about the way some priests have been sidelined from ministry for a long time with a single dubious accusation of impropriety. I understand that accusations need to be dealt with and require temporary suspension from public ministry. The concern is that the reputation of some good priests has been destroyed or at least sullied (even after exoneration) by a single dubious accusation which they had no way of defending themselves against, not knowing who the accuser was or perhaps what were the circumstances.*

2. Challenges in pastoral ministry

Another common struggle for clergy was dealing with a variety of issues in pastoral ministry. The main challenges in this area were identified as cultural disparities between the priest and the parish

community or between multiple priests in a parish team. Adapting to the Australian cultural environment was particularly challenging for clergy who were born overseas. Australian-born clergy encountered challenges when they attempted to serve multicultural communities. Other obstacles included a perceived sense of favouritism, in which clergy of certain cultures were regarded differently than those of others, and ethnocentrism in certain ethnic clergy groups.

Overseas priests may face unique challenges such as cultural adaptation, language barriers, and adjusting to different pastoral expectations. Additionally, they might struggle with homesickness, navigating bureaucratic processes, and feeling isolated from their families and communities back home. These challenges can impact their wellbeing and effectiveness in their pastoral roles, highlighting the need for supportive networks and resources tailored to their specific needs.

As an Australian-born priest, I am often called on to take on work, sacramental celebrations, etc., that people don't take to their overseas-born priests. Language and cultural concerns have not really been addressed for both priests and parishioners.

Lack of support from the bishop. [Name of Asian group] favouring and neglecting other nationalities' clergy.

As reported earlier in this report, the decline in Mass attendance and parish participation was also a source of concern, with clergy struggling with the closure of parishes and a diminishing number of Catholics showing commitment and faithfulness.

One of my dominant problems that I struggle with is keeping the Parish operating whilst facing the real possibility of things collapsing around me. … with parishioner numbers rapidly declining and society's indifference towards Christ's promises of Eternal life, my parish will cease to exist in less than 10yrs. I can't build my parish up using the Traditional Latin Mass, which is drawing large numbers, because of 'Church politics' … Too much of my time is spent on 'maintenance', and not enough on 'mission'. I think other clergy would feel the same, as they too face similar challenges of 'keeping the lights on' whilst facing a downward spiral of regular Mass attendees.

Decreasing numbers of people means decreasing contributions. Financial stress is significant, and that's only going to increase. We're looking at renovating the church here. How do you find two to three million dollars to do a reasonably simple renovation that won't make the church that much better? That's just going to fix some flaws and stop it from being as awful as it is. Lack of faith, lack of engagement, lack of volunteers …The inability of the bishops and chancery to understand what's happening on the ground. Being able to actually practically support what could or should be happening is a huge challenge.

Difficult dealings with parishioners were also a challenge, with a few clergy commenting on the general lack of appreciation and charity while others discussed the conflicts that resulted from varying faith perspectives and unrealistic expectations.

The expectation that priests are sitting ducks for the "culture of complaint" in parishes, and the gabble of gossip. Also, parishioners thinking "This is their parish" so they are in charge and the priest is not assertive and caves in to the aggressive parishioner … that leaves a problem for subsequent priests.

Church people trying to change [the] doctrine of the faith. Pushing ideas which don't come from Jesus, Scripture and the Tradition.

I think in some ways the biggest challenge for the Church in Australia … Well, I must say for Australia, for our [diocese], is alleviating the division, that's the beginning to occur, and has been occurring for a few years between the more devotional Catholics and conservative, very

conservative Catholics and the sort of post Vatican Catholics … I think one of the biggest challenges is for a priest to be able to walk in both of those worlds without alienating, you know, the Conservatives or the Liberals and bringing them together. And I see great hope in the synodal process in the Church.

Several leadership and governance issues were named, including inadequate structures, a lack of financial resources and remuneration, clergy transparency and accountability, and negotiating the balance of pastoral work and administration. Some clergy struggled to maintain good relationships with their parish schools. Others expressed frustration regarding the lack of adequate support for their ministry.

Absence of a parish council. Lack of structure for people to communicate with priests/Deacons. Excessive focus on money for all church services, activities and sacraments. Priests/Deacons having an aggressive ownership of the parish with no accountability. Clergy living comforts being greater than that of average people of the country.

Lack of financial recognition that is in keeping with the financial realities of today, particularly for non-stipend deacons.

Good clergy struggle because they are active and are willing to work for their people and this takes its toll as there is more of a demand put on them because lazy clergy are not stepping up and doing their bit, they are more concerned with days off and holidays rather than being pastorally approachable and helping people. E.g., not celebrating a funeral because of it being their day off.

Relationships with schools is a major issue. The relationships are usually, at best, superficial with the priest and non-existent with the parish as a whole. Priests are effectively kept out of the school unless they contract us in as sacrament machines, and even then they're not interested in our contribution, for example, to plan Masses, even though we are the most competent to do this. I think most priests want to able to be involved with schools, but executives resent clergy and are fearful that our contribution will disrupt their own personal ideology or that they will be held account to actual Catholic values, faith or authority. Despite many priests desiring to be involved with the schools and who see it as an important part of their ministry and parish, there is no place for a priest in the Catholic School system.

Lack of support to be creative and imaginative in ministry: some sort of coaching for ministry. There needs to be a radical approach to priestly ministry in the country diocese, and it seems the leadership doesn't want any risk for radical changes. Leadership is happy for these country parishes to die a silent death rather than bringing life through noisy, risky changes.

I think really embracing the permanent deaconate and the gifts that each deacon can bring … there's a couple of roadblocks that I mentioned with some of my brother priests not embracing the deaconate, and what the deaconate as a gift can bring into Church life. The notion that, "I'm a priest, you're a deacon. I'm preaching today. That's a funeral that I will be present at." Just the cut and thrust and the role of, as parish life unfolds, I think that one of the great challenges is really embracing the deaconate and those deacons as a team. And more broadly, meeting, as a priest and as brother deacons, weekly.

Poor pastoral planning was another challenge, with several clergy discussing difficulties associated with appointments, particularly the absence of proper consultation and the tendency to focus on "gaps in the diocesan structure and how they will be filled" rather than gifts for ministry. Short-term appointments lacked the stability that a few clergy desired. Other challenges included greater parish amalgamations, a lack of clarity in pastoral plans, and a shortage of pastoral associates and workers.

Appointments are another major issue. There seems to be very little thoughtfulness or imagination. "Parish Priest" and "Assistant Priest" exhausts the majority of appointments. Often, priests are abandoned to the parish with little care, concern, or follow-up. I have seen time and time again the difficulties when bishops thoughtlessly mix religious and diocesan priests. Some parish priests treat their assisting clergy at best, neglectfully and with little recourse or care for how miserable it makes the lives of clergy.

The lack of a clear pastoral strategic plan for our dioceses that listens to people in a synodal way and which respects the contribution of women and other lay leaders who would be called into collaborative leadership with the ordained. Our diocese has now, for 30 years, not encouraged or prepared lay people for leadership and paid employment as pastoral leaders in parishes. Just as there is a lack of priests, there is a lack of pastoral associates and workers.

Some other challenges in pastoral ministry included being very cautious in working with children and young adults, and challenges in dealing with same-sex couples, especially those who sought blessings and/or sacraments, including marriage.

I think the challenges that we face as ministers of the gospel in secular Australia these days: gender, marriage and family …. There's incredible pressure, even from Catholics, for us to conform … I take seriously the teaching of the Church and yet there are people, including many Catholics, who they don't believe in the Church's teaching on marriage or family, … and they just expect us to conform. And I'm like, hang on, I'm a priest. My first loyalty is to the teaching of Christ and the Church. I don't agree with same-sex marriage, but then you get piled on, even by other priests who do believe that the Church's teaching should change. Like, so there's this incredible pressure.

The sacrament of reconciliation with the new mandatory reporting laws that invariably are present in many of the states that we have. Because as priests now, we actually have a—There's two diametrically opposed positions that both lead to the same outcome, which is removal from ministry. And this is a fraught pathway … So, with the law changes, I don't think there's been enough … I think it has needed more Church guidance to priests about how to navigate the difficulties of tiptoeing through all of that … I think there's a lot of priests that are vulnerable that have absolutely no idea.

3. Experiences of loneliness, isolation, alienation, loss of identity

This third area once again reiterated findings from elsewhere in the survey that revealed clergy struggling with issues of loneliness, isolation and a lack of belonging. Living alone, living in rural areas, retirement, divisions among clergy, and a lack of support from the diocese or religious community appeared to exacerbate the issues. Overseas-born and missionary clergy were particularly vulnerable. A few clergy expressed a desire for priesthood as well as a desire to be married.

The Clergy who have come from overseas will struggle to fit in with a sense of belonging. Despite Australia having relied on overseas Religious before, there are differences now as new community groups come to call Australia home.

I think isolation is a big one. Parishes are going to get bigger. People's social circles and families are getting smaller. There is a strong possibility that people will not notice when a priest is in trouble.

I feel loneliness and isolation is a factor for other clergy, where there is little or no support from the Diocesan leaders, including Bishops and VG's. Priests are appointed to a parish and then are left to manage on their own. It is challenging for them.

A loss of priestly identity was primarily attributed to the growing secularity in the wider community and confusion about the priestly role and ministry in an emerging Church, leading to hopelessness and low morale. Several deacons expressed feelings of low self-worth due to being treated as second-rate.

Occasionally I think, "What is this all about?" "Why are so few seeing the hope I see in a Creator who loves us all infinitely, intimately and absolutely. Just as we are."

I struggle sometimes with feeling that I simply don't belong / fit-in, especially after attending clergy days/gatherings, etc. When I said 'yes' to what I believe was God's call of me to priesthood, I was saying yes to something that seems to only be a very minor part of what I actually do. I didn't sign up to become a CEO, but that is what I feel like most days.

I am concerned about how often I encounter presbyters who seem to lack energy and enthusiasm for the mission. They seem a bit lost and despondent. Their preaching is unprepared and haphazard; they don't engage much with pastoral initiatives, enabling the gifts of the laity to emerge and grow. They seem to be in a very basic maintenance mode in their ministry. They lack signs of fire for the mission. At worse they stifle the laity and initiatives for evangelisation and mission. They give the impression of going through the motions but not really caring. I am concerned that they are resting in some state of ennui or despondency.

As a deacon, the lack of understanding of our vocation by some priests, bishops and lay people can be disheartening. The transitional diaconate also devalues the role of deacon, as it is only a last stop before 'real ordination' in the eyes of many.

Outside of migrant groups, most of our people at Mass are quite elderly now. And I often say that we're a palliative care church ..., I spend a lot of time in our schools and with the school communities, virtually none of them partake in the Sunday liturgies or an active part in the parish. And to deal with that and to see how our ministry has changed from a very sacramental ministry to more missionaries ... That change is, I think, quite massive. And I don't think many priests, we were generally not trained for that change. And I don't think our in-servicing seniors address that very well. We still pretty much do it the way we used to do. And I think, to be frank, I don't think our new seminarians are trained for that either.

4. Heavy workload burdens

Respondents also expressed concern regarding the heavy workload of pastoral and administrative work. Several clergy members disclosed their experiences with stress and exhaustion, and some expressed their apprehension regarding discussing the matter. The problem was further exacerbated by compliance and documentation expectations regarding work health and safety, and safeguarding. Other identified factors included diocesan "red tape", extra pastoral responsibilities, such as conjoined parishes, sacramental burden, constant exposure to demands, the 24-hour work culture, and inflexibilities in ageing and retirement that required priests to work despite personal vulnerabilities.

The sheer workload that comes from the episcopal office; follow up on work place health and safety, safeguarding, etc. and ministry. Top heavy bureaucracy with people trying to justify their positions asking for information adds more work to the parish.

The declining number of clergy has led to many of us having two or three parishes to care for. I am currently bearing the sacramental load that was once covered by five priests. I have tried to moderate the load, but when parishioners complain, I get the regional bishop, vicar general and archbishop telling me off. It is a no-win situation and it is not sustainable.

Unjust treatment and uninformed understanding of priest's health and pressures in a much more demanding and complex context in which we minister. A general lack of understanding of mental pressures and mental wellbeing by those who make the decisions. Retirement and different forms and expressions for ageing priests seen only in terms of the ageing process in terms of age and years rather than the person who is personally going through the process according to their own unique character and circumstances ... Change in ministry direction and retirement seen only in terms of 75 years needs to be more flexible and understanding of the priest involved. Reduction and refusal to financially and materially support the person is manipulation and a form of abuse, with its own outcomes and consequences, driven by the shortage of priests known to the institution for at least 60 years.

5. Physical and mental health concerns, including sexual problems

Several clergy discussed physical and mental health issues. Physical frailty, fatigue, disabilities, addictions to alcohol and smoking and a lack of self-care were among the identified challenges in physical and general health. Mental health issues included anxiety, depression, immaturity, as well as a lack of self-control.

People say well, you're a workaholic, because if I'm asked to do things my initial response is always yes. But how do you balance that? Because there's a danger if you don't give time to yourself ... It's living with the expectations of people ... sometimes it can be seven or eight funerals a week. That makes a demand on you, intellectually and emotionally. Because you don't reside at any of these things, you're responding to a community of people. Learning how to manage a realistic workload while taking care of your own health and wellbeing. That's a major challenge for us as clergy.

Mental health is an issue more are struggling with than they are willing to admit. It is seen as a weakness which brings shame.

I think mental health is a big one ... When I was a deacon and I first started out, I thought to myself, 'I can see why a lot of priests become alcoholics'. Because it's a heavy thing to do. It's a heavy task. And I think that's exacerbated by the fact that we're males, and males don't talk about their issues. A lot of—I think as men, we suffer silently until it goes away or something breaks. So that's ... an issue within the clergy, but I think it's a male issue, more generally speaking.

