

Pastoral Research Online

Issue 72

March 2026

New Bishop-Delegate for the ACCPR



Above: Bishop Greg Bennet
PC: Diocese of Sale

Bishop Greg Bennet, Bishop of Sale, joined the Australian Catholic Council for Pastoral Research (ACCPR) late last year as the new bishop-delegate for the Council. The bishop-delegate provides a conduit between the work of the NCPA and the members of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference (ACBC).

Bishop Bennet brings valuable insight through his role as Vice-President of the ACBC and his participation in the Jubilee of Synodal Groups in Rome in 2025, alongside NCPA Director Dr Trudy Dantis. He is also an episcopal representative to the *Interim Coordinating Group for the Synod*, which is currently coordinated by members of the NCPA.

We warmly welcome Bishop Bennet to the ACCPR and look forward to working with him in his new role.

Dear Readers,

Welcome to the March 2026 edition of Pastoral Research Online!

This issue is a special one for the National Centre for Pastoral Research, as 2026 marks the 30th anniversary of the office and three decades of placing social research at the service of the Church in Australia. Since its establishment, the Centre has sought to support pastoral planning, reflection and decision-making through careful listening to the experiences, beliefs and practices of Catholics across the country.

In this anniversary year, we reflect on the enduring significance of listening, drawing inspiration from Dr Robert Dixon's keynote address, 'The Science of Listening', delivered at the 2014 Pastoral Research Conference. Dr Dixon reminds us that data and analysis are not ends in themselves, but tools to help the Church read the signs of the times and respond more faithfully in its mission.

This issue also brings together a variety of current updates and resources. We highlight preparations for the 6th National Count of Attendance, share the latest Vatican statistics on sacramental life and introduce the final layer of the Australian Catholic Mapping Online project, which focuses on Catholics needing care and carers. Readers will also find updates on synod implementation across Australia, insights from recent international research on religious diversity and news from the NCPA team.

As we celebrate 30 years, we thank the bishops, our colleagues, collaborators and readers for their ongoing engagement and support. We look forward to continuing this journey together in faith, research, and service for many years to come.



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2026 National Count of Attendance



Mass Count to Take Place in May

The 6th National Count of Attendance at Mass and Other (Sunday) Assemblies (“the Count”) will take place in May 2026. Conducted every five years in the same year as the Australian Census, the Count records attendance at all Catholic Masses and Sunday Assemblies across the first four weekends of May.

The 2026 Count marks a significant milestone, representing 25 years of national attendance data since the first Count in 2001. As in 2021, parishes will be asked to count the sex of parishioners on the third weekend and age groups on the fourth weekend.

Each diocese has appointed a diocesan contact to coordinate the distribution of materials and the data entry for the Count. As coordination processes may vary slightly between dioceses, parishes are encouraged to look out for correspondence from their own diocesan contact regarding local arrangements.



Webinar for Diocesan Contacts

To support diocesan contacts in their coordination role, a webinar was held on Friday, 20 March. NCPR staff outlined the Count process and shared practical tips for managing parish data collection and portal entry.

Training materials, developed with the input from our diocesan contacts, will shortly be available on the NCPR website: <https://ncpr.catholic.org.au/national-count-of-attendance/>

The training materials cover topics such as:

- Undertaking the Count in your parish
- Counting the sex of parishioners (Week 3)
- Counting the age groups of parishioners (Week 4)
- Online portal data entry
- Paper form submission.

Preliminary results will be shared with dioceses in late 2026 once analysis is complete. Final reporting on Mass attendance rates at the parish level will follow the release of the 2026 Census data, typically published by the Australian Bureau of Statistics one to two years after the Census. Final parish-level reports from the 2026 National Count are anticipated in 2028.

Call for Diocesan Statistics

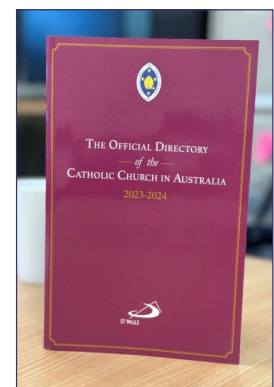
Diocesan contacts have received a request from the NCPR to submit their annual statistics for the *2026-2027 Official Directory of the Catholic Church in Australia*.

