

Pastoral Research Online

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A Parish Rises from the Ashes



The five-yearly National Count of Attendance can be challenging to coordinate at the best of times, requiring parishes to count attendees by age group and sex across four consecutive weekends in May.

For the congregation of Mary Immaculate church, Blackwater Parish, the task became even more difficult when the building was destroyed by fire on 28 April 2026, only days before the first weekend of the Count.

Yet the parish was not deterred and devised a creative way to participate, despite the difficulties. Read more on page 2.

Left: Members of the Blackwater Parish gather for Mass in the parish centre after the fire that destroyed their church. PC: Diocese of Rockhampton

Dear Readers,

Welcome to the September 2026 edition of 'Pastoral Research Online'.

This issue highlights important developments in the work of the National Centre for Pastoral Research and across the wider Church. We begin with a remarkable story from Blackwater Parish in the Diocese of Rockhampton, where parishioners demonstrated resilience and commitment in participating in the 2026 National Count of Attendance despite the devastating loss of their church to fire just days before the Count commenced.

The 2026 Count marked a significant milestone for the Church in Australia, with an exceptional response from dioceses and parishes across the country. We extend our sincere thanks to all who contributed to this important project. As work continues on data analysis and reporting, we also look ahead to the next stage of the National Catholic Census Project, including preparations for future diocesan and parish Social Profiles based on the 2026 Australian Census.

This issue explores recent Vatican statistics on parish leadership around the world, providing an opportunity to consider how different countries are responding to changing pastoral realities. We also include updates on the implementation phase of the Synod on Synodality, including the Recollecting Phase and the work of several Synod Study Groups, as well as resources for following synodal initiatives in Australia.

Finally, we preview the launch of the N CPR's 'Absent from the Table' Final Report, which examines the experiences of Catholics who do not regularly attend Sunday Mass. We also report on the ACMRO Conference 2026, where Cardinal Fabio Baggio CS and Dr Trudy Dantis reflected on the role of migrant communities as missionaries of hope and contributors to a more synodal Church. We hope you find this edition both informative and thought-provoking.



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2026 National Count of Attendance



Thank You to Dioceses and Parishes

The 2026 National Count of Attendance took place in May and NCPR researchers were delighted by the level of engagement across Australia. By the end of the Count, we had received responses from 97.6 per cent of parishes across Australia, which included those in geographical dioceses as well as those of the Eastern Churches and Ordinariates. Moreover, of the 34 dioceses who were collecting information for the Count, 22 received data from 100 per cent of their parishes. This provides a really strong foundation for the analysis that the NCPR will undertake.

The data provided by parishes is currently being cleaned and analysed, and preliminary reports will be developed for each diocese later this year. The final National report will be produced once Census data becomes available, which is expected in late 2027.

The NCPR extends its very heartfelt thanks to all the bishops, diocesan contacts, other diocesan staff, parish priests, parish councils, and parishioners who assisted with the 2026 Count. We could not have done it without you.

Creative Responses to The Count

While the Count was straightforward for some parishes, others faced significant challenges in participating. On 28 April, in the week before the first weekend of the Count, Mary Immaculate church in Blackwater Parish, Diocese of Rockhampton, was destroyed by fire. Parishioners were unable to use the church and faced great uncertainty. Despite the trials facing the community, they continued to meet, firstly outside the police barrier in front of the church, and later in the parish centre. Undertaking the Count during the month of May was understandably not a priority for the congregation at the time. Rather than miss the opportunity to contribute, the parish used photographs taken of Mass-goers in the weeks following the fire to make a reasonably accurate estimate of attendance, including the number of men and women present during Weekend Three.



Members of the Blackwater Parish celebrate Mass the day after the fire. PC: Diocese of Rockhampton



Age counts using puzzle pieces at St Christopher's Cathedral, Canberra & Goulburn Archdiocese. PC: N. Pham.