Several concerns regarding sexual issues were also highlighted. These included addiction to pornography, challenges with celibacy, confusion regarding sexual identity and difficulties in creating healthy boundaries in relationships with women.

Celibacy is the proverbial elephant in the room. To be frank, "prohibition" leads to black market behaviour, as men try to address loneliness, sexual frustration, and a loving for healthy intimacy.

[I] struggle with maintaining healthy and respectful relations/friendships with female friends.

The loss of intimacy with others- women, men and children as a result of the sexual abuse problem has been a terrible cross for all to bear. It deprives us all of emotional vitality.

Coming to terms with homosexuality as a priest and combining the two areas.

Pornography and living a solitary celibate life – though with help, I am coping!

My Story

I was formerly an Anglican priest, and my wife and I became Catholics. I am married. We have … children, … grandchildren, and I came to the priesthood in the Anglican church … [Wife's name] and I decided to become Catholics because I had read myself into the Catholic Church, essentially … and I have therefore been a Catholic priest for [nearly three decades] …

The challenges … because I was a very public person, you get persecuted, particularly by the mass media. They'll run any story against you that they can find and [they] did … So, I would say that is probably the most difficult thing … The second one is that as a small boy, I was about 13, I had polio … it was the last great polio epidemic of 1956. And I still have reemerging some problems with that. But the most important one was really psychological. 'Cos I … consciously buried the experience of that time and didn't really want to face it until I got into my 30s, … or maybe early 40s.

That's the major one, and that resurfaced again … when I was the subject of accusations of misbehaviour 40 years early or something like that. And so … that in the end forced me into retirement from active ministry and massive periods of depression, some suicidal ideation associated with that. But it was a terrific psychologist I was referred to here in [Diocese] … And … well, she saved my life …

And in that situation, you get no support from your bishop. You're abandoned at that point …. that's been, for me, a major surprise and shock. Bishops won't talk to you. That they're quite indifferent … If you try and get an appointment with the [Bishop] … you've probably got to wait six months, which is really not very, very good at all … If you need to see a bishop in the Anglican Church, you just pick up the telephone and make an appointment. Or if something terrible has happened, like when my father died, he appeared at my doorstep unbidden, because he'd heard … I think I always saw myself as being treated as a bit of an oddity in the Catholic Church … [Because I came across from the Anglican Church] and because I was married and had raised children …

I think priests need … they need the active support not only of each other but of groups of married layfolk where they can go and feel safe and be built up in terms of their who they are and of their priesthood. See families at work and so on. That's stopped. One time, priests would go and visit families, and they'd stay for dinner. It just doesn't really happen much anymore. I think that in that sense laypeople--the right kinds of laypeople---have every ability to help the priest be a priest. To help him have some sense of self-worth, confidence of who he is … I also think priests need to be told something more about the psychology of women Because … women are not men. They think differently. They respond differently. Complementarily, some ways the same, but other ways strikingly different, and I don't think they know that or they haven't been given a framework within which they can see how that works. Now, seeing a good married couple interact, teaches you.

6. **Uncertainty around retirement and future planning**

Several clergy members expressed their challenges in planning for retirement, with some expressing a desire to remain active and productive in ministry, albeit to a lesser extent. The need for adequate pastoral care for retired priests was emphasised, as was the need for additional assistance during the transition to retirement. A few individuals, particularly married clergy, discussed financial uncertainty in the future.

A disregard for priests who have served for many years and are landed with heavier workloads, diocesan demands, and centralised diocesan organisation, which become impersonal, disregard the priestly presence, his experience and generally not supportive. Also, in retirement or alternative lifestyles, the priest is often left to his own resources, especially in regard to finance.

Uncertainty as to my future when the time comes to move into supportive living.

I struggle with the reality of aging and the consequent change in role, which brings new challenges.

My group—that is, those that are 70 and over—their main concern is what's going to happen to them. And what does happen, unfortunately, is when they retire, they're ignored ....not just put on the shelf, but ignored in terms of all the work and all the understanding and all the experience they've had is just finished ...there's been a lot of talk about what things—what the individual priests need: supervision, spiritual direction, all those sorts of things. But being imposed rather than helping people understand that together … it's best to do it together.

7. **Challenges in faith formation and evangelisation**

Several clergy expressed challenges with the lack of faith formation and evangelisation. Some were concerned about liberal theologies and the contemporary manner in which teachings of the Church were being presented, while others struggled with the way young people were being formed in the faith. The lack of formation for vocation to the priesthood, poor levels of scriptural studies and the general lack of awareness about Church laws were also expressed.

I believe many clergy struggle with the place of religion in today's society. Some even think that today is worse than any other time in history. And they feel that their treasure is under threat. When will more leaders (along with Pope Francis) lead us in a Gospel based, grace-based vision of joy and freedom - of responding with witness and enthusiasm without thinking we carry the world on our shoulders.

We are sacramentalising children and people instead of evangelising them – which does no favours to the children and gives the wrong message to parents and children. When sacraments are celebrated without commitment to the New Covenant (the Sunday Mass), it teaches parents and children alike that faith practice and discipleship are not as important as their own agendas, sports, careers, etc. This makes me feel like we are trivialising the sacraments and not helping the people. You start to wonder what is the point?

8. **Gaps in clergy training and mentoring**

Respondents also expressed concern regarding the absence of mentoring and training for clergy, emphasising deficiencies in areas such as parish management training, cultural training for overseas-born priests, and ministry guidance at various stages of the priesthood.

Lack of practical mission and leadership training from the seminary. During my time of formal study in the seminary I did not even study one missiology unit. Our mission these days is to renew the

parish, make disciples, preach the Gospel etc. We are severely unprepared for this task. There are many groups, including Divine Renovation, Alpha Catholic, and Proclaim, who provide such practical training. Why are we not providing seminarians with more opportunity to grow as missionary leaders?

Foreign priests need better inculturation and professional support with language & pronunciation & cultural attitudes - and loneliness.

It concerns me that some of the newly ordained are not prepared for some of the knocks that a priest might experience.

Poor opportunities for ongoing education. No information on ageing, diet, exercise.

We had begun work with ACU to work out what were the best ways of helping a priest from overseas to come to Australia and to become involved in ministry. Well, that was just scrubbed at one of the Bishops conferences. And not long after that, the whole Council for Clergy Life and Ministry was scrubbed, without any thought of what's gonna come next to help people.

My Story

When I was ordained … I was number [x] in my little diocese. Of [those], I'd say only two didn't have a major breakdown at least once in their life as a priest … It blows my mind that this wasn't a major concern of the Bishop and his administration.

The blokes coming from overseas … They arrive on another planet with no money at all, no family, neighbours, friends, nothing. They're treated as though they've got all those things. It's dreadful, but nobody can say anything …

Looking back now, we know a lot of guys suffered immense depression. Many would've been bipolar. They're educated in seminary, and what they learn over seven years, 99% of people aren't interested in. They'll never have to use it or talk about it again. But all the skills and knowledge they need to know, they never get …

For me, AA was my salvation. I wouldn't have survived as a Catholic priest in the Catholic Church without AA. It was group therapy, it was wonderful. And totally humiliating, to be this important priest sitting down with, …. a bunch of heroin addicts, we're in our pyjamas, watching TV. That was the beginning of my growing up, and the beginning of the grace of my ordination clicking in. That was five years after I was ordained, I started to grow spiritual hairs on my spiritual chest …

The humanising of what you're on about in the priesthood can't be done just by a structure or culture that's based on one size fits all, cloning the clergy. Until the men are treated like men, not infantilised, which happens if they're not paid enough … Multiculturalism, education, training, intelligent formation by people who've been qualified and professionally formed, tried and tested, supervised by professionals. It needs an overall shakeup, but that begins with formation … Seminaries are useless, they give a lot of blokes the idea that they're qualified, but they haven't even started. The pathway to a priest is the pathway to becoming a good human being.

7: SUPPORT AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Support for Ministry

In the final survey question, respondents were asked how they could be better supported in their work or ministry. Around 68 respondents indicated they were adequately supported and did not require further assistance. The majority of respondents provided answers in eight key areas:

1. More personal interest or support from bishops or leaders
2. Stronger peer support
3. Increased administrative help
4. Improved leadership from the bishop
5. Enhanced formation and training
6. Greater spiritual support and supervision
7. Financial assistance
8. Better work-life balance

1.   More personal interest or support from bishops or leaders

Most clergy answering this question requested more personal interest or support from the bishop, diocese or congregation leader. Firstly, the requests included a greater understanding of the clergy's circumstances and a realistic appreciation of their challenges and stressors. Several clergy members requested a more personal and direct connection and communication from bishops and religious superiors, as well as greater dignity and respect, more appreciation for their work, the ability to be listened to when issues arose and to have sincere discussions. This was crucial for both permanent deacons and priests. Another area that required ongoing training was practical matters related to ministry.

> More direct contact from the [diocese] to check on the priest's welfare; so little of this occurs unless a serious situation is at hand; this is something I hear from other clergy & is also my experience.

> I would like to see the diocese actually invest in their clergy and ongoing development … There are often heavy burdens and expectations put on us, complaints about our preaching, for example, sacramental preparation, [and] business skills. And yet, they don't "put their money where their mouth is". I would like to see the clergy's ongoing formation model change in offering specified workshop courses in things like preaching, how to do marriage prep, dealing with grieving families for funerals, supporting families in crisis, etc., and not simply useless mandatory meetings once a month. There is more to ministry than safeguarding!

> I do feel diocesan admin can sit on the fence and ignore the elephant in the room. They don't want to deal with problems; will not name them and even delay dealing with them. This is a culture that must change. Particular Diocesan offices need to support clergy and at times, they do not do this.

> Better support for Permanent Deacons who have to work full time plus Ministry without the benefits of Priests.

> I'm not very good at organising or administration so I'm always going to struggle with that. Perhaps to be asked just some basic things about hopes and dreams, what sort of priestly ministry is my strength/gives me life/ want to pursue, and whether I want to live alone or in community, and what work stresses me out the most, and things like this.

Secondly, caring for clergy as they aged was a prominent topic. A few clergy members requested more concrete initiatives to support clergy, while others desired a ministry that was specifically designed for older males, which would include spiritual direction, mentoring, and teaching, as well as training and supervision. Retired priests requested greater appreciation and consideration of their experience and expertise. A few respondents also mentioned the need for better treatment of those who had been falsely accused of misconduct.

> *Bishops should get to know the value of retired priests. They are more than just 'Mass machines' at the weekend. Aged wisdom is a gift to be shared.*

> *False allegations against clergy must be acknowledged as being false, and the same concern for abuse victims must be extended to clergy who have been falsely accused so that they are recognised, too, as being victims.*

> *For complaints against priests in regard to their beliefs and teachings in sermons or practice by members of the faithful to be assessed properly and for a presumption of innocence or at least good intention presumed on behalf of the minister. Calumnious or malicious complaints should be responded to with a sense of justice and correction in mind so as to discourage further behaviour.*

Lastly, a few clergy members desired more extensive consultation on pastoral matters. Others mentioned the need for adequate parish consultation and handover when a priest transitioned to a new parish and candid discussions regarding succession planning. Additionally, it was necessary to communicate a shared vision at parish and diocesan levels clearly.

> *Greater consultation with incardinated clergy in the diocese regarding the work of the diocese, policies, etc., rather than a select group.*

> *Better succession plans/ in-depth and transparent conversations with superiors and parishioners.*

> *1. Have a proper handover when a priest goes to a new parish. 2. Any issues in that parish should be documented and given to the priest before he arrives. 3. An In-depth conversation with the priest going into the new parish about the situation in the parish. 4. Ask the priest what they would like to see happen at clergy meetings or convocations, rather than the vicar for welfare or clergy assume what support is needed and rely on a personal straw poll to decide what should be offered.*

2. Stronger peer support

Clergy also identified the need for stronger mutual support among themselves, emphasising the importance of peer relationships and solidarity in navigating the challenges of ministry. Respondents expressed a desire for increased social support, collaboration, networking, friendships, and more clergy gatherings and team-building events. The abolition of authoritarianism and clericalism was also emphasised.

> *Recognising the contribution of each and every one, taking proper and timely action from authorities, organising in-services, organising clergy gatherings, fun & entertainment.*

> *If bishops and clergy were more collaborative, more like Pope Francis, synodal and much less authoritative, seen to be working together, less divisive.*

> *I think that there could be more done by the hierarchy (not just the bishop alone) to help priests feel supported in the ministry in parishes. Perhaps this could be done by encouraging deans to visit priests in their area or phone them periodically, catch up for coffee, etc. or a team of older priests*

who assist the Vicar for Clergy in checking in on priests from time to time. Of course, episcopal visitation does occur and is so often a boost to the morale of priests in parishes.

Clergy who were born overseas requested that their Australian-born colleagues establish stronger connections with them and demonstrate more acceptance. A few requests were made for the Ministry to Priests office to provide more support and presence. Additional assistance in parishes was required to facilitate the effective collaboration of clergy. Newer priests desired additional mentoring and support from more experienced clergy. Several clergy members who operated independently in parishes expressed a desire for an assistant priest to provide pastoral support.

Talk to the people who understand my cultural background, easy to be accepted.

I'm a religious order priest helping out the diocese I'm in. I feel that the local priests are not aware of the importance of getting together either for deanery meetings or for social nights together with other clergy.

An intentional aim to establish good priest/bishop relationships and good communication during the first five years of priest's ministry, and [the] beginning of parish priest placement.

3.   Increased administrative help

Several clergy expressed an urgent need for additional parish support mechanisms, particularly qualified laity to assume some of the escalating administrative and pastoral responsibilities. Clergy observed that numerous dioceses lacked the necessary resources or infrastructure to train such individuals. The issue was further exacerbated by poorly organised amalgamated parishes, and a few requests were made for a more equitable and effective method of appointing priests to parishes.