The Directory serves as an important resource for the Catholic Church, providing insights into the current population, clergy and various ministries across Australia. To assist completion, dioceses have been provided with a copy of their previous year’s figures.

Responses must be submitted via email no later than **Wednesday, 15 April 2026**.

Any questions about the process can be directed to:

- Katherine Jelavic - katherine.jelavic@catholic.org.au
- Stephen Reid - stephen.reid@catholic.org.au

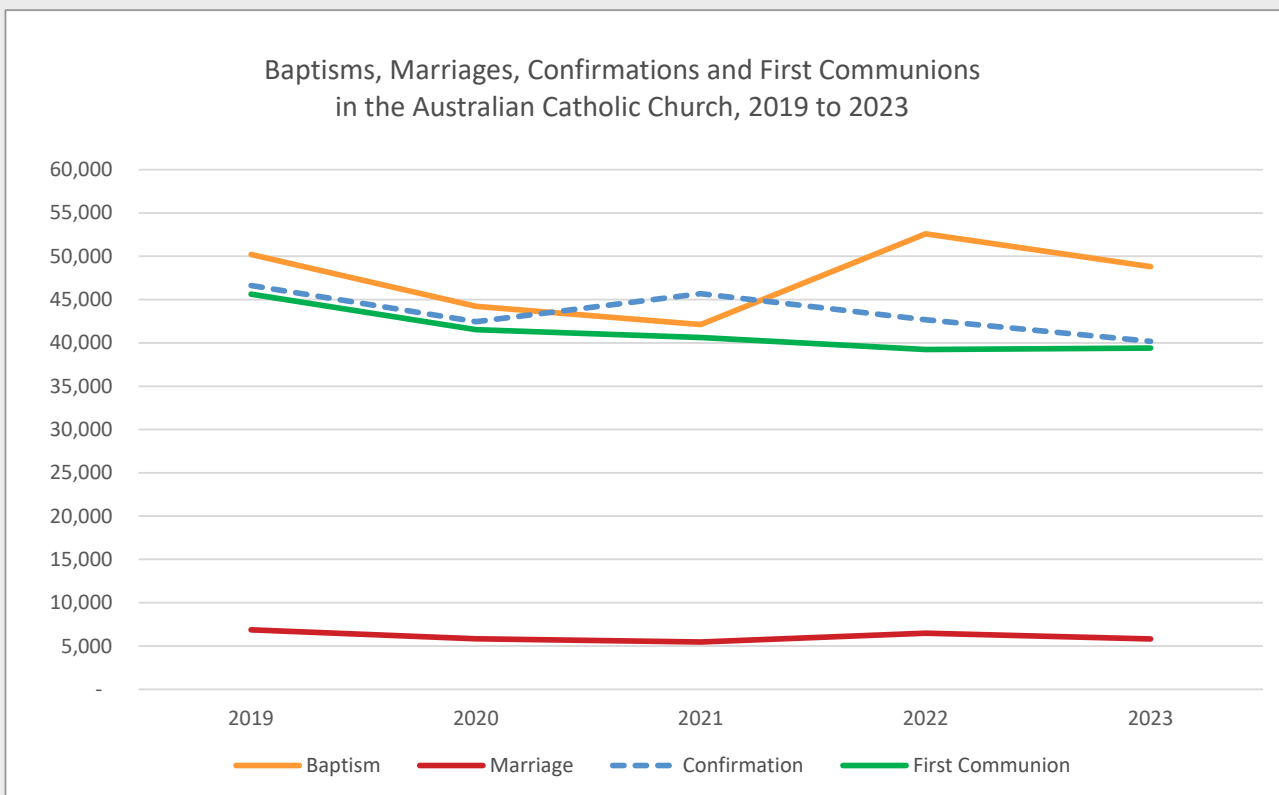


Vatican Statistics

Baptisms, Marriages, Confirmations and First Communion to 2023

Each year, the Vatican gathers statistics from dioceses around the world on a range of Church-related topics. In particular, they report on the number of baptisms, marriages, confirmations and first communions each year. The most recent report includes statistics for the year 2023. The NCPR has been tracking this information for many years, enabling trends over time to be identified. Figure 1 below shows the number of baptisms, marriages, confirmations and first communions in Australia over the five-year period from 2019 to 2023.

