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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

THRIVING (& SURVIVING) IN MINISTRY

**A PROFILE OF CATHOLIC CLERGY IN AUSTRALIA:
HEALTH AND WELLBEING**

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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.