Adequate staffing and personal resourcing as parishes amalgamate. Staffing and support both with respect to pastoral needs and financing needs to reflect the new reality of parishes and the shortage of clergy to manage them.

Several clergy members requested assistance in recruiting additional volunteers or pastoral associates to assist with office administration and share the workload within the parish. Other requests in these areas included the provision of housekeeping support, language support for multicultural parishes, improved IT systems, pastoral and administration workshops, professional advice for financial matters, ministry coaching, adequate remuneration, and the possibility of part-time work when there was not an abundance of pastoral work.

To be honest, we don't have the money for it, but if I had a personal assistant to take care of admin and emails, I would be much more effective, and it would liberate me for much more pastoral and sacramental service.

4.   Improved leadership from the bishop

Several clergy expressed a desire for their bishops to exercise more leadership. Bishops were frequently requested to remain faithful and proclaim the teachings of the Church, as well as to provide clear pastoral guidelines on critical issues.

I just want to be able to authentically live the Gospel (Truth & Love) without being undermined by others including priests. The Bishops need to set an example by ensuring their priests share a consistent belief and teaching of the Catholic faith.

Good priests would feel much more supported if their bishops preached the "hard sayings" of Our Lord more frequently and allowed their priests to preach the full truth of the Gospel also. Many priests feel that they will be punished or "cancelled" if they are too vocal about some of the teachings of the Church. Bishops can have a tendency to be political in their public discourse rather than focusing on God, the Church, prayer, the Sacraments, the salvation of souls, etc.

There were many examples of leadership issues that were addressed, including the necessity for increased collegiality and open communication about feelings and concerns without fear of reprisal, as well as accountability for individuals who exhibit abusive behaviours. Other examples included the implementation of firm decisions by bishops in liturgical and managerial matters, the establishment of clear guidelines and role descriptions for priests, improving induction procedures for individuals entering dioceses, and the appropriate management of parishes and clergy personnel.

Leadership that is relational would make a big difference to the experience of being clergy in the Church.

Clarity around expectations, KPIs and if my superiors are un/happy with my ministry.

A greater focus from the diocese in supporting the work/ministry of parishes and thus parish clergy, rather than an all but exclusive focus on schools, social welfare, and other diocesan level activities. I sometimes feel like the 'poor cousin' of pastoral ministry.

Less bureaucracy. Less unnecessary meetings. It seems diocesan structures get larger with more employees creating more work for priests to do in parishes. The concerns of priests need to be taken seriously in regards to pastoral issues regarding their parishes and they need to receive adequate support.

5. Enhanced formation and training

Respondents also expressed a desire for additional clergy training and education, including ongoing pastoral and theological formation, seminars or lectures on current topics, and skill-building. The needs expressed in this area included the provision of more opportunities for professional development, the provision of sponsorship for priests to attend courses, and the diversification of further education. Additionally, the need for clearer frameworks for the formation and exercise of diaconal ministry was identified.

To preach well, a priest needs to read a lot, but that is rather difficult when working full-time. I would love one-day seminars for priests especially on biblical exegesis - not overly academic, but great insights into the scriptures and their meaning for the faith.

Receive training or education opportunities to develop my skills and deepen my knowledge in my area of ministry.

Regular and updated theology and practice of how [the] Church is able to witness and preach the gospel in today's world.

A clear navigating of the Sacrament of Reconciliation and new laws that are in conflict with Canon Law.

I think it'd be good if they had something like the renewal course we had in Canberra in 1983. Where you're taken out of the parish for a month, you do a whole series of lectures on liturgy, sacraments, laws. You also had the chance to fraternise with 20 other priests from all over Australia. That centre closed down many years ago now, but I wish there was something like that. To give people the chance to be updated, renewed.

6. Greater spiritual support and supervision

The need for increased access to regular spiritual direction and supervision was discussed by numerous clergy. A few individuals who did not have access to a spiritual director expressed a desire for one. Some clergy members expressed a desire for additional retreats and spiritual days. Other requested supports included counselling support, access to group psychology, motivational workshops, and personal life coaching.

We have Ministry to priests [co-ordinators] but they are too stretched on other activities outside their portfolio. It highlights the need for strong pastoral supervision to avoid becoming automatons in our ministry.

I would be very happy to have a pastoral supervisor as I am young and from overseas.

More support in terms of finding a good spiritual director, something which seems to be rarely mentioned or promoted by bishops.

7. Financial assistance

Several clergy members expressed a need for financial assistance. Many deacons were prominent among these, as they struggled to balance their work and ministry responsibilities. Some aspired to work in full-time ministry. A requirement was identified for a "realistic and structured system" of reimbursement for permanent deacons that is consistent with the current economic climate. Other forms of support for deacons included reimbursement for travel expenses and allowances, such as a clothing allowance for vestments.

As a Deacon, I am only a 'volunteer' and I still need to have a full-time job to support my family. This means that time spent in Parish Pastoral and Sacramental work is seen as taking away from time that I need to spend at work or with my family. This conflict of how much time I can spend in ministry is a real issue for me, to the point that my work colleagues have noted that I need to work out where my priorities lie.

A few clergy members expressed the need for an increase in their stipends, with some observing that the absence of such a rise resulted in pilfering and the acquisition of funds through dishonest means. Others desired additional funding assistance for various reasons, including professional development and wellbeing, pastoral resources, seminars and conferences, and occasional vacations. It was evident that certain clergy encountered numerous difficulties in this area.

There should be a re-examination of renumeration for clergy to make it at par with the rising cost of living here in Australia.

Personally, I'm well paid, but most clergy are under-paid, which is why they become dishonest with collections, finding 'creative' ways to supplement their miserable base stipend.

As a non-stipendiary priest doing secular work, it would be nice if the Church would provide some financial supplement for our ministry just to assist with our travel and maintenance expenses. We are not asking for a salary or any financial remuneration, but just a small token every quarter would suffice.

Start with us not having to live below the poverty line and have enough money to have a decent holiday when we can get it / if lucky to have a supply priest for it. A stipend that is one of the lowest in the country and other claims like medical and food provisions are tightly controlled. Some assistant priests have access to the provisions fund for restaurant expenses, and some don't. Some clergy are remunerated according to the scheme, and others aren't. Some are limited on how much they can spend on a car, and some aren't, and even changing over the car isn't as easy as it once was.

8. Better work-life balance

Several clergy members indicated a desire for a more harmonious work-life balance and additional time for rest and relaxation activities in the final area of support. Two of the essential supports desired were the ability to take sufficient time off when necessary and the need to establish boundaries in work and ministry.

Less responsibilities from the diocese (meetings, trainings, work) and more support to be able to set boundaries with pressures on our time from parishioners and others.

More time to be with friends and be away from pastoral necessities.

Pastoral Staff in the Parish Office have unreal expectations of my role. I could be better supported in my ministry rather than me supporting them in their administration. There needs to be a better lifestyle/work/ministry balance.

My Story

At just 15, I entered the seminary in [South Asian country]—a place meant for prayer, formation, and hope. Instead, it was shaped by conflict and fear. We lived in a war-torn environment, caught between military and ethnic violence. I witnessed the loss of seven priests. I was nearly one of them. When the Bishop finally gave me permission to leave, I became a missionary — and that is how I arrived in Australia.

But arriving here was not the end of my challenges. It was the beginning of new ones—quieter, hidden, but just as painful.

The cultural difference was profound. In [my country], we do not use words like "please" and "sorry" as casually or frequently as here. Our communication is shaped by respect shown through action, not just words. Learning the culture here—especially how to behave socially, to communicate "appropriately"—took time and a lot of internal adjustment. I was pruned—reshaped by the experience.

In [my country], priesthood is a ministry—a calling of the soul. Here, I see it often treated like a job. People speak of "losing their position" as if they were laid off. But we are not employees; we are servants of God. Our priesthood is not fulfilled by just saying Mass. It is about walking with the people, especially the broken and the lost.

Sometimes, I deeply regret coming here. The environment is stifling. There is no freedom to speak openly to bishops or superiors …There is no structure to support priests in need. Unlike nurses who have their Nursing Federation, we priests have no one to advocate for us, no platform to raise our concerns. There is no allied group to speak on behalf of clergy, especially those who are migrants or from minority backgrounds … We need someone to hear us.

In this country, as I have experienced, if a priest makes a mistake—even once—he is cast aside. There is no pathway back, no pastoral care, no guidance toward restoration. Silence and exclusion become the norm. It is as if forgiveness no longer exists within the very structure that is supposed to embody it …There is no effort to correct, to heal, or to reconcile. Yet our Church is supposed to be about mercy, not condemnation.

We are treated as if this is merely a job—and yet, none of the proper support, benefits, or workplace protections of a regular job are given. If we are workers, then where is the care that a worker deserves?

Bishops today do not want to talk. But that should not be our priesthood. The more you are in leadership, the humbler you should become—not less. If one among a hundred sheep is lost, we are called to go after that one. That is our mission. That is our faith. That is the Gospel. But I do not see that Gospel here.

Advice for Future Priests and Deacons

In the final stage of the interview, participants were asked to provide suggestions for people considering the diaconate or priesthood. Many clergy members were supportive and encouraging, urging candidates to "Give it a shot," "Embrace it!" or "Explore it!" They described their joy in the vocation but advised them to understand the "reality" of the vocation and be aware of what they were getting into.

I've said to young people, 'You'd make a good priest' because I think that's just what they need to hear in order to start their journey. But if a young person was serious, I would tell them, 'Join the seminary'. And then the seminary system should provide them a space to be able to sift out what that call is. That's seven years of discernment. So, I would tell them to do it without hesitation.

it's an incredibly rewarding vocation. I've really enjoyed finally taking the plunge and heading off in this direction. But I think I'm a lot wiser now about the pitfalls and challenges than when I first went in. … they've gotta go in with their eyes wide open …. You've gotta know some of the challenges of not getting married, not having children, those sort of things, which … I don't think I really got until I was already a priest.

I just say to people, 'You don't have to be the brightest, you just have to be who you are'. And then that person becomes a priest with all the formation, the training … You don't have to be 'holy', whatever 'holy' is in peoples' minds and understanding. You have to be … a good person who is you. And understand that and enjoy that. And the seminary process and the journey have helped me articulate that. And that's a blessing and a gift.

And I would probably advise to really ask, … how it's experienced from our end, from our perspective, rather than from how you've formed your idea of church or congregation from where you've heard it, you know? From the media, from your generation, or from what's available out there. But to form your ideas of what that is from the end of where the Church stands, or where the congregation stands, or from …. what our stories are.

Others advocated a more cautious approach, encouraging candidates to take more time to "search their heart," "think carefully," and "live a bit of life first" before making decisions unless they were certain what they wanted to accomplish. Several invited them to ask the fundamental question, "Why?" Why do you want to become a priest? They reminded them of the importance of carefully discerning where or what the Holy Spirit was calling them to, and they encouraged them to develop their prayer life and seek the guidance of a spiritual director to help discern their future directions.

Get in touch with that deep desire of your heart. Is it relationship and marriage, priesthood and servitude, and all that that embraces? We want them to really search their heart and know this is where I'm drawn.

If I was going to be walking with them … I'd be looking for them to articulate a call. Some sort of supernatural understanding that this is what God wants me to do. It doesn't have to be the saints and all those sorts of things; but I think there has to be something—and then you'd be looking for that deep relationship with Jesus, that personal relationship.

I would say if you've got a sense of call— And it might be a slow-moving thing. Mine, as I say—Let's see, I've felt I had some sort of a call to religious life from my—at least from my early high school years. But I only joined the Jesuits [in my thirties]. So, I don't think those sorts of calls can be denied. But they do need to be properly explored and worked through.

Several clergy, particularly deacons, recommended that candidates participate in local activities and seek mentoring and support. Married men considering the diaconate needed to ensure that their wives clearly understood what their future role entailed and how it could affect their lives.

First thing is to discern that you're called to the ministry of deacon and not the ministry of priest … and by the time you get to the end, a key bit of advice is, if you still think that, "Maybe I'm called to the ministry of priest," then you're not to be ordained … That's a key thing, because for deacons, the ministry is not that of assistant priest ... but what diaconate is … [its] ordained ministry bigger than parish, parochial ministry and oriented only toward the altar—even though our ministry must begin and end at the altar, like everyone else's.

I'd give them my book to read, just to show them the different things I got involved in as a deacon. I'd invite them to talk to other deacons in ministry and see what's involved. The Americans put out a Deacon's Digest, and in the UK, there's a document called Pastoral Liturgy, which has a section for deacons as well. And also, I'd encourage them to take on a mentor.

I would think ... You need a support network. And the other side of that is, you need to be involved. Like, you need to come from a base of involvement and support. It's not—it isn't, '[Name] has got a mission and he's going to go and change the world'. That's actually not what it's about. You're actually part of something. And the more part of it you are, the more chance you've got of being effective, being faithful and all that stuff …

Others expressed concern for candidates, citing their experiences with the hardships that lay ahead of them. Some advised them to carefully assess the group or diocese they desired to join, and to look for a place where they might be supported in their vocation and ministry.

Generally, I think, I'd be worried a bit for them, the difficulties they'd face. I'd be very interested in their own maturity to be able to cope for a role that's in public turmoil. It would be a very demanding role. And it's always been a role that attracts inadequate people …. So, my reaction would be to encourage them to be involved wherever they are already. And to wish them well, I think.

Seriously consider religious life because I think there is support there. I think there's a different support. The support of one another, the fraternity, what we would call, or the community is really important because we can't do it alone … it is a great life if you keep your focus. The focus needs to be on helping people and do the best you can, and you can only do what you can, and so on.