Figure 1. Baptisms, Marriages, Confirmations and First Communion in the Australian Catholic Church, 2019-2023



Over the last five years, there have been some notable changes in the trends of these four sacraments. Prior to 2020, the numbers for all four sacraments were steadily declining. Since 2020, however, when the COVID-19 pandemic first had an impact, the patterns for each sacrament have diverged.

The number of Catholic marriages celebrated in the Church declined more sharply in 2020 than in previous years, falling from 6,871 in 2019 to 5,838 in 2020. The lowest number of marriages was recorded in 2021 (5,460), followed by an increase in 2022 (6,482). This increase did not return to pre-pandemic levels, and numbers declined again in 2023 (5,817).

First Communion experienced a larger drop in 2020 (41,533) than in earlier years and continued to decline through 2021 (40,620) and 2022 (39,227). The 2023 figure (39,413) is very similar to that recorded in 2022.

The trend for Confirmations shows a different pattern. While there was also a significant decline in 2020 (42,455) compared with 2019 (50,205), numbers increased noticeably in 2021 (45,679) before declining again in 2022 (42,674) and 2023 (40,171).

Baptisms over this period appear to be the most variable. There were 50,205 baptisms in 2019, then declining during the COVID-19 years, before witnessing a substantial increase in 2022 (52,593). In 2023, baptisms declined again (48,803) but remained higher than the levels recorded in 2020 and 2021. Whether these patterns represent a temporary correction following the pandemic or signal longer-term shifts in sacramental participation remains to be seen.

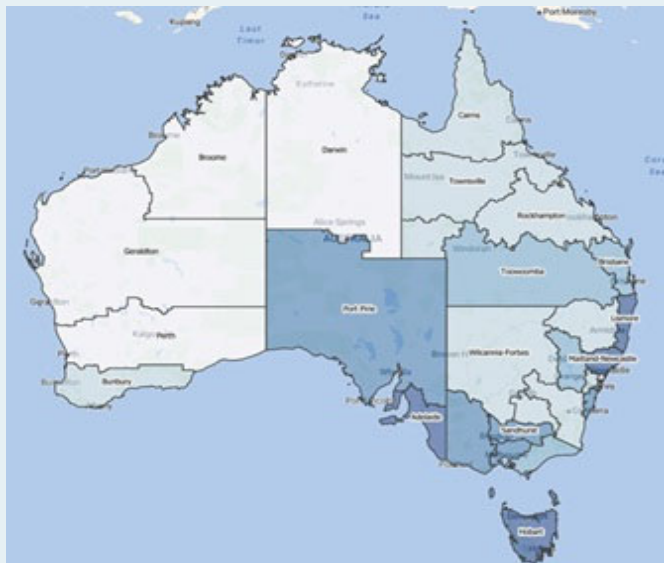
Australian Catholic Mapping Online

Catholics Needing Care & Carers Maps

The NCPR is pleased to launch the fifth and final mapping layer for the 2021 Catholic Census Maps: *Catholics Needing Care & Carers*. This layer, together with a printable PDF of a national map showing the percentage by diocese of Catholic carers aged 15 and over, provides easily accessible information to support diocesan and parish pastoral planning. The layer will be available for all dioceses by the end of March 2026.

This layer was developed in consultation with Dr Adam Hughes Henry from the ACBC Disabilities Project Office. We are grateful to him for his contribution to the project.