Other parishes also developed creative approaches to undertaking aspects of the Count, particularly counting the different age groups in Weekend Four. One parish asked Mass-goers to place a puzzle piece in a box corresponding to their age group. Another handed out slips of paper and asked each household to record how many people from each age group were present at Mass. At St Mel's Parish, Narrandera, in the Diocese of Wagga Wagga, a sheet was passed along each pew and parishioners were invited to mark their age in the corresponding category. Whatever method was used, we are deeply grateful to all parishes for their efforts.

Updates on the status of the project will be available on the NCPR website:

<https://ncpr.catholic.org.au/national-count-of-attendance/>

Right: The tally sheet used by parishioners at St Mel's Narrandera to undertake the Mass Count in Week 4. PC: Fr Chris Heffernan

MASS COUNT – WEEK 4 (23 rd -24 th May 2026)					
AGE	0-17	18-29	30-49	50-69	70+
Please mark your age in the corresponding box. Use '1111' (tally counting). Fill in any near you who cannot fill in the details, e.g. young children, then pass this on to the next relevant person. Thanks!					

2024 Vatican Statistics

Parishes With and Without Parish Priests

Each year, the Central Statistics Office of the Church gathers data on activities and characteristics that provide insights into the life and mission of the Church. The most recent *Statistical Yearbook of the Church*, covering global data from 2024, was released earlier this year.

One aspect examined in the Yearbook is the number of parishes in each country, and their leadership patterns. Broadly speaking, parishes are classified according to whether they are led by a parish priest, although several distinct leadership arrangements exist within those categories.

Parishes that are reported as having a parish priest are divided into those with a diocesan priest and those with a religious priest. Within Australia, 62.6% of the parishes have a diocesan parish priest, while 20.9% have a religious priest (see Table 1). Together, these categories account for 83.5% of parish leadership arrangements in Australia.

For parishes without a dedicated parish priest, several alternative leadership arrangements are possible. Parishes could be administered by another priest, they could be entrusted to a permanent deacon, a non-priest religious man or woman, a lay person or they could be left vacant. In Australia, 14.2% of parishes are administered by another parish priest, 11 parishes (0.8%) are entrusted to a permanent deacon, two parishes (0.1%) are entrusted to religious women, ten (0.7%) are entrusted to lay people and eight (0.6%) are vacant. The distribution of these leadership arrangements in Australia can be compared with a selection of other countries, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Parishes With or Without Parish Priests on 31 December 2024

Countries	With parish priest			Without parish priest						Total (%)
	Diocesan priest (%)	Religious priest (%)	Total (%)	Administered by another priest (%)	Entrusted to permanent deacons (%)	Entrusted to non-priest men religious (%)	Entrusted to women religious (%)	Entrusted to lay people (%)	Entirely vacant (%)	
Australia	62.6	20.9	83.5	14.2	0.8	-	0.1	0.7	0.6	16.5
Canada	50.2	16.3	66.6	30.3	0.1	-	0.2	1.1	1.7	33.4
Great Britain	66.8	17.5	84.3	15.3	0.3	-	0.0	-	0.0	15.7
India	75.5	18.0	93.5	6.4	-	0.0	0.0	-	-	6.5
Ireland	85.6	4.1	89.7	10.1	0.1	-	0.1	-	-	10.3
New Zealand	61.7	17.6	79.3	20.2	-	-	-	0.5	-	20.7
Philippines	87.0	11.6	98.7	1.3	-	-	-	-	-	1.3
South Africa	55.9	39.0	94.9	3.1	0.6	-	-	-	1.5	5.1
Switzerland	30.8	6.1	36.9	37.1	8.9	0.1	0.5	14.2	2.3	63.1
USA	67.4	11.0	78.4	20.2	0.7	0.0	0.1	0.5	0.2	21.6

Note: Figures reported as 0.0% have a numerical basis but form less than 0.1% of the parish population. Figures indicated with a dash reported zero for that category.