Other General Comments

In the final question, respondents were asked if they had any other comments or suggestions for how things could be done differently in the future. Of those who answered, the need to prioritise clergy wellbeing was a primary concern, with many emphasising the need for a duty of care at many levels. With many priests working in difficult situations well beyond their retirement years, greater pastoral care of clergy was seen as a desperate need. A proposal was made for alternatives to full-time celibate clergy: for example, married priests and more pastoral workers to assist in ministry. Other recommendations included compulsory pastoral supervision, ongoing formation, spiritual direction and professional pastoral monitoring as well as a call for clergy organisations to play a greater role in this area.

> *Ongoing clergy care and ongoing formation are essential to modern ministry. With the risk of occupational burnout escalating due to low clergy numbers this must be addressed immediately.*

> *National Priests Council should do lot more to the welfare of the clergy and religious working in Australia.*

Leadership and governance issues were another area that received comments, with clergy noting weakness in organisational culture, and a lack of leadership competence, authenticity and transparency. Some recommendations included creative discernment for newer solutions and greater support and inclusion for all clergy—priests, deacons and religious alike. Also included were proposals for regular priestly ministry appraisals and opportunities to develop ministry based on these appraisals.

> *Religious are easily overlooked in dioceses as being add-ons to the dioceses rather than collaborators. Suggest better integration of key religious in decision making bodies.*

> *I think the same standards of code of conduct for professional organizations should be applied to leadership of the church and these standards should be adhered to.*

> *I would like to see a more regular process to help ensure a viable Permanent Diaconate in our regional diocese.*

Comments around divisions within the clergy and the need for greater solidarity and unity were also made. Support for younger priests, improving clergy connections and promoting a greater tolerance of diversity were some recommendations made.

> *The fact that you often cannot trust another priest to believe the same things, that you have to hunt around to find a parish you could trust to send someone to, given the way they celebrate Mass: all this undermines a sense of solidarity. It creates bitterness and destroys the unity that God wants in his church and definitely expects in his priests.*

> *There needs to be greater support and encouragement especially for young priests who are often criticised by some senior priests and bishops because they are different and viewed as problems to be solved. Young priests in particular need to be valued for the positive contribution they bring to the church and want to be part of the solution to restore the Church's credibility.*

Finally, clergy expressed deep gratitude for their ministry, despite the challenges, with many noting it to be an "honour" and privilege" and others viewing it as a "rewarding and meaningful" ministry.

I am a happy and contented priest who has been serving the Lord for [20+] years … and I will continue to be the same …. I enjoy my priestly life.

After many years of teaching and working in parishes and foreign missions, I am finally retired (almost) at [80+] – and not before time. I am looking for ways to continue to be actively and interestedly engaged – as a way of living out my religious commitment in the time left to me by providence.

I was given an opportunity to serve our Church, to live and proclaim the Gospel truth. It has, in large part been extremely rewarding, if at times challenging (and frustrating), but that has as much to do with my own interior conversion and letting go of my "false self" … I look forward to making the most of this next decade and more (God willing) to be called, blessed, broken and shared. Amen.

CONCLUSION

In contemporary Australian society, clergy face a complex and evolving set of challenges across both social and ecclesial dimensions. This study was initiated out of a deep concern for their wellbeing and a desire to offer them meaningful support. The national, large-scale, in-depth exploration of the health and wellbeing of Catholic clergy in Australia sought to answer four key questions:

1. What are the key issues affecting Catholic clergy in areas of physical wellbeing, mental health and spiritual health?
2. How have recent social and cultural changes in Australia affected Catholic clergy?
3. What are some other concerns with which Catholic clergy in Australia struggle?
4. How can the support available for clergy be improved?

In addressing these questions, the study uncovered valuable insights across seven key areas: general wellbeing, ministry, relationships, spiritual health, mental health, general concerns, and support and future directions. While the use of a self-selected sample may limit the generalisability of findings, it enabled rich, personal reflections from clergy who were motivated to share their experiences. These voices brought depth and authenticity that might not have been present in a more randomly selected sample.

Notably, the Phase One survey included a broad range of age groups, ensuring that the perspectives of clergy across different life stages and ministry experiences were represented. This diversity helped balance the lower representation of younger clergy in the interviews, contributing to a more inclusive and comprehensive understanding of clergy wellbeing. Meanwhile, Phase Two participants—primarily older clergy—provided valuable historical and experiential insights, particularly in understanding long-term patterns and shifts.

It is also essential to recognise that the results of this study may mask the extent of specific problems among clergy. A study such as this one has the potential for bias and underreporting, particularly in sensitive areas such as mental health. Some individuals may not self-identify issues without a clinical diagnosis. In other instances, in areas where the results are generally favourable, serious concerns raised by a smaller number of clergy must not be overlooked. Care must be taken not to trivialise these issues, as the overall trends may obscure the depth of struggle experienced by some.

The nature of this study elicited more problem-focused responses, reflecting both the reality of clergy experiences and the human tendency to highlight challenges over positives. Nonetheless, many participants expressed gratitude for their ministry and a profound sense of vocation, even in the face of adversity. While some positive aspects of ministry were noted, further exploration of these areas lies beyond the scope of this study and presents opportunities for future research.

This research underscores the urgent need for targeted pastoral strategies to support clergy in areas of wellbeing, mental health, and spiritual care. It is recommended that specialists be identified to provide clergy with practical coping mechanisms and ongoing support. Despite its limitations, this study stands as a hopeful and pioneering effort—one that opens the door to deeper understanding, continued dialogue, and meaningful action to nurture the wellbeing of those who serve the Church.

Reflection 1 – Bishop Greg Bennet

Reflection 2 – Ms Angela McCabe

Reflection 3 – Dr David Leary OFM

Reflection 4 – Ms Emma Grieve

Reflection 5 – Fr Paul Monkerud

Reflection 6 – Ms Kylie Cullen

Reflection 1: Bishop Greg Bennet

Bishop Greg Bennet is the Bishop of the Diocese of Sale. He also serves as the Vice President of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference.

I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you (2 Tim 1:6)

I welcome this significant and diligent research study undertaken by the National Centre for Pastoral Research, commissioned by the Bishops Commission for Evangelisation, Laity and Ministry in collaboration with the Australian Catholic Migrant and Refugee Office. The study, *Thriving (& Surviving) in Ministry*, has sought to deepen the understanding of the bishops of Australia about the health and wellbeing of the priests and deacons entrusted to our care. This valuable research opens a window into the lives of participants and offers insights more broadly into the experience of the clergy across this vast and beautiful country. *Thriving (& Surviving) in Ministry* is also a significant contribution to the Jubilee Year *Pilgrims of Hope* as it provides a welcome glimpse into the joys and challenges of the experience of our clergy.

In receiving this study, a platform is offered upon which the bishops, and those engaged in Clergy Life and Ministry and ministries to clergy, can develop strategies to actively support the wellbeing, care, and ongoing formation of clergy. The careful exploration of the current context of proclaiming the good news is welcomed. We have all been formed by the findings and recommendations to the Catholic Church from the *Royal Commission into Institutional Sexual Abuse of Minors*: Nothing is the same, nor should it be. This time calls forth a new responsibility for everyone, and the reflection of the research participants on the demands and the scrutiny they experience in this time of renewed safeguarding practice and compliance is explored. In this environment of public accountability, their feedback demonstrates how they continue to negotiate a new way of being, especially amongst their families and young people.

The report also highlights a need to listen more deeply to clergy and the heart questions that are raised by their experience. The survey data, enhanced by the interwoven stories, also identifies the gap some participants feel between them and their bishops. Perceived or real, this gap between bishops and their co-workers raises fundamental questions for our theological understanding of Holy Orders (*Presbyterorum Ordinis, 7*). It poses a challenge for bishops: how are we to be father and brother?

The summary findings of the 'Challenges Faced by Clergy' (pg. 105) provide a useful starting point for reflection. The necessity for ongoing formation in every diocese which truly attends to the human, spiritual, intellectual and pastoral maturity of priests—and deacons—(*Pastores Dabo Vobis, PDV 78.3)* is highlighted. In this, we are ever mindful that the true agent of ongoing formation is the priest or deacon himself (PDV *79*).

The study gives further impetus for bishops to ensure that the guidance of *Pastores Dabo Vobis* continues to inform us in our shared responsibility in the provision of ongoing formation opportunities. The study is a reminder that these opportunities must be informed by the experiences of clergy.

The data also notes some of the challenges that come with living a well-balanced and joyful ministry. The tension between governance and pastoral life is raised. The demands suggest clergy feel burdened by the task of administration and feel ill-equipped by their formation for the realities that they experience. Among the participants, there are those who were asked to undertake a variety of ministerial-governance tasks beyond their parish appointment, which draws upon their experience but also adds to the daily pressures of being present and available to their people. Are we being invited to imagine new initiatives between dioceses and religious congregations that equip clergy for pastoral church governance?

The study affirms the four key relationships that exist in the life of priests (and deacons). Pope Francis spoke of these as proximities: The intimate relationship with God; the ecclesial relationship with the bishop; the fraternal relationship with brother clergy – presbyterate; and the pastoral relationship with those we serve and among whom we share ministry. *Thriving (& Surviving) in Ministry* attests to the fine balance between these key relationships, each of which enrich the gift of ordination. The necessity to form, nurture and accompany clergy in embracing the various dimensions of each is highlighted.

The participants' commitment, dedication, and enthusiasm were evident as they reflected on their daily sacramental and pastoral ministry. They shared their deep spiritual and personal journey in following the call of God in Christ Jesus. Their profound witness is a reminder that ministry is a gift that needs to be nurtured to flourish. This study is a reminder that deep listening can be transformative and open new horizons – a synodal Church walking together.

I commend this study to my brother bishops, as we endeavour to respond to the needs of the clergy with whom we share the gift of ministry. May the fruits of this research be kindling as we fan into a flame the gifts of God and strengthen our sharing in the mission of ongoing formation.

+Greg Bennet

Diocese of Sale

Vice President ACBC

Reflection 2: Ms Angela McCabe

Ms Angela McCabe is a United Nations Certified Mental Health Professional and Principal Consultant and Clinician at Evidence Based Solutions. She is also a Consultant Psychologist for the Archdiocese of Canberra & Goulburn.

Thank you for the opportunity to reflect on the *Thriving (and Surviving) in Ministry* report. It is a valuable contribution to our understanding of the health and wellbeing of Australian Catholic priests and deacons, and the findings are consistent with international research.[128] As requested, the following reflection focuses on clergy formation and is based on my observations as a psychologist who has provided pastoral supervision and clinical care to members of this population.

Guided by the Church's teachings and traditions, the formation of Catholic clergy in Australia, as in other parts of the world, involves a structured process of human, spiritual, intellectual and pastoral development. In my view, psychological support and guidance may be considered a useful adjunct to each domain but are most useful around human formation. In this domain, behavioural sciences may be a useful resource to support the development of a priest's self-knowledge, personal character, emotional maturity and ability to relate effectively with others. Given the holistic nature of the human person, this support should not be provided as a stand-alone process but integrated with the other aspects of a priest's formation.

Perhaps the most valuable aspect of incorporating psychological support into clerical formation is the fostering of psychological growth over a lifetime. This could include input into the development of personal identity as a priest during different life stages, thereby allowing him to gain insights into his strengths and weaknesses, while fostering a mature intrinsic pro-social faith. Griffin in *Forming Fathers. Seminary Wisdom for Every Priest* provides practical and comprehensive guidance to support the formation of seminarians.[129]

Psychological input into clerical formation may have utility from discernment to retirement. This might include journeying with men discerning a call to the vocation to help them self-assess their motivation and readiness, and their psychological suitability as potential seminarians. Provision of psychoeducation and pastoral supervision for clergy can help with building skills to enhance the effectiveness of their ministry. Clinical care of clergy may aid wellbeing and resilience during periods of stress and help mitigate mental health issues when they arise. Specialised psychological assessments can help identify risk factors for moral disengagement and rule-breaking consistent with research into professional standards violations, with a view to preventing the grave harm caused by such violations.

Australian clergy inevitably encounter stresses inherent to their ministry, as well as those faced by the population generally. Stressors reported by clergy under my pastoral supervision or clinical care include loneliness, a high workload, feeling distrusted and less respected following the Royal Commission, feeling unsupported and/or unheard by Church authorities, and difficulties with personal or professional relationships.

---

[128] Stephen Rossetti, *Priesthood in a Time of Crisis: A New Study of the Psychological and Spiritual Health of Priests*. (Ave Maria Press, 2023); Miguel Ruiz-Prada et al., "Occupational Stress and Catholic Priests: A Scoping Review of the Literature". *Journal of Religion and Health,* 60, no.6 (2021): 3807–3870. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10943-021-01352-0.

[129] Carter Griffin, *Forming Fathers. Seminary Wisdom for Every Priest* (Parousia, 2022).

The findings by Dantis et al. and my observations are broadly consistent with risk factors for clergy stress articulated by Rossetti[130] and Ruiz-Prada et al.[131]

Reasons for presentations by clergy to this author for treatment are wide-ranging and include personal concerns and clinical conditions. These may include, but are not limited to, exposure to chronic or acute stress, or a medical or psychological condition. Consistent with Ruiz-Prada et al. (2021)[132], I have observed that personality traits such as perfectionism, conscientiousness and altruism may contribute to a priest's high level of occupational engagement and effectiveness but may also increase the risk of personal and occupational stress and burnout.

In addition to clinical services, I provide pastoral supervision for individuals and small groups. While clergy are often initially unsure of the purpose of supervision, once they are engaged, participants report that both formats are valuable. Individual sessions allow for more vulnerability and sharing of the emotional impact of their work, while the group setting offers opportunities for collegiality and for clergy from different age groups with varied degrees of experience to share and learn from each other. There is a strong interest in the intersection between theology, scripture, spirituality and psychology that might be considered a useful contribution to their formation.