Figure 1. ACMO Diocesan Layer: Catholics Needing Care & Carers



Map Layer: The map layer displays the percentage of Catholics who need assistance with core activities, as shown for dioceses in Figure 1. Similar to existing layers, it uses a five-colour band range to highlight where those requiring support are more or less represented across the country or within a diocese. Each colour band contains approximately one-fifth of all dioceses or parishes. Areas with smaller proportions of Catholics who need assistance are shown in lighter colours, while those with higher proportions are displayed in darker colours, making patterns and differences readily identifiable.

Figure 1 shows that the Archdioceses of Perth and Brisbane have smaller proportions of Catholics requiring assistance with core activities compared to other archdioceses, such as Adelaide or Hobart.

2021 Census Information: Information about Catholics with disabilities is drawn from the 2021 Census question on the need for assistance with core activities of self-care, communication and mobility. The Census also collects information on the reasons for needing assistance or supervision, such as short- or long-term health conditions, a disability, old or young age, and language difficulties.

Pop-ups: Clicking on an area in the diocesan or parish map layer opens a pop-up window that includes the following information:

- **The number and proportion of Catholics who need assistance, and Catholic carers aged 15 and over:** Data from the 2021 Census is included in all pop-ups, with comparative 2016 data provided for dioceses where available. Data from 2016 is not available at parish level. National map pop-ups include a link to the PDF map showing the percentage of carers by diocese.
- **Household types:** Please note that this chart is not displayed if no Catholics in a parish reported needing assistance in the 2021 Census.
- **The number of Catholics with one or more health conditions:** This information was collected for the first time in 2021 and may be useful for diocesan and parish pastoral planning.
- **The number of Catholics who use non-verbal languages at home:** Diocesan pop-ups display the number of Catholics who use Auslan or Other non-verbal languages at home, while parish pop-ups show the total number of Catholics who use non-verbal languages.

Map Refresh: Map users may notice some formatting changes across the maps. Elements within the Map Legend and Information Panel have been condensed to reduce repetition, and pop-ups have been given a more uniform appearance. We encourage readers to explore the new layer and the *Percentage of Catholic Carers by Diocese* PDF, both available on the NCPR's ACMO page:

<https://ncpr.catholic.org.au/australian-catholic-mapping-online>

NCPR's 30th Anniversary

The Science of Listening

In 2026, the NCPR celebrates its 30th anniversary. As we mark this significant milestone, we are reminded of a keynote address delivered by the Office's Founding Director, Dr Robert Dixon, at the Pastoral Research Conference, *Beliefs and Practices of Australian Catholics: What We Know and Why It Matters*, held in Melbourne on 20 February 2014.

The address, titled *The Science of Listening: Context and Challenges Facing the Catholic Community in Australia*, was later published in *The Australasian Catholic Record*. In it, Dr Dixon reflected on the purpose of the Pastoral Research Office (the former name of the NCPR) as a service to the Church.



Above: Dr Robert Dixon

*So, the job of the Pastoral Research Office is to put social science at the service of the Church. And social science is all about listening—it is just that we use different methods of listening from musicians. Listening is our job—you can be the judge of how well we do it.*¹

Dr Dixon located this work within the Church's broader engagement with the social sciences:

*In the 1994 motu proprio establishing the Pontifical Council for the Social Sciences, Pope John Paul wrote, 'Social science research can effectively contribute to improving human relations, as has been shown by the progress achieved in various sectors of society especially during the century now drawing to a close'. For this reason, the Church has turned to 'this field of scientific research in order to obtain concrete information for fulfilling the duties of her Magisterium'.*²

Reflecting on the purpose of the conference, Dr Dixon noted that while statistics play an important role, the task is not simply about numbers. Rather, it is about reading the "signs of the times", or what conference contributor Fr Michael Mason described as "social exegesis". Figures, Dr Dixon argued, are tools—useful insofar as they can "be put towards improving the quality of ministry and evangelisation".³

Throughout his address, Dr Dixon considered several aspects of Church life shaped by the work of the Office. He examined the role of parishes and changes in Mass attendance, explored Catholic beliefs and practices, and shared the stories of three young women who grew up in the Catholic Church, which influenced their lives and careers. While each had disengaged from the Church to varying degrees, their experiences offered insights into broader cultural and social shifts that shape contemporary faith life.