Around the world, different countries have addressed the issue in different ways. Great Britain, for example, has a similar proportion of parishes without parish priests (15.7% compared with 16.5% in Australia), although a higher proportion are administered by another priest and none are entrusted to lay people.

In the Philippines, there is a very high proportion of parishes with a dedicated parish priest (98.7%), with all of those that do not have a dedicated parish priest being administered by another priest. India presents a similar pattern, although a small number of parishes (five each) are entrusted to religious women and men.

By contrast, Switzerland has only 36.9% of its parishes with dedicated parish priests. They have 37.1% administered by other priests, but 14.2% of their parishes are entrusted to lay people, which is the highest proportion in the world.

2026 Census

What Happens Next?

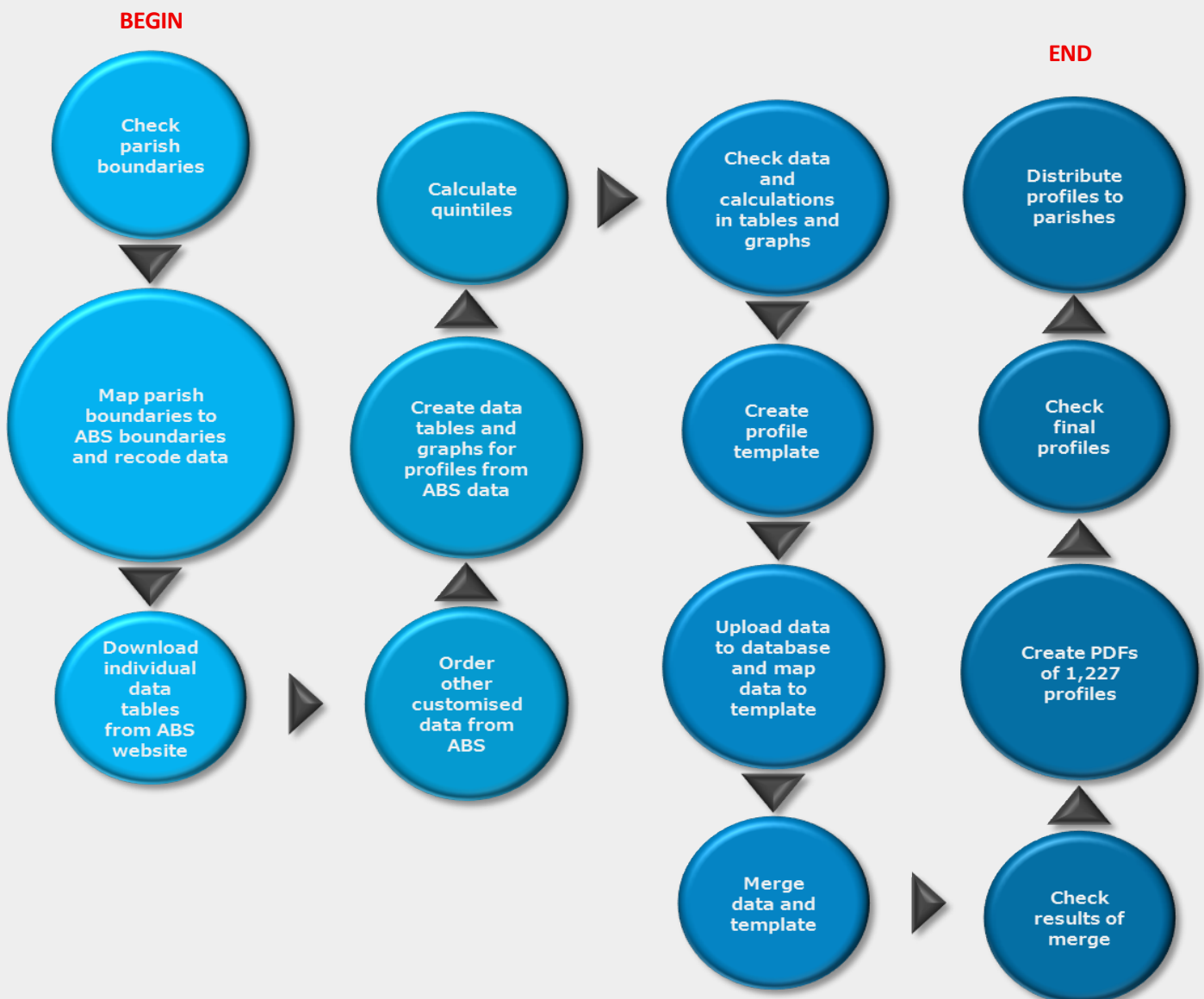
The Census of Population and Housing was conducted by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) on 11 August this year. Although the Census data may not be released for some time, the NCPR has already begun the preparatory work required to produce the diocesan and parish *Social Profiles* once the data becomes available.