In conclusion, it is important to note that the report, *Thriving (and Surviving) in Ministry,* indicates that the majority of Australian clergy value their vocation and ministry and maintain a strong relationship with God. While there are clearly identified risk factors that impact mental health and well-being, it is worth recognising that psychological care with, and input to, formation may be considered protective. As a group, priests are highly educated, and this author has found that most appreciate the nexus between theology and science in understanding the human condition and are willing to apply it to their personal, spiritual and professional growth to enhance their ministry. An investment in a priest's formation and overall wellbeing is an investment in the communities that they serve.

---

[130] Rossetti, *Priesthood in a Time of Crisis*.
[131] Ruiz-Prada et al, "Occupational Stress and Catholic Priests," 3807–70.

[132] Ruiz-Prada et al, "Occupational Stress and Catholic Priests," 3807–70.

Reflection 3: Dr David Leary OFM

Dr David Leary is a Franciscan brother who works as the provincial delegate for professional standards and safeguarding. He is a counsellor and pastoral supervisor for seminarians and priests in Australia and Southeast Asia. He leads retreats and facilitates religious Chapters and meetings for various religious institutes in Australia and elsewhere. He also teaches at the University of Divinity.

After the first session of the Synod on Synodality (4-29 October 2023), it was clear that the voice of priests was not present enough around the table. I imagine that it may well have been similar for our married deacons. And the Synod addressed this concern. While the Church is composed of many parts to form one body, the role and place of the priest and the deacon are central to our understanding of the Church. This report brings life to those voices and helps us consider, in a new way, the lives and ministries of our priests and deacons. I am grateful to the researchers and writers who synthesised the many and varied ideas and experiences gathered from the participants.

Seminarians were not interviewed as part of this study; however, we can gain insight into their formation needs by considering the voices in this critical study.

We know that central to initial and ongoing formation is a dual movement, where we bring the Gospel into the cultures of the world, while also witnessing "…the introduction of these cultures into the life of the Church."[133] We engage with the Gospel in our time, and the cultures of our day engage with the Gospel and move into the Church.

At the recent gathering of seminarians in Rome (June 24, 2025), for the Jubilee of Hope, Pope Leo presented a Meditation for seminarians and formators, which emphasised many points reflected in the voices in this study.

He noted that for seminarians to become ordained ministers who are a "bridge, not an obstacle for those who come to you in order to come to Christ", the formation of seminarians needs to focus on connecting them with the culture of today, with the varied and complex "signs of the times"[134] evident to us. He urged them to "listen with an open mind and heart to the voices rising up from our culture" for we must "learn to hear the often silent cry of the little ones, of the poor and the oppressed, and so many others, especially the young, who are searching for meaning in their life." The goal of formation is to help each seminarian "become a joyful man and a joyful priest," a bridge, not an obstacle.

How do we help our seminarians become joyful men, and perhaps, with grace and in time, joyful deacons and priests? The participants in this study make direct and indirect references to their joyfulness, highlighting the people and supports in their lives as crucial to finding and maintaining that joyful spirit. Life and ministry cannot be done outside the context of loving relationships. It is just as clear that where joy is missing, aspects of life may have lost a necessary dynamic balance.

---

[133] International Theological Commission, *Faith and inculturation*, Vatican website, 1988, sec. 11. https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_1988_fede-inculturazione_en.html#:~:text=The%20term%20inculturation%20includes%20the,the%20life%20of%20the%20Church.%22

[134] Second Vatican Council, "Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*," Gaudium et spes,* Vatican Website, December 7, 1965, sec. 4, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html.

We must understand that as idealistic as our seminarians may be, their reflections and discernment must grapple with the struggles that present in any priest's life, through loneliness, isolation, the burdens of work, the absence of support and the imbalances in daily life that arise when demands lead us to forget that we are humans who also need love and care.

The starting point for this discernment, and the focus of much of Pope Leo's meditation, was on reading the "movements of the heart", of learning to "know your heart" so that as a man committed to God and others, "you will be more genuine and not feel the need to hide behind masks." Taking this path, as we all must, can mean "descending to the depths of our heart", which he indicates, "can be intimidating, since we also have to confront our hurts, our wounds."

The many reflections from the priests and deacons give voice to these struggles, hurts and pain, but also to the unique ways they have found to enliven life and ministry. Ministry can become a burden; deacons and priests share creative ways to do more than just survive. People are at the core of those strategies. Family, long-standing friends, brother priests, pastoral teams, particular parishioners, prayer, holidays, exercise, and learning how to set limits. Real and deep struggles exist; vigilance for self-care is imperative. That must be a core message in seminary formation, which must be experiential.

We learn much about the formation of seminarians by learning from the wisdom of our ordained ministers, be they young, in the middle years of ministry, or in their years of active retirement. As we listen carefully to their joys and pains, they are making recommendations to us on what seminarians need. As one priest forcefully noted, "I don't think [the current style of formation] is fit for purpose in the modern world", as today's diocesan priesthood is "often about how you manage and handle solitary life." It is a salutary message I often hear from seminarians and young priests who seek to form themselves for the reality of ordained ministry in the Church and world of today.

Reflection 4: Ms Emma Grieve

Emma Grieve is a seasoned healthcare leader with over 20 years of nursing experience including a decade in strategic health management across clinical and community settings. Currently serving as Manager of Clergy Care & Wellbeing in the Adelaide Catholic Archdiocese, she is passionate about evidence based and compassionate care for clergy.

Clergy Wellbeing is a complicated and multifaceted concept, as outlined by this outstanding research, *Thriving (& Surviving) in Ministry*, that offers an honest portrait of the lives of Catholic clergy in Australia. It also reflects the experience of those of us who work alongside clergy as clergy care staff (nurses, doctors, and allied health professionals) in the dioceses of Australia. I read this report not only with great professional interest but with an overwhelming sense of responsibility. The voices of priests and deacons—expressing joy, fatigue, hope, frustration, and resilience—are a reminder that clergy wellbeing is not a niche concern for health professionals alone but a shared responsibility across the broader Church.

The complexity of clergy wellbeing is eloquently described in the detailed background section reviewing the international literature; I read this section often nodding my head in agreement, we know much of this information already through our work with clergy. The report clearly articulates that clergy wellbeing is truly holistic—encompassing physical, mental, spiritual, relational, and vocational dimensions–this reflects the reality we encounter in our work. The data on physical health was encouraging in parts—many clergy reported good self-confidence, healthy diets, and regular rest. Yet, the struggle with daily exercise and the prevalence of age-related health issues highlight the need for proactive health promotion, which is incredibly hard to do when most of our teams are staffed inadequately. The report's findings on healthcare access for overseas-born clergy, especially those without Medicare, are a call to action. No one serving the Church should feel they are a financial burden for seeking medical help.

Mental health emerged as a significant concern, which reflects our clinical experience; we know that many clergy have difficulty identifying the need for help, asking for help, and accessing help. While many clergy reported feeling hopeful and joyful, the prevalence of anxiety, exhaustion, and loneliness should not be ignored. The report's insights into burnout, especially among younger clergy, also resonate with what we see clinically. The emotional labour of ministry, often invisible, is real and cumulative. It is heartening to see the growing uptake of pastoral supervision, but more needs to be done to normalise mental health support and reduce stigma.

Spiritual wellbeing, unsurprisingly, remains central to clergy wellbeing. Many clergy struggle with spiritual dryness, lack of time for prayer, and limited access to spiritual direction. These are not just personal challenges—they are systemic. Clergy are often left to navigate their spiritual lives in isolation. The report's emphasis on the need for accessible, affordable, and culturally sensitive spiritual direction is vital. As health professionals, we recognise that supporting spiritual health is integral to holistic care, but more needs to be done structurally to support it.

The report's findings on strained relationships with bishops, lack of peer support, and cultural divides within the presbyterate are sobering. Healthy relationships are protective factors against burnout, depression, and loneliness. Yet many clergy feel disconnected or undervalued. We all must do better in fostering community, brotherhood, and mutual respect.

Perhaps the most confronting sections of the report are those dealing with the impacts of the Royal Commission and the changing face of the priesthood. We see the impacts of this in our clinical work. These are not just administrative challenges—they are deeply personal and affect clergy identity, morale, and mental health.

Finally, the report's reflections on retirement, aging, and future planning are poignant. We know that many clergy feel uncertain about their future, especially those without family or financial security, and the data reflects this. The lack of structured transition support and the undervaluing of retired clergy's wisdom are missed opportunities. We must honour the full arc of a clergy member's life, from formation to retirement, with dignity and care, by learning from each other and sharing resources across Dioceses.

This report is not just a research document, nor should it be read once and relegated to the shelf—we must use this data and act on it. Clergy wellbeing is not the responsibility of health professionals alone. It belongs to bishops, diocesan leaders, religious superiors, parish communities, clergy life and ministry teams, and the clergy themselves. As a clergy health nurse, I am committed to walking alongside our priests and deacons, advocating for their health, and helping build systems that support their flourishing. But I cannot do it alone. The Church must listen, learn, and act—because the wellbeing of our clergy is central to the wellbeing of our church.

Reflection 5: Fr Paul Monkerud

Fr Paul Monkerud is the parish priest at All Saints, Liverpool and formerly the Episcopal Vicar for the Western Region in the Archdiocese of Sydney. He has served a number of parishes across the Archdiocese of Sydney for over 25 years.

I offer this reflection as Parish Priest of All Saints Liverpool (since 2016) and St Therese Sadlier Miller (since 2021) in south-west Sydney. It is informed by previous roles as Chair of the Archdiocesan Ongoing Formation of Clergy Committee (2016-2024) and Episcopal Vicar of the Western Region (2019-2025). I minister in a large urban setting with four assistant priests. I acknowledge that the experiences of clergy serving alone or in rural parishes are very different.

My experience of priestly ministry and of the clergy with whom I have lived and worked resonates with the overall positive disposition of the report. Notwithstanding the challenges, ordained ministry remains highly appreciated by many in the Church and beyond. By and large, clergy value their vocation and exercise their ministries of word, sanctification and pastoral care conscientiously and creatively.

Workload pressures exist even in parishes with multiple priests. The constant schedule of liturgies, teaching and pastoral care in schools, aged care facilities and a large hospital is complicated by unscheduled demands that arise in a large urban centre. Exhaustion is a constant companion that accumulates unless addressed. That younger clergy report working more than ten hours a day is unsurprising and unsustainable. It is consistent with the relatively high proportion who experience anxiety. Skilled mentoring of recently ordained priests in their first parish appointment is essential.

Increasing administrative demands from Church and State governance requirements, relating particularly to financial reporting, safeguarding and occupational health and safety, limit clergy capacity for pastoral ministry. This is exacerbated by demands outside the parish. Parish Priests in particular must invest time and focus in their parish if it is to develop from a religious service centre to a "community of missionary disciples".[135] Administrative support that does not dilute their pastoral authority is timely.

The multicultural constitution of parish ministry presents challenges and opportunities. Communicating to and providing pastoral care for a majority of parishioners for whom English is not their first language and whose cultural experience of Church is very different can be difficult. Yet the rich tapestry of faith expressions provides opportunities for personal and ministerial growth. Faith needs culture. Leading parishes to be multicultural "communities of communities"[136] requires an array of high-level understandings and skills. The multicultural and theologically diverse profiles of presbyterates offer their own challenges and opportunities. Living and working with priests with different perspectives calls for mutual respect, openness and communication.

The report highlights the contribution of ongoing formation for clergy wellbeing and ministerial effectiveness. That clergy limit it to retreats, spiritual days and safeguarding courses is concerning. The distinction between formation and wellbeing is important. Formation is offered through seminars, conferences and support for

---

[135]Francis, *Evangelii gaudium*, Apostolic Exhortation, Vatican website, November 24, 2013, sec. 24, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html.

[136] Francis, *Evangelii gaudium*, sec. 28.

personal learning and upskilling. Wellbeing addresses physical, mental and spiritual health issues. Dioceses need to invest in both.

Clergy need support to commit to ongoing formation. Conscientious priests will not undertake sabbaticals or extended programs unless confident that their parishes will be well served in their absence. "Relief" clergy offer a vital ministry. Parishioners must be formed in supporting their clergy when absent. With workload pressures increasing, establishing long-term, personal "vocational" plans, in consultation with bishops and including interludes for appraisal and renewal, may be beneficial. Opportunities for sponsored post-graduate studies, in addition to sabbaticals, need not be reserved for the academically gifted. Dioceses need to budget for such plans.

The negative effects on personal esteem and ministry practice of the Royal Commission into Child Sexual Abuse looms large. Clergy feel vulnerable working with children and young people. Spurious accusations and perceived lack of Church support add to the collective angst. So too do social developments contrary to Church teaching and a hostile media. Declining attendance and sacramental take-up do not help. Such challenges need to be addressed constructively and regularly by presbyterates and their leadership.

The report mentions dissatisfaction with bishops several times and for two reasons: lack of personal connection and failure to publicly challenge issues contrary to Church teaching. Connecting personally with bishops is important to most clergy. I have been able to do so on request. Bishops need support from clergy. Perhaps in larger dioceses, deaneries may provide a means of connection. Whatever the mechanism, it is vital that bishops' representatives, such as episcopal vicars and deans, be formed appropriately for their roles.

Pastoral Supervision is valued by most clergy who undertake it. Yet half are not in supervision, despite the National Catholic Safeguarding Standards mandating a minimum of six hours annually for clergy in full-time ministry.[137] There is a pressing need for qualified supervisors, especially clergy, and for spiritual directors. Supervision take-up is a cultural issue that will take time.