Turning to the wider context, Dr Dixon invited reflection on longer-term changes in Western society over the past fifty years, including processes of secularisation and what he termed "reverse secularisation".⁴ He described secularisation as the process by which religious thinking, practices and institutions lose social significance—an idea often linked to declining Church participation in modern Western societies.

Finally, Dr Dixon asked the question, 'How are we to respond?' and considered Pope Francis's approach to the subject in *Evangelii Gaudium*:

*The first thing that strikes you about it is that it is full of references to joy. Francis uses the word forty times in the introduction alone. ... One theme that speaks particularly strongly to me is the idea of 'accompaniment'. Pope Francis uses 'accompaniment' to talk about being there for people. 'The only way is to learn how to encounter others with the right attitude, which is to accept and esteem them as companions along the way, without interior resistance.' ... In relation to the theme of my talk today, it is also noteworthy that Francis speaks about listening many times in Evangelii Gaudium. For example, the bishop is to 'listen to everyone'; it is better to slow down and listen to others; it is helpful to listen to young people.*⁵

For Dr Dixon, listening remains central to the Church's pastoral and research mission. The full text of this address, as published in the *Australasian Catholic Record*, can be found here:

<https://ncpr.catholic.org.au/2014-conference/>

1 Robert Dixon, "The Science of Listening: Context and Challenges Facing the Catholic Community in Australia", *The Australasian Catholic Record* 91, No. 3 (2014), 265.

2 Dixon, "The Science of Listening", 266.

3 Dixon, "The Science of Listening", 266.

4 Dixon, "The Science of Listening", 274.

5 Dixon, "The Science of Listening", 275-6.

Synod on Synodality: Implementation



Interim Coordinating Group for the Synod

At the close of the Second Assembly of the Synod on Synodality in 2024, bishops' conferences worldwide were tasked with implementing synodality in their local churches.

In Australia, members of the former Synod Working Group were tasked with collating and reporting on synodal activities nationwide. Soon after, a representative of the Eastern Churches was invited to join the Group, and in 2025, Archbishop Tim Costelloe and Bishop Greg Bennet also joined, providing a direct connection with the Permanent Committee of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference (ACBC). Reflecting the evolving focus of this work, the Group was renamed the *Interim Coordinating Group for the Synod*, recognising both its changed role and its transitional nature as synod implementation in Australia continues to develop.

As at the beginning of 2026, the members of the Group were:

- Dr Trudy Dantis (Chair)
- Archbishop Timothy Costelloe SDB
- Bishop Greg Bennet
- Fr Chris De Souza
- Mr Paul Osborne
- Fr Collin Nunis
- Emeritus Professor Gabrielle McMullen AM
- Mrs Sophy Morley
- Mr Daniel Ang
- Dr Stephen Reid
- Ms Leith Dudfield (Secretary)

Synod Next Steps Newsletter

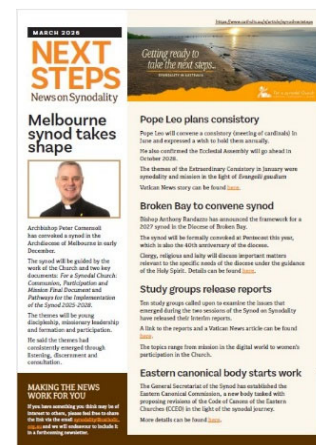
To support communication about synodal activities and initiatives being implemented within the Church in Australia, the Interim Coordinating Group has commenced a quarterly newsletter titled *Next Steps*. Previous issues are archived on the webpage, along with a link to subscribe to future issues.

<https://www.catholic.au/s/article/synodnextsteps>

The most recent issue (March 2026) has just been published and is available online.

Synodal Activities in 2026

In addition to a range of formation events, seminars and parish-based events, there are also a number of synodal activities at the diocesan level occurring in 2026, some of which are highlighted in the table below.