The first step is to identify all the parish boundaries, especially where there have been changes to parishes since the 2021 Census. The parish boundaries are then mapped to Statistical Area 1s (SA1s), the smallest geographic unit used by the ABS. More information about SA1s is available on the next page. To report on the Census data relevant to each parish and diocese, these SA1s must be mapped against parish boundaries. This allocation is based on a "best fit" approach. However, some SA1s overlap two, three, or even four parish boundaries.

These preliminary steps can be completed before the data is released and will keep the NCPR busy as we await the ABS data, expected in late 2027. The full process of preparing the Parish Social Profiles is shown in Figure 1 below.

Further information about the Australian Census and the National Catholic Census Project is available on the NCPR website: <https://ncpr.catholic.org.au/national-catholic-census-project/>

Figure 1: Steps in Creating the 2026 Parish Social Profiles



2026 Census

The Smallest Geographic Unit

An SA1, or Statistical Area 1, is the smallest geographic unit used by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) for the release of Census data. SA1s cover the entire country, without gaps or overlaps (see Figure 2). Each one has a population of between 200 and 800, with an average of around 400 people. SA1s form the foundation building blocks for developing diocesan and parish *Social Profiles* produced by the NCPR.

Did you know that Australia's largest SA1 is located within Coober Pedy Parish and covers 255,438.8712 square kilometres? At the other end of the scale, the smallest SA1 covers just 500 square metres (0.0005 km²). Located within Melbourne (Bourke St) Parish in the Archdiocese of Melbourne, it includes only one building!

For the 2026 Census, there are 63,485 SA1s across Australia, an increase of 1,640 since 2021. Each of these SA1s must be allocated to a parish for the purpose of producing parish and diocesan profiles. The NCPR is currently undertaking a preliminary allocation of the SA1s to parishes and will shortly contact dioceses to ensure these allocations align with parish boundaries.

Further information about Statistical Area 1s can be found at: [ABS Statistical Area Level 1](#)