---

[137] Australian Catholic Safeguarding Limited, *National Catholic Safeguarding Standards,* 2nd ed. (2022), Standard 5.5.4, https://www.acsltd.org.au/national-catholic-safeguarding-standards/

Reflection 6: Ms Kylie Cullen

Kylie manages the Catholic Immigration Office for the Archdiocese of Sydney. She also operates a private practice as a psychotherapist and pastoral supervisor. She is a member on the Bishops Commission for Evangelisation, Laity and Ministry, a committee member for the ongoing formation of clergy in Sydney, and a formator for the permanent deaconate training program.

Having worked in this space for several decades, I firmly believe that health and wellbeing needs to be at the top of the agenda, both in our personal lives and in the life of the Church.

As most of us experience, ministry in the Church is changing. We now have a growing number of clergy who are born overseas, along with congregations that have representation from many different ethnic groups. The report reveals that many priests in Australia come from other countries, with data from the ACMRO showing that 727 overseas-born clergy arrived in Australia between 2012 and 2022 (pg. 12). Many of these clergy are working in parishes, as well as in migrant chaplaincy roles.

One of the questions that I have is, how do we look after and care for our clergy? What can we do for them to ensure that they can flourish in their ministry? What can we do at an Archdiocesan level, at the parish level, at an individual level to ensure that our priests are well? Wellbeing is not for someone else to be responsible for. We are all responsible both for our own wellbeing, and for the other to flourish and be the best version of themselves.

The questions in this report guide us to think about how well-being is being prioritised in the Church. As the report reminds us, the Fifth Plenary Council of Australia identified loneliness, isolation and unrealistic expectations placed on clergy as some of the elements influencing their health and wellbeing. There was a call for greater support and broader formation (pg. 14-15). However, my question is, how is this being followed up? How will this be followed up?

We can only care for the other in the measure that we care for ourselves. How well do I care for myself? Perhaps we can care abundantly for our intellectual wellbeing, but how about our emotional and psychological health? How can our spiritual health be separated from our physical health when we are one? Often, I witness unhealthy spirituality that leads people to an internal split. Clergy are not immune to this phenomenon.

At the very least, our Church needs to dive into cultural competency and learn about what makes us different from one another and how we can better interact. Don't be afraid of others; learn from one another. A priest recently shared with me that the Intercultural Clergy Induction program he participated in was so informative and enjoyable. He wished he had found it much earlier.

The gift of our multicultural Church is something to be embraced and celebrated, and not something to be threatened by. Often, we can experience change or difference as something that separates us. I extend the invitation to move 'towards' one another. To embrace one another in our differences.

REFERENCES

Adams, Jerome M. "The Value of Worker Well-Being." *Public Health Reports* 134, no. 6 (2019): 583-6.
https://doi.org/10.1177/0033354919878434.

Australian Catholic Bishops Conference. *Official Directory of the Catholic Church in Australia 2023-2024.*
National Council of Priests, 2023.

Australian Catholic Bishops Conference. *Official Directory of the Catholic Church in Australia 2024-2025*. St
Pauls, 2024.

Australian Catholic Safeguarding Limited. *National Catholic Safeguarding Standards,* 2nd ed. 2022.
https://www.acsltd.org.au/national-catholic-safeguarding-standards/

Australian Workers' Union. "What Is the Working Week." Accessed September 13, 2024.
https://awu.net.au/work-week/.

Centre for Applied Research in the Apostolate, The. *Word, Liturgy and Charity: The Diaconate in the U.S.
Catholic Church, 1968-2018*. Lexington Books, 2018.

Department of Health, Victoria State Government. "Anxiety and Depression in Men." Accessed January 15,
2025. https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/health/conditionsandtreatments/anxiety-and-depression-
in-men#bhc-content.

Department of Health, Victoria State Government. "Stress Busters." Accessed January 15, 2025.
https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/health/healthyliving/Stress-busters.

Dantis, Trudy, Paul Bowell, Stephen Reid, and Leith Dudfield. *Listen to What the Spirit Is Saying: Final Report
for the Plenary Council Phase 1: Listening and Dialogue*. Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, 2019.
https://plenarycouncil.catholic.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/FINAL-BOOK-v7-spread-version-
LISTEN-TO-WHAT-THE-SPIRIT-IS-SAYING.pdf.

Dantis, Trudy, Stephen Reid, and Leith Dudfield. *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.

Dantis, Trudy, Stephen Reid, and Leith Dudfield. *Synod of Bishops: Australian Synthesis*. Australian Catholic
Bishops Conference, 2022. https://s3.ap-southeast-
2.amazonaws.com/acbcwebsite/Articles/Documents/ACBC/Synod_of_Bishops_Australian_Synthesis_-
_FINAL.pdf.

Dantis, Trudy, Stephen Reid, and Leith Dudfield. *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%20Rep
ort%20-%20Continental%20Stage.pdf.

David, Susan A., Ilona Boniwell, and Amanda Conley Ayers, eds. *The Oxford Handbook of Happiness*. Oxford
University Press, 2013. https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/acu/detail.action?docID=1591550&pq-
origsite=primo.

Department of Health and Aged Care, Australian Government. "Anxiety Conditions." Accessed July 22, 2024.
https://www.healthdirect.gov.au/anxiety-related-disorders.

Department of Health and Aged Care, Australian Government. "Irritability and Feeling on Edge." Accessed July
22, 2024. https://www.healthdirect.gov.au/irritability-and-feeling-on-edge.

Dixon, Robert E. *The Catholic Community in Australia*. Openbook, 2005.

Doolittle, Benjamin R. "The Impact of Behaviors Upon Burnout among Parish-Based Clergy." *Journal of
Religion and Health* 49, no. 1 (2010): 88-95. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10943-008-9217-7.

Edmondson, Amy C., and Zhike Lei. "Psychological Safety: The History, Renaissance, and Future of an Interpersonal Construct." *Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior* 1, no. 1 (2014): 23-43. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-orgpsych-031413-091305.

Edwards, Laura, Rachel Sabin-Farrell, Roger Bretherton, David M. Gresswell, and Anna Tickle. "Jesus Got Crucified, Why Should We Expect Any Different?: UK Christian Clergies' Experiences of Coping with Role Demands and Seeking Support." *Mental Health, Religion & Culture* 25, no. 4 (2022): 462-78. https://doi.org/10.1080/13674676.2022.2059068.

Edwards, Tom. "Clergy Wellbeing: Strategies for the Prevention and Management of Burnout." *Pointers* 27, no. 2 (2017): 2-6.

Fifth Plenary Council of Australia. *Instrumentum Laboris: Working Document*. Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, 2021.

Fisher, Krista, Zac E. Seidler, Kylie King, John L. Oliffe, and Simon M. Rice. "Men's Anxiety: A Systematic Review." *Journal of Affective Disorders* 295 (2021): 688-702. https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jad.2021.08.136.

Francis. *Evangelii gaudium*. Apostolic exhortation. Vatican website. November 24, 2013. https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html.

Francis, Leslie, Patrick Laycock, and Christine Brewster. "Work-Related Psychological Wellbeing: Testing the Balanced Affect Model among Anglican Clergy." *Religions* 8, no. 7 (2017): 118. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel8070118.

Gallet, Wilma. "Drawing Sustenance from a Strong Sense of Calling." *Pointers* 27, no. 2 (2017): 14-5.

Gautier, Mary L., Paul M. Perl, and Stephen J. Fichter. *Same Call, Different Men: The Evolution of the Priesthood since Vatican II*. Liturgical Press, 2012.

Goode, Helen, Hannah McGee, and Ciarán O'Boyle. *Time to Listen: Confronting Child Sexual Abuse by Catholic Clergy in Ireland*. The Liffey Press, 2003.

Griffin, Carter. *Forming Fathers. Seminary Wisdom for Every Priest.* Parousia, 2022.

Gubi, Peter Madsen, Sally Bubbers, Deanne Gardner, William Mullally, and Tuntufye Anangisye Mwenisongole. "An Evaluation of Supervisees' Perceptions of the Benefits and Limitations of Pastoral/Reflective Supervision among Christian Clergy in the UK." *Mental Health, Religion & Culture* 26, no. 3 (2023): 226-37. https://doi.org/10.1080/13674676.2023.2231365.

Holleman, Anna, and David Eagle. "Is There a Crisis in Clergy Health?: Reorienting Research Using a National Sample." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 62, no. 3 (2023): 580-604, https://doi.org/10.1111/jssr.12859.

International Theological Commission. *Faith and inculturation*. Vatican website. 1988. https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_1988_fede-inculturazione_en.html#:~:text=The%20term%20inculturation%20includes%20the,the%20life%20of%20the%20Church.%22

Ivtzan, Itai, Hannah E. Gardner, Izra Bernard, Mandeep Sekhon, and Rona Hart. "Wellbeing through Self-Fulfilment: Examining Developmental Aspects of Self-Actualization." *The Humanistic Psychologist* 41, no. 2 (2013): 119-32. https://doi.org/10.1080/08873267.2012.712076.

Kaldor, Peter, and Rod Bullpitt. *Burnout in Church Leaders*. Openbook, 2001.

Kappler, Stephan, Kristin A. Hancock, and Thomas G. Plante. "Roman Catholic Gay Priests: Internalized Homophobia, Sexual Identity, and Psychological Well-Being." *Pastoral Psychology* 62, no. 6 (2013): 805-26. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11089-012-0505-5.

Kinman, Gail, Obrene McFall, and Joanna Rodriguez. "The Cost of Caring? Emotional Labour, Wellbeing and the Clergy." *Pastoral Psychology* 60, no. 5 (2011): 671-80. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11089-011-0340-0.

Lane, Dermot A., ed. *Reading the Signs of the Times: A Survey of Priests in Dublin*. Dublin Diocesan Council of Priests, 1997.

Litchfield, Paul, Cary Cooper, Christine Hancock, and Patrick Watt. "Work and Wellbeing in the 21st Century." *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 13, no. 11 (2016): 1065, https://doi.org/doi: 10.3390/ijerph13111065.

Livingston, Patricia H. "Intimacy and Priestly Life." In *Being a Priest Today*, edited by Donald J. Goergen. The Liturgical Press, 1992.

Maslow, Abraham. *Motivation and Personality*. 3rd ed. Longman, 1987.

McGillion, Chris, and John O'Carroll. *Our Fathers: What Australian Catholic Priests Really Think About Their Lives and Their Church*. John Garratt, 2011.

National Centre for Pastoral Research. *The Catholic Church in Australia: Parishes, Priests and Deacons, 1981 to 2022*. Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, 2022.

National Centre for Pastoral Research. *Social Profile of the Catholic Community in Australia: Based on the 2021 Australian Census.* Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, 2023.

Noronha, Konrad, and Dinesh Braganza. "The Wellbeing of Clergy and Vowed Religious." *Pastoral Psychology* 71, no. 5 (2022): 667-77. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11089-021-00961-6.

Pastoral Research Office. *Called to Serve: A Report on Overseas-Born Priests Working in Australia*. Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, 2016.

Pastoral Research Office. *Understanding Religious Vocations in Australia Today*. Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, 2018.

Pegram, Nigel. "Passion and Sustainable Ministry." *Pointers* 27, no. 2 (2017): 7-10.

Picornell-Gallar, Damián, and Eduardo González-Fraile. "Burnout Syndrome among Catholic Clergy: A Systematic Review." *Journal of Religion and Health* 63 (2024): 1830-48. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10943-023-01883-8.

Powell, Ruth, Sam Sterland, Carole Gan, Kathy Jacka, and Miriam Pepper. *Leader Wellbeing: Effectiveness and Stress. Report for the Catholic Church in Australia. NCLS Research Profile 2419.* NCLS Research, 2024.

Power, Georja, and Barry Fallon. "Sacred and Profane: Gay Catholic Priests in Australia." *Proceedings of the 38th Annual Australian Psychological Society Conference* (2003): 162-7.

Proeschold-Bell, Rae Jean, Chongming Yang, Matthew Toth, Monica Corbitt Rivers, and Kenneth Carder. "Closeness to God among Those Doing God's Work: A Spiritual Well-Being Measure for Clergy." *Journal of Religion and Health* 53, no. 3 (2014): 878-94. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10943-013-9682-5.

Ruiz-Prada, Miguel, Samuel Fernández-Salinero, Cristina García-Ael, and Gabriela Topa. "Occupational Stress and Catholic Priests: A Scoping Review of the Literature." *Journal of Religion and Health*, 60, no.6 (2021): 3807–70. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10943-021-01352-0.

Randall, Kelvin J. "Examining Thoughts About Leaving the Ministry among Anglican Clergy in England and Wales: Demographic, Churchmanship, Personality and Work-Related Psychological Health Factors." *Practical Theology* 6, no. 2 (2013): 178-89. https://doi.org/10.1179/1756073X13Z.0000000005.

Robbins, Mandy, and Nicole Hancock. "Subjective Well-Being and Psychological Type among Australian Clergy." *Mental Health, Religion & Culture* 18, no. 1 (2015): 47-56. https://doi.org/10.1080/13674676.2014.1003171.

Rossetti, Stephen. *Priesthood in a Time of Crisis: A New Study of the Psychological and Spiritual Health of Priests.* Ave Maria Press, 2023.

Rossetti, Stephen, and Colin J. Rhoades. "Burnout in Catholic Clergy: A Predictive Model Using Psychological and Spiritual Variables." *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* 5, no.4 (2013): 5(4):335-41. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0033639.

Rudolph, Elizabeth Cornelia and Antoni Barnard. "The Cinderella of Positive Psychology: Spiritual Well-Being as an Emerging Dimension of Flourishing in Pastoral Work." *International Journal of Qualitative Studies on Health and Well-being* 18, no. 1 (2023):2170767. https://doi.org/10.1080/17482631.2023.2170767.