Diocese	Activity	Date
Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle	Formation of Diocesan Pastoral Council	2026
Archdiocese of Sydney	Archdiocesan Synod	30 April – 3 May 2026
Diocese of Cairns	Diocesan Synod	8 June 2025 – 24 May 2026
Archdiocese of Adelaide	Archdiocesan Synod	May-June 2026
Diocese of Wilcannia-Forbes	Diocesan Synod	30 Sept – 2 Oct 2026
Diocese of Townsville	3 rd Diocesan Synod	12 June 2026
Diocese of Toowoomba	Diocesan Synod	23-24 October 2026
Diocese of Bathurst	Parish Assemblies	Throughout 2026
Archdiocese of Melbourne	Archdiocesan Synod	December 2026

Dioceses are invited to share details of their synodal initiatives by emailing synodality@catholic.org.au

Major events from across the country, and some overseas initiatives, are shared on the *Synod Next Steps* webpage:

<https://www.catholic.au/s/article/synodnextsteps>

Overseas Research

Religious Diversity Around the World

A recent study by the Pew Research Center reports on the most religiously diverse countries in the world in 2020. Singapore was found to be the most religiously diverse country globally, with the most even distribution of religious affiliations across its population.

Religious diversity is measured using the Pew Research Center's Religious Diversity Index (RDI), which is calculated based on the proportions of people identifying across seven religious categories: Christians, Muslims, the religiously unaffiliated, Buddhists, Hindus, Jews and other religions. Countries with higher RDI scores are considered more religiously diverse.

Australia was ranked the ninth most religiously diverse country in the world, with an RDI of 7.0, classified as a "high" level of diversity. Drawing on data published by the Australian Bureau of Statistics from the 2021 Census, the study reported that 47 per cent of Australia's population identified as Christian, four per cent as Muslim, 42 per cent as religiously unaffiliated, three per cent as Hindu, three per cent as Buddhist, and one per cent as belonging to other religions.

The report noted that among the world's most religiously diverse countries, Christians are often the largest single religious group. However, in the Asia-Pacific region—which was identified as the most diverse region globally—the religiously unaffiliated represented the largest group (33%), followed by Muslims (26%) and Hindus (26%). In this region, Christians account for only six per cent of the population.

Among the least religiously diverse countries, the study identified 17 countries where Christians make up 95 per cent or more of the population, and 25 countries where Muslims account for at least 95 per cent. Yemen was identified as the least religiously diverse country in the world, with 99.9 per cent of the population identifying as Muslim. The least religiously diverse Christian country was Timor-Leste, where 99.5 per cent of the population identified as Christian.

More information about this study can be found at:

<https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2026/02/12/religious-diversity-around-the-world/>

Pew Research Center



Singapore is the most religiously diverse country

Based on Pew Research Center's Religious Diversity Index scores calculated for 201 countries and territories



Rank	Religious Diversity Index score
1. Singapore	9.3
2. Suriname	7.5
3. Taiwan	7.5
4. South Korea	7.3
5. Mauritius	7.3
6. Guinea-Bissau	7.2
7. Togo	7.1
8. Benin	7.1
9. Australia	7.0
10. France	6.9

Note: Higher scores on the Religious Diversity Index reflect a more even distribution of the seven religious categories studied: Christians, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Jews, adherents of other religions and people with no religious affiliation.

Source: Pew Research Center calculations using religious composition estimates for 2020, which are based on more than 2,700 censuses and surveys. "Religious Diversity Around the World"

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

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

NCPR Staff Update

NCPR Team Catches up in Canberra

One of the challenges of having a geographically diverse team is finding opportunities to spend time together. With half of the NCPR based at the General Secretariat of the ACBC in Canberra and the other half located at the University of Divinity in Melbourne, occasions for something as simple as a shared lunch are few and far between.

During the week commencing 16 February 2026, Dr Stephen Reid and Ms Katherine Jelavic from the Melbourne office travelled to Canberra to attend the ACBC Staff Formation Day and to spend time with their NCPR colleagues. The visit provided a welcome opportunity for the team to come together, marked by lunch at the local restaurant, Azima.



NCPR Team L-R: Leith Dudfield, Katherine Jelavic, Trudy Dantis and Stephen Reid

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



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