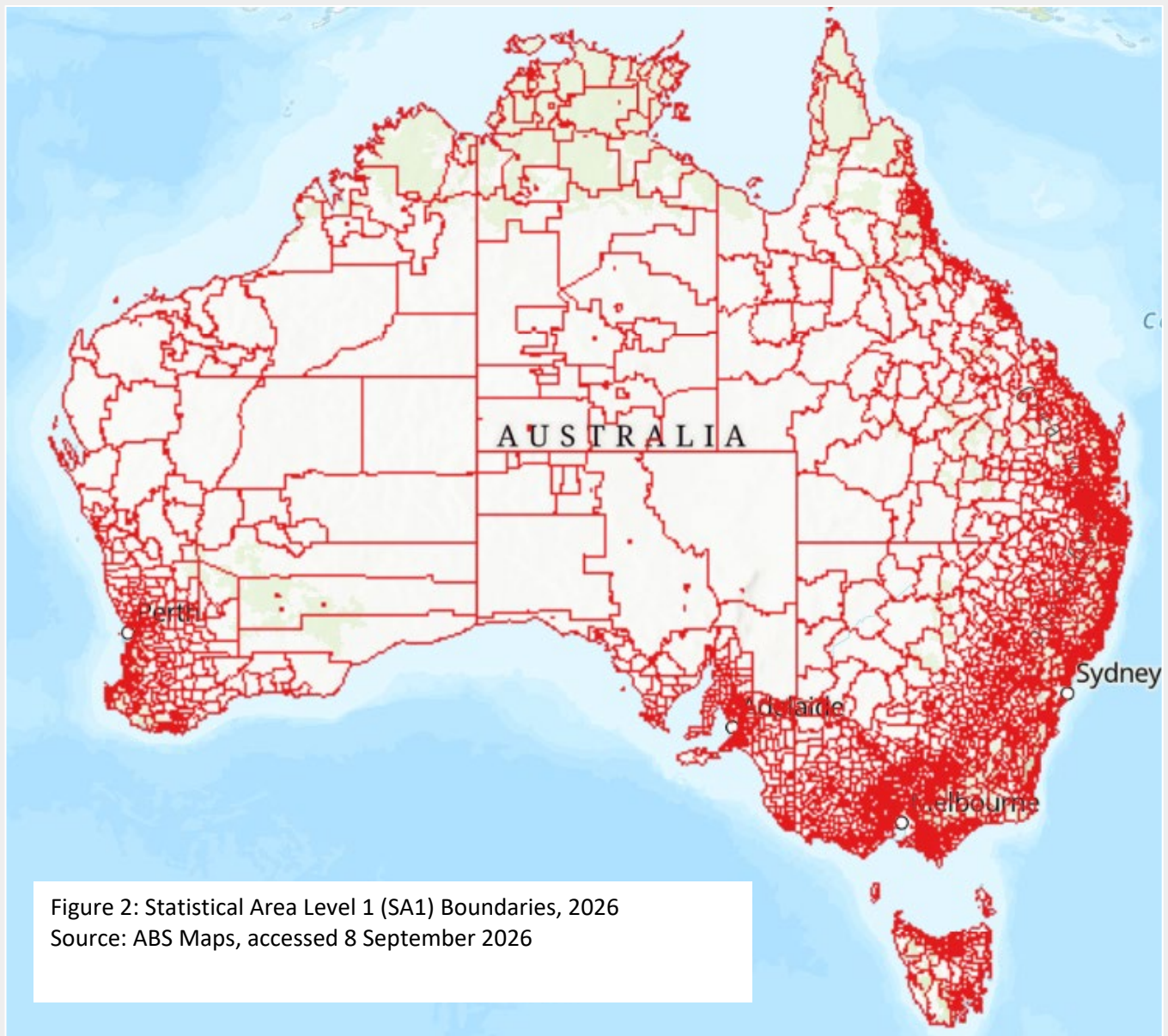
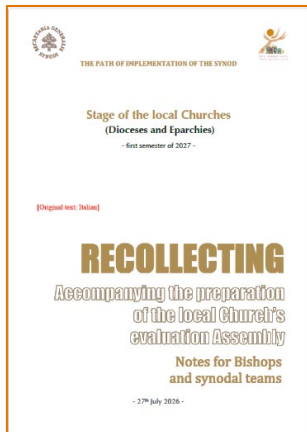


Figure 2: Statistical Area Level 1 (SA1) Boundaries, 2026
Source: ABS Maps, accessed 8 September 2026

Synod on Synodality: Implementation



Recollecting Phase



The General Secretariat for the Synod has released a new document providing guidance for bishops and synodal teams preparing for the Recollecting phase of the Church's *Towards the Assemblies* process.

During the Recollecting phase, dioceses are asked to reanimate their synodal teams and coordinate the diocesan process of reflection and discernment. Each diocese is invited to reflect on its synodal journey, considering how the Holy Spirit has shaped the decisions and the fruits that have emerged from them.