Ryan, John E. *Priesthood Imprisoned: A Crisis for the Church*. Coventry Press, 2017.

Salvagioni, Denise Albieri Jodas, Francine Nesello Melanda, Arthur Eumann Mesas, Alberto Durán González, Flávia Lopes Gabani, and Selma Maffei de Andrade. "Physical, Psychological and Occupational Consequences of Job Burnout: A Systematic Review of Prospective Studies." *PLoS ONE* 12, no.10 (2017): e0185781. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0185781.

Second Vatican Council. "Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*." Gaudium et spes.* Vatican website. December 7, 1965. https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html

Sterland, Sam, Ruth Powell, Nicole Hancock, and Miriam Pepper. *A Snapshot of Effective and Sustainable Leadership Issues: Catholic Church in Australia. 2016 NCLS Local Church Leaders Report*. NCLS Research, 2018.

Sleep Health Foundation. "How Much Sleep Do You Need?" Updated May 13, 2024. https://www.sleepfoundation.org/how-sleep-works/how-much-sleep-do-we-really-need.

Terhaag, Sonia, Brendan Quinn, Neha Swami, and Galina Daraganova. *Mental Health of Australian Males: Depression, Suicidality and Loneliness*. Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2020. https://aifs.gov.au/sites/default/files/2022-10/2020_ttm_insights_report_chapter_1.pdf.

Tervo-Niemelä, Kati. "Clergy Work Orientation Profiles and Wellbeing at Work: A Study of the Lutheran Clergy in Finland." *Review of Religious Research* 58, no. 3 (2016): 365-84. https://doi.org/10.1007/s13644-016-0247-4.

Thompson, Sam. "Introduction to Happiness and Society." In *Introduction to Happiness and Society*. Oxford University Press, 2013.

Vaidyanathan, Brandon, Christopher Jacobi, Chelsea Rae Kelly, Stephen White, and Sara Perla. *Well-Being, Trust, and Policy in a Time of Crisis: Highlights from the National Study of Catholic Priests*. The Catholic University of America, 2022.

Village, Andrew, and Leslie J. Francis. "Wellbeing and Perceptions of Receiving Support among Church of England Clergy during the 2020 Covid-19 Pandemic." *Mental Health, Religion & Culture* 24, no. 5 (2021): 463-77. https://doi.org/10.1080/13674676.2021.1906214.

WHO Guideline on Self-Care Interventions for Health and Well-Being, 2022 Revision : Executive Summary. World Health Organization, 2021. https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/acu/detail.action?pq-origsite=primo&docID=30477958.

Wilson, George B. *Clericalism: The Death of Priesthood*. The Liturgical Press, 2008.

Appendix 1 – Phase One Notification of Ethics Approval

Appendix 2 – Phase Two Notification of Ethics Approval

Appendix 3 – Phase One Sample Invitation Email

Appendix 4 – Phase One Survey Questionnaire

Appendix 5 – Phase One Information Letter to Participants

Appendix 6 – Support Services Document

Appendix 7 – Phase Two Invitation to clergy to participate in an interview

Appendix 8 – Phase Two Participation Information Sheet

Appendix 9 – Phase Two Consent Form

Appendix 10 – Phase Two Demographic Profile Form

Appendix 11 – Phase Two Interview questionnaire

Appendix 1 – Phase One Notification of Ethics Approval

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: 163

Date of Approval: 8/3/2024

Project Name: A Profile of Catholic Clergy in Australia (Stage 1 - Survey)

Principal Researcher(s): Trudy Dantis, Stephen Reid

Organisation: National Centre for Pastoral Research

Philip Hughes

Rev Emeritus Professor Philip Hughes
Executive Officer,
Christian Research Association
Human Research Ethics Committee

Appendix 2 – Phase Two Notification of Ethics Approval

Human Research Ethics Committee

NHMRC Registration No. EC00354

90 Albion Street, Box Hill, VIC 3128

Email: secretary_HREC@cra.org.au

CRA

CHRISTIAN RESEARCH
ASSOCIATION

Notification of Ethics Approval

HREC Application number: 185

Date of Approval: 27/5/24

Project Name: A Profile of Catholic Clergy in Australia (Stage 2 - Interviews)

Principal Researcher(s): Trudy Dantis, Stephen Reid, Leith Dudfield.

Organisation: National Centre for Pastoral Research

Philip Hughes

Rev Emeritus Professor Philip Hughes
Executive Officer,
Christian Research Association
Human Research Ethics Committee

Appendix 3 – Phase One Sample Invitation Email

SAMPLE EMAIL TO HEADS OF RELIGIOUS INSTITUTES/CONGREGATIONS/ DIOCESES/ORGANISATIONS/GROUPS

Dear [Name],

The Australian Catholic Bishops Conference is undertaking a research project into the wellbeing of clergy. The important information gathered from the survey will be used to inform a discussion on the spiritual, physical, mental and general wellbeing of clergy, including areas that require more care and support.

Involvement in the project is completely voluntary and will be carried out in two phases.

Phase 1 - an anonymous online/paper survey questionnaire which we aim to distribute to as many clergy as possible around Australia; and
Phase 2 - interviews with a selected individuals who indicated at the end of the abovementioned questionnaire that they would like to participate in this second phase.

The online survey (phase 1) should only take about 10 minutes to complete and will run from 15 May through 30 June 2024. Results will be aggregated prior to reporting and no individual will be identifiable in anyway.

We would like to seek your assistance in encouraging the clergy in your [institute/religious congregation/diocese/organisation/group] to participate in this important survey.

Attached is a sample email template to invite participants to the survey, as well as a copy of the Information Letter to Participants. The letter provides further information about the process and what would be required of participants and is also available through the survey link.

If you are happy to assist with this research, please email all clergy in your [institute/religious congregation/diocese/organisation/group] using the text in the email template.

Please note the survey closes at 11:59 pm **Sunday, 30 June 2024.**

For more information on the project, please contact either of the following:
• Dr Trudy Dantis, Director, National Centre for Pastoral Research:
trudy.dantis@catholic.org.au
• Fr Khalid Marogi, Director, Australian Catholic Migrant and Refugee Office:
khalid.marogi@acmro.catholic.org.au.

Thank you for your assistance with this project.

Appendix 4 – Phase One Survey Questionnaire

A PROFILE OF CATHOLIC CLERGY IN AUSTRALIA

The Australian Catholic Bishops Conference have developed a survey to gather feedback to create a profile of Catholic clergy in Australia. The attached letter from Fr Khalid Marogi and Dr Trudy Dantis outlines the background and purpose of the survey.

The important information gathered from the survey will be used to inform a discussion on the spiritual, physical, mental and general wellbeing of clergy, including areas that require more care and support.

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 the *Support Services* document.

For more information on the project, please contact either of the following:
Dr Trudy Dantis, Director, National Centre for Pastoral Research: trudy.dantis@catholic.org.au
Fr Khalid Marogi, Director, Australian Catholic Migrant and Refugee Centre:
khalid.marogi@acmro.catholic.org.au

If you have any difficulties with this survey, please contact: stephen.reid@catholic.org.au

The last date for completing this survey is **30 June 2024**.

A PROFILE OF CATHOLIC CLERGY IN AUSTRALIA

SECTION 1. GENERAL WELLBEING

Q1. Reflecting on the last 12 months, on a scale of 1 to 5, how would you rate yourself in the following areas?

	1 Extremely poor	2 Poor	3 Average	4 Good	5 Extremely good
My self-confidence	○	○	○	○	○
My energy levels	○	○	○	○	○
My ability to eat a healthy diet	○	○	○	○	○
My ability to get adequate rest and sleep *(at least 6-7 hours per night)*	○	○	○	○	○
My ability to exercise daily	○	○	○	○	○

Q2. To what extent are the following statements true or not for you?

	Definitely false	Generally false	Neither true nor false	Generally true	Definitely true
I appreciate the value of my work/ministry	○	○	○	○	○
I get adequate support from others for my work/ministry	○	○	○	○	○
I receive adequate remuneration for my work/ministry	○	○	○	○	○
I get appropriate medical treatment when I need it	○	○	○	○	○
I am able to get at least one day of rest per week	○	○	○	○	○

Q3. **Reflecting on your relationships in the last 12 months, on a scale of 1 to 5, how would you rate yourself in the following areas?**

	1 Extremely poor	2 Poor	3 Average	4 Good	5 Extremely good
Relationship with my parish community	○	○	○	○	○
Relationship with my peers (other clergy and religious)	○	○	○	○	○
Relationship with my bishop	○	○	○	○	○
Relationship with contacts in Catholic agencies (e.g. Centrecare, SVDP, etc.)	○	○	○	○	○
Relationship with my family members	○	○	○	○	○
Relationship with the school community	○	○	○	○	○

Q4. **Are there other healthy relationships where you feel strongly supported?** *If so, please describe.*

_____

_____

Q5. **Would you like to further comment**, positively or negatively, about your relationships?

_____

_____

Q6. **We would like to get an idea of your daily routine. As part of your role, on average, how many hours would you spend <u>each day</u> on each of the following?** *If any of the options are not applicable to you, please mark 'NA'.*

- Working at your office? _____

- Celebrating sacraments in your regular place of work (e.g. in your parish)? _____

- Undertaking pastoral work (e.g., visiting people in their home, visiting the sick)? _____

- Attending **formal meetings** outside the parish/your regular place of work (e.g., diocesan/deanery/congregational meetings)? _____

- Attending other events **outside** the parish (e.g. celebrating sacraments) or **outside your regular place of work** (e.g., in other parishes or in the local community)? _____

Q7. On average, how much time would you spend on the following? *Where appropriate, include time spent both <u>in-person and online</u>. If any of the options are not applicable to you, please mark 'NA'.*

- On holiday/vacation - No. of days per year? _____

- Attending spiritual retreats/reflection days - No. of days per year? _____

- Spending time with your family - No. of hours per month? _____

- Spending time with friends - No. of hours per month? _____

Q8. Are you involved in the wider (non-parish) community in any way?

○ Yes (move to Q9)   ○ No (move to Q10)

Q9. In what ways are you involved? *(Select all that apply)*

○ Involved in a sporting club
○ Involved in a social club
○ Involved in a welfare society
○ Work/volunteer in the local community (please describe as many as you like): _____
○ Other involvement (please describe as many as you would like): _____

Q10. Are you active on social media? (e.g. Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, X/Twitter)?

○ Yes (move to Q11)   ○ No (move to Q13)

Q11. What are the main reasons for using social media?

○ For relaxation
○ For communication with family and friends
○ For communicating with parishioners
○ For communicating with the wider community
○ Other (please describe briefly): _____

Q12. On average, how many hours would you spend on social media per day? _____

Q13. What are your main hobbies/interests/relaxation activities that you spend time on? *(Select all that apply)*

○ Listening to music, radio, podcasts
○ Reading
○ Watching TV, videos, movies at home
○ Sports (please name as many as you like): _____
○ Other outdoor activities (please name as many as you like): _____
○ Other indoor activities (please name as many as you like): _____
○ Other activities (please name as many as you like): _____

Q14. Reflecting on the last 12 months, on a scale of 1 to 5, how would you rate yourself in the following areas?

	1 Extremely poor	2 Poor	3 Average	4 Good	5 Extremely good
My relationship with God	○	○	○	○	○
Finding adequate time for daily prayer and meditation	○	○	○	○	○
Finding time for daily Mass, the Divine Office, the Rosary and other devotions	○	○	○	○	○
Finding time to attend retreats/spiritual reflection days	○	○	○	○	○

Q15. Which of the following is true for you?

o   I currently have a spiritual director
o   I have had a spiritual director in the past, but not currently
o   I have never had any forms of spiritual direction

Q16. Are there any difficulties you encounter in the area of spiritual direction?

_____

_____

_____

Q17. Are there any difficulties you encounter in the area of personal confession?

_____

_____

_____

Q18. Do you have any other personal concerns regarding spiritual matters?

_____

_____

_____

_____

Q19. **During the past 30 days, about how often did you feel each of the following?**

	None of the time	A little of the time	Some of the time	A lot of the time	All of the time
Hopeful	○	○	○	○	○
Joyful	○	○	○	○	○
Anxious	○	○	○	○	○
Irritable	○	○	○	○	○
Deeply depressed	○	○	○	○	○
Worn-out or exhausted	○	○	○	○	○
Worthless or insignificant	○	○	○	○	○

Q20. **Reflecting on the last 12 months, have you struggled with any of the following?**

○ Stress
○ Thoughts of self-harm
○ Loneliness/Isolation
○ Despair
○ Home sickness
○ Depression
○ Other mental health concerns (please describe): _____

○ Anxiety
○ Lack of sleep
○ Using alcohol as a coping mechanism
○ Using drugs as a coping mechanism
○ Gambling as a coping mechanism

Q21. **Which of the following is true for you?**

○ I currently have a pastoral supervisor (move to Q22)
○ I have had a pastoral supervisor in the past, but not currently (move to Q24)
○ I have never had any forms of pastoral supervision (move to Q25)

Q22. **How do you participate in pastoral supervision?**

○ As an individual   ○ In a group   ○ Both
○ I do not participate (please explain why): _____

Q23. **Who pays for your pastoral supervision?**

○ I pay   ○ Shared by me and my diocese
○ My diocese pays
○ I have another arrangement (please describe briefly): _____

Q24. **Have you found pastoral supervision generally beneficial to your ministry?**

○ Yes   ○ No

SECTION 4. GENERAL CONCERNS

Over the last decade, there have been many factors that have contributed to cultural and social changes in Australian society, some of which are:

- The decline in the numbers of clergy and religious congregations
- The Royal Commission into Institutional Child Sexual Abuse
- Laws surrounding gender, same-sex marriage, Euthanasia, Abortion
- Debates on Religious Discrimination and Freedom of Religion

Q25. Have any of the above factors negatively impacted on your morale, wellbeing or sense of self-worth? Could you please explain how?