From these reflections, the synodal team will draft a narrative report. The document emphasises the importance of gathering experiences from a diverse range of ministries and communities, with particular attention given to areas where the diocese has "invested most significantly". The narrative report will inform the evaluation assembly which will in turn contribute to the preparation of a letter to other churches. The letter, expected to be approximately two pages in length, will accompany the narrative report and present the contribution that the diocese offers to the wider Church.

The document is available from the website for the Synod at the link below:

<https://www.synod.va/en/resources/documents/documents-for-the-third-phase/recollecting-accompanying-the-preparation-of-the-local-church-s0.html>

Study Groups

Following the first assembly of the Synod on Synodality in 2023, Pope Francis established a number of study groups to examine key issues that had emerged during the synodal process. Several of the Study Groups have now released their final reports, reflecting extensive consultation, listening and discernment in the areas they were tasked to examine. The Study Groups that have released reports to date are:

- Study Group 2 – To Hear the Cry of the Poor and the Earth
- Study Group 3 – The Mission in the Digital Environment
- Study Group 4 – The Revision of the *Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis* from a Synodal Missionary Perspective
- Study Group 5 – The Participation of Women in the Life and Leadership of the Church
- Study Group 6 – The Revision in a Synodal Missionary Perspective of the Documents Touching on the Relationship between Bishops, Consecrated Life, and Ecclesial Associations
- Study Group 7, Part 1 – The Procedures for the Selection of Candidates for the Episcopate
- Study Group 7, Part 2 – The *Ad Limina* Visits in a Missionary Synodal Perspective
- Study Group 9 – Theological Criteria and Synodal Methodologies for Shared Discernment and Emerging Doctrinal, Pastoral and Ethical Issues
- SECAM – The Pastoral Challenge of Polygamy

The final reports and their executive summaries can be accessed at the link below:

<https://www.synod.va/en/the-synodal-process/phase-3-the-implementation/the-study-groups.html>

Synodality in Australia

Further information about synodal activities and initiatives being implemented across the Church in Australia can be found on the Synod Next Steps webpage, which also includes a link to subscribe to the quarterly newsletter.

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

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

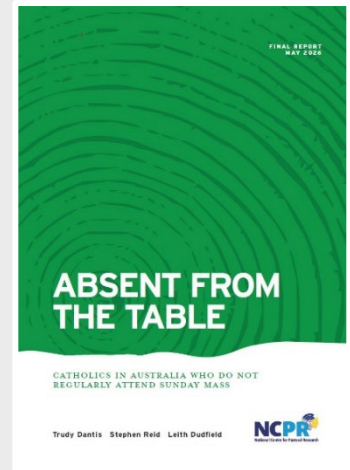
Absent from the Table Project

Final Report Launches in October

The NCPR's *Absent from the Table* Final Report will be launched on **Thursday 8 October 2026** at 10:00am at Mary MacKillop Place, Sydney. The event will also be streamed online using this link: <https://bit.ly/AbsentfromtheTableLaunch>

The project emerged from concerns raised during recent Church consultations in Australia, including the Fifth Plenary Council and the Synod of Bishops processes, where declining Mass attendance was consistently identified as a significant pastoral challenge. The study focused on four key areas:

- Factors influencing a Catholic's decision not to attend Sunday Mass
- Alternative forms of engagement with the Church
- Attitudes towards the Eucharist
- Implications for the wider Catholic community and Church



The research employed a mixed-methods approach across two phases. Phase 1 involved an online survey of 1,973 self-selected Catholics aged 18 and over, across seven states and territories. Phase 2 consisted of in-depth interviews with 67 volunteers from Phase 1, providing qualitative insights into personal experiences and motivations.

Among survey respondents, 74 per cent attended Mass less than weekly, including 19 per cent who attended monthly, 36 per cent occasionally and 19 per cent not at all. Interview participants expressed mixed views: some admired weekly attendance as a meaningful commitment, while others saw it as an obligation or even frustrating. Many valued community over ritual and indicated they might return if changes were made.