\
\
\
\

Q26. Are there any other impacts you wish to provide information on concerning these matters?

\
\
\
\

Q27. Are there any other problems that you struggle with or that you are concerned other clergy might be struggling with?

\
\
\
\

Q28. How could you be better supported in your work/ministry?

\
\
\
\

SECTION 5. ABOUT YOU

In order to do further analysis of the results, can you please provide us with a little bit more information about yourself.

Remember: this survey is completely anonymous and no details about you can be publicly revealed.

Q29. Which of the following describes you? *Select all that apply*

- ○ Diocesan Clergy
- ○ Diocesan clergy on loan to an Australian diocese
- ○ Religious
- ○ Religious on loan to an Australian diocese

- ○ Permanent Deacon
- ○ Transitional Deacon
- ○ Semi-retired (some active duties)
- ○ Completely retired (no active work)

Q30. At what age did you enter the seminary? _____

Q31. What was your year of ordination? _____

Q32. What is your age group?

- ○ 20-24 years
- ○ 25-29 years
- ○ 30-34 years
- ○ 35-39 years
- ○ 40-44 years

- ○ 45-49 years
- ○ 50-54 years
- ○ 55-59 years
- ○ 60-24 years
- ○ 65-29 years

- ○ 70-34 years
- ○ 75-39 years
- ○ 80-44 years
- ○ 85-49 years
- ○ 90 years and over

Q33. In which country were you born?

- ○ Australia (move to Q35)
- ○ India
- ○ Ireland (including Northern Ireland)
- ○ Italy
- ○ Korea (Republic of South)
- ○ Lebanon
- ○ New Zealand

- ○ Nigeria
- ○ Philippines
- ○ Poland
- ○ Sri Lanka
- ○ United Kingdom (excl. Northern Ireland)
- ○ Vietnam
- ○ Other (please name): _____

Q34. If you were born overseas, in which year did you arrive in Australia? _____

Q35. In which country did you do your seminary training?

- ○ Australia
- ○ Overseas (please name the country) _____

Q36. How would you describe your <u>main</u> ministry?

○ Parish priest
○ Assistant priest
○ Prison Chaplain
○ Hospital Chaplain

○ Retired priest
○ Other (please describe briefly):
_____

Q37. Do you have another role or appointment in addition to your main ministry?

○ Yes   ○ No

Q38. Please describe further _____

Q39. Do you identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander?

○ Yes   ○ No

Q40. What geographical context do you usually work in? (Select all that apply)

○ Urban
○ Regional

○ Rural
○ Remote

Q41. Thinking about decision-making at the diocesan level, are you involved in any of the following? (Select all that apply)

○ Council of Priests
○ Diocesan Pastoral Council
○ Education Council
○ Other (please describe briefly): _____

Are there any final comments you would like to make?

_____

_____

_____

_____

Thank you for taking the time to respond to this survey.

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

NB: If any of the questions in this survey raised 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 the *Support Services* document.

Appendix 5 – Phase One Information Letter to Participants

AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC BISHOPS CONFERENCE
National Centre for Pastoral Research

A Profile of Catholic Clergy in Australia

INFORMATION LETTER TO PARTICIPANTS

Title of project: A Profile of Catholic Clergy in Australia

Names of investigators: Dr Trudy Dantis (Principal Investigator)
                           Dr Stephen Reid

Dear Participant,

You are invited to participate in this research project which is aimed at creating a profile of Catholic clergy in Australia, both those born in Australia and those born overseas who are working in Australia. The project will provide in-depth information about their spiritual, physical, mental and general wellbeing, including areas that require more care and support.

The survey will cover matters such as:

- Key issues affecting Catholic clergy in areas of physical well-being, mental health and spiritual health
- Recent social and cultural changes in Australia affecting Catholic clergy
- Concerns that Catholic clergy in Australia struggle with
- Improving the support available for clergy.

The participants in this study will include all Catholic clergy within Australia: priests, deacons, newly ordained, priests transitioning to retirement, active in retirement and retired. The findings of this research project will offer a number of benefits to the Catholic community in Australia including:

- Identify and address challenges for the clergy
- Provide in-depth data about Catholic clergy in Australia
- Support people who design and deliver programs for the ongoing formation of clergy
- Assist dioceses to provide more focused in-service for their clergy
- Assist diocesan bishops to provide better support for their clergy
- Assist chancery personnel, especially those who have direct interaction with clergy
- Assist parish pastoral councils, school principals/staff and various parish groups.

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 a summary of the research findings when the project is concluded
- Preserve your confidentiality with regards to participation in this project.

The survey is anonymous and only aggregated results will be published. No identifiable information will be collected about participants. Any other details that inadvertently identify participants will be kept confidential at all times and will not be disclosed.

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 either of the following:
- Dr Trudy Dantis, Director, National Centre for Pastoral Research: trudy.dantis@catholic.org.au
- Fr Khalid Marogi, Director, Australian Catholic Migrant and Refugee Office: khalid.marogi@acmro.catholic.org.au.

………………………………………   ………………………………………
Dr Trudy Dantis, Director   Fr Khalid Marogi, Director

Appendix 6 – Support Services Document

AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC BISHOPS CONFERENCE
National Centre for Pastoral Research

A Profile of Catholic Clergy in Australia

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 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 http://www.mensline.org.au/

You can also contact your Diocesan Director for Clergy Life and Ministry or your Diocesan/Religious Clergy Care Coordinator.

NCPR

AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC MIGRANT & REFUGEE OFFICE

ACBC National Centre for Pastoral Research   T: (02) 6201 9812   ncpr@catholic.org.au
GPO Box 368 Canberra ACT 2601   www.ncpr.catholic.org.au

Appendix 7 – Phase Two Invitation to Clergy to Participate in an Interview

The following invitation was included at the end of the Phase One questionnaire.

Thank you for taking the time to respond to this survey.

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

NB: if any of the questions in this survey raised 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 the *Support Services* document.

Page 8 of 8

AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC BISHOPS CONFERENCE
National Centre for Pastoral Research

A Profile of Catholic Clergy in Australia

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET – Stage 2

Title of project: A Profile of Catholic Clergy in Australia

Names of investigators: Dr Trudy Dantis (Principal Investigator)
                          Dr Stephen Reid
                          Ms Leith Dudfield
                          Ms Carole Gan

This research project is aimed at creating a profile of Catholic clergy in Australia, both those born in Australia and those born overseas who are working in Australia. It will also provide in-depth information about their spiritual, physical, mental and general wellbeing, including areas that require more care and support.

Stage 2 of the Profile of Catholic Clergy in Australia research project involves one-on-one interviews and will take approximately an hour. The interviews, which may be done online or in-person, take a deeper look at some of the issues raised in questionnaires Stage 1.

The interview will cover matters such as:

- Key issues affecting Catholic clergy in areas of physical well-being, mental health and spiritual health
- Recent social and cultural changes in Australia affecting the Catholic clergy
- Concerns that Catholic clergy in Australia struggle with
- Improving the support available for clergy.

The findings of this research project will offer a number of benefits to the Catholic community in Australia including:

- Identify and address challenges for the clergy
- Provide in-depth data about Catholic clergy in Australia
- Support people who design and deliver programs for the ongoing formation of clergy
- Assist dioceses to provide more focused in-service for their clergy
- Assist diocesan bishops to provide better support for their clergy
- Assist chancery personnel, especially those who have direct interaction with clergy
- Assist parish pastoral councils, school principals/staff and various parish groups.

Twenty participants will be selected from clergy who completed the Stage 1 questionnaire and indicated their interest in being part of Stage 2. As it is desirable to have a diverse group of participants, (e.g., priests, deacons, newly ordained, priests transitioning to retirement, active in retirement and retired), other clergy may also receive a personal invitation to participate in Stage 2.

ACBC National Centre for Pastoral Research   T: (02) 6201 9812   ncpr@catholic.org.au
GPO Box 368 Canberra ACT 2601   www.ncpr.catholic.org.au

Participation is voluntary, and should you accept the invitation to participate in the interview process, 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
- Privacy: In-person interviews will be conducted in a setting that ensures privacy. Interviewers conducting online interviews will themselves be in a private space, but it is your responsibility to ensure the privacy of the space you are in during the interview
- Preserve your confidentiality with regards 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.

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 either of the following:
- Dr Trudy Dantis, Director, National Centre for Pastoral Research: trudy.dantis@catholic.org.au
- Fr Khalid Marogi, Director, Australian Catholic Migrant and Refugee Office: khalid.marogi@acmro.catholic.org.au.

…………………………………….   …………………………………….
Dr Trudy Dantis, Director   Fr Khalid Marogi, Director

Appendix 9 – Phase Two Consent Form

AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC BISHOPS CONFERENCE
National Centre for Pastoral Research

Profile of Catholic Clergy
CONSENT FORM FOR CLERGY

Title of project: Profile of Catholic Clergy

Names of investigators: Dr. Trudy Dantis (Principal Investigator)
                          Dr. Stephen Reid
                          Ms. Leith Dudfield

☐ 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 audio 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: _17/09/2024_ ....

NCPR

**AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC
MIGRANT & REFUGEE OFFICE**

ACBC National Centre for Pastoral Research   T: (02) 6201 9812   ncpr@catholic.org.au
GPO Box 368 Canberra ACT 2601   www.ncpr.catholic.org.au

Appendix 10 – Phase Two Demographic Profile Form

AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC BISHOPS CONFERENCE
National Centre for Pastoral Research

A Profile of Catholic Clergy

DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE

Dear Father/Deacon,

Thank you for your willingness to be interviewed as part of our investigation into the health and well-being of Catholic clergy in Australia. To assist us with preparing for your interview, we would be grateful if you could fill out the below information and return it to our office prior to your interview. 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.

Please be assured that your information is confidential, and no identifying data will be released.

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?

_____

DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

Are you a ...

☐ Diocesan Priest
☐ Religious Priest
☐ Permanent Deacon
☐ Transitional Deacon

1

Are you ...

☐ In full-time Ministry
☐ Semi-retired (some active duties)
☐ Completely retired (no active work)

What is your age group?

☐ Under 30
☐ 30-39
☐ 40-49

☐ 50-59
☐ 60-69
☐ 70-79
☐ 80 years and over

What is your country of birth?

☐ Australia
☐ India
☐ Philippines
☐ Vietnam
☐ United Kingdom (except Northern Ireland)
☐ Other country (please specify): _____

How long have you lived in Australia?

☐ Born here
☐ Less than 2 years
☐ 2-5 years
☐ 6-10 years
☐ 11-20 years
☐ More than 20 years

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

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

2

A PROFILE OF CATHOLIC CLERGY IN AUSTRALIA

Interview Questions for Clergy

Introduction

Thank you *for agreeing to be part of this interview.*

I am a researcher with the National Centre for Pastoral Research. The Australian Catholic Migrant and Refugee Office of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference has commissioned us to undertake some research to create a profile of Catholic clergy in Australia, both those born in Australia and those born overseas who are working in Australia.

*This project will help us obtain **in-depth data about the spiritual, physical, mental and general well-being of clergy in Australia**. It will also help us identify areas that require **more care and support**. You would have completed the online or paper 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 clergy 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?

Introduction

1. Would you mind just briefly telling me about yourself? *How long have you been a priest/deacon? How long have you been in your current location? What led you to the priesthood/diaconate? What is your current role?*

Theme 1 – Ministry

2. What are some of the most important aspects of ministry for you?
3. Can you give me some examples of positive experiences in ministry?
4. What about some of the challenges?
5. What about your workload?
    Do you believe you have a good work-life balance? *Do you feel burnt out?*
6. Do you look for personal and/or professional development opportunities (e.g., leadership, ministry, skill development)? What sorts of development have you undertaken?
    Do you get adequate opportunities?
7. Do you feel supported in your ministry? *How well or not are you supported?*

Theme 2 – Health & Wellbeing

8. Are you happy with your physical health? *Do you do anything to keep yourself fit and healthy?*
9. What about your mental health? *Do you often face stress, loneliness, isolation, etc? Have you ever suffered from depression? What do you do to cope?*
10. How about your spiritual health? What do you do to maintain a healthy spiritual life?
11. Do you have any other concerns about your well-being?

Theme 3 – Relationships

12. Do you have a good circle of supportive friends or family? *Could you describe who they are? Are they mostly clergy, parishioners or from other areas in your life?*
13. Do you think it is easier or harder than normal to form relationships because you are a priest/deacon? *What are some of the differences/difficulties?*
14. Do you have any other comments about relationships?

Theme 4 – Other Concerns and Support

15. What are some significant challenges that clergy in Australia face today?
    Which challenges have impacted you personally as a Catholic, or as a deacon/priest, or in your ministry?
16. Has the diaconate/priesthood ever become too overwhelming for you? *Would you like to elaborate?*
17. Are there any other issues that you or other clergy you know are concerned about or are struggling with?

Theme 5 – The Changing Face of the Priesthood

18. Reflecting on when you were first ordained and now, have you seen any changes to the identity and ministry of priests/deacons?
    Has this affected how you changed or how you see yourself and your ministry? If so, how?
19. What opportunities do you see in these changes?
20. What are some of the challenges?
21. If you were to advise a person considering the diaconate/priesthood, what would you say/suggest?
22. Do you have any suggestions for how things could be done differently in the future?

Final Comments

23. Is there anything the Church can do to help you flourish?
24. Is there anything else you would like to add?

Many thanks for volunteering to be involved with this research project.

We hope to have the findings of the research published on our website early next year.

This page is intentionally blank