The study identified 14 reasons (six 'Participant-centred' and eight 'Church-centred') for infrequent Sunday Mass attendance. Many respondents cited a combination of factors, with personal experiences often intertwined with institutional concerns. While the findings echoed themes identified in the 2007 study¹, they also highlighted several emerging concerns and shifts in emphasis. Beyond the 14 Participant-centred and Church-centred reasons identified in the study, six interwoven themes emerged across both phases of the research, reflecting deeper emotional, cultural and spiritual dynamics that shape Catholic engagement today:

- | | |
|--|-------------------------------------|
| 1. The impacts of abuse | 4. Burnout and competing priorities |
| 2. Seeking community beyond the parish | 5. Generational disconnect |
| 3. Spirituality beyond the Church | 6. Indigenous issues |

Despite irregular attendance, most participants remained deeply connected to their faith. Around two-thirds said faith was very important, and more than three-quarters affirmed belief in Jesus as the Son of God. The Eucharist also remained deeply meaningful for many participants, although beliefs varied.

Participants provided several strategies for reconnection, including making Mass more engaging, welcoming greater involvement of lay people, building stronger relationships within parish communities and fostering environments where people feel they belong and can participate meaningfully.

In addition to the research findings, the report includes six pastoral reflections prepared by a team of reflection writers. Drawing on their expertise and experience, these contributors offer thoughtful perspectives on the findings and their implications for pastoral leadership, ministry and the life of the Church.

Once launched, the Final Report will be available for download from the NCPR website:

<https://ncpr.catholic.org.au/absent-from-the-table-australian-catholics-who-do-not-regularly-attend-sunday-mass/>

The NCPR is deeply grateful to all who supported and contributed to the project, especially the participants who responded to the survey and took part in the interviews. Thank you for generously sharing your stories, concerns, hopes and fears with us.

¹ Robert Dixon et al., *Catholics Who Have Stopped Attending Mass* (Pastoral Projects Office Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, 2007), 9.

Staff News

ACMRO Conference 2026

On 25 and 26 August, the Australian Catholic Migrant and Refugee Office (ACMRO) held its annual conference at the Mary MacKillop Centre in Sydney. Cardinal Fabio Baggio CS delivered the keynote address on the opening day, while Dr Trudy Dantis addressed participants on the second day with a presentation titled *Migrant Communities as Missionaries of Hope in a Synodal Church*.



In her address, Dr Dantis reflected on how migrant communities become witnesses and missionaries of hope, while also sharing her personal experiences as both a migrant and a participant in the Synod on Synodality in 2023 and 2024. She noted that her migration story included four significant journeys: from India to New Zealand, New Zealand to Australia, Australia to India, and finally India to Australia. Her experiences of leaving jobs behind, farewelling friends, and surrendering plans resonated with the participants in the room, many of whom were migrants themselves.

She noted that one of the reasons migrants can become powerful witnesses of hope is because they “know something of what it means to stand between what has been left behind and what has not yet arrived, to live in the space between loss and promise”. She also reflected on some of the challenges faced by migrants today, including prejudice, racism and, at times, violence. In response to these challenges, she proposed a way forward that was also practised at the Synod: “attentive listening, genuine encounter, and the courage to engage with those whose experiences differ from our own”.



Above: Trudy Dantis, Stephen Reid, Katherine Jelavic and Leith Dudfield

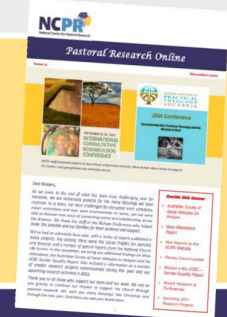
NCPR staff also attended the conference, with Ms Leith Dudfield facilitating two “Conversations in the Spirit” sessions across the two days.

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