

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY
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ABSENT FROM THE TABLE

**CATHOLICS IN AUSTRALIA WHO DO NOT
REGULARLY ATTEND SUNDAY MASS**

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This national study examined the reasons why some Catholics in Australia do not attend Sunday Mass regularly. The research responded to concerns raised during recent Australian consultations, particularly the Fifth Plenary Council and the Synod of Bishops processes, which highlighted declining Mass participation as a pressing pastoral issue. The study focused on four key areas:

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

The research was conducted in two phases, employing a mixed-methods approach. Phase 1 involved an online survey of 1,973 self-selected Catholics aged 18 and over, across seven states and territories. Most respondents were born in Australia, with others representing at least 55 countries, offering diverse perspectives. Phase 2 consisted of in-depth interviews with 67 volunteers from Phase 1, providing qualitative insights into personal experiences and motivations. A Research Reference Group guided the project, and the Human Research Ethics Committee of the Christian Research Association granted ethics approval.

Mass Attendance Patterns and Perspectives

Seventy-four per cent of respondents attended Mass less than weekly. Of these, 19 per cent attended monthly, 36 per cent attended occasionally, and 19 per cent did not attend at all. Twenty per cent of respondents said they had attended a Sunday celebration in the absence of a priest (generally, liturgies where Mass is not available in a geographical area close by), and 96 per cent did not participate in services of other Christian denominations or religions.

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. COVID-19 reduced the sense of obligation, reframing Mass as one of several ways to connect with God. For some, non-attendance signalled dissatisfaction with Church teachings or practices seen to be conservative.

Changes in attendance were both gradual and abrupt. Some drifted away over years due to life transitions (e.g., leaving school, moving parishes), while others stopped suddenly during COVID-19, which disrupted routines and weakened parish ties. Online Mass provided a temporary substitute, but many did not return, citing health concerns, loss of habit, or feeling Mass was no longer central to their spiritual identity. Family dynamics, personal crises, abuse scandals, and disagreements with Church teaching also influenced decisions.

Factors Influencing Non-Attendance at Sunday Mass

The study identified six 'Participant-centred' and eight 'Church-centred' reasons for not attending Sunday Mass frequently, outlined below. Many cited a combination of factors, with personal experiences often intertwined with institutional concerns.

Table 1. Participant- and Church-centred Reasons for Non-Attendance

Participant-centred Reasons:	Church-centred reasons:
1. Going to Mass not a priority	1. Liturgical issues
2. Crisis of faith	2. Challenges with the parish priest and other clergy
3. Family or household-related issues	3. The misuse of power and authority in the Church
4. Travelling, weather or temporary illness	4. Structural factors
5. Chronic illness, infirmity or old age, transport	5. Concerns related to the parish as a community
6. Attendance at another time or elsewhere	6. Disappointment in the Church
	7. Lack of inclusivity or a sense of being excluded by Church rules
	8. The irrelevance of the Church to life today

These findings echoed themes from a 2007 study, while also revealing new or more prominent Church-related factors such as disappointment in the Church, liturgical dissatisfaction, and inclusivity concerns. Similarly, novel participant-centred reasons included attending at another time or elsewhere, chronic illness, old age, transport and travelling, weather or temporary illness (among weekly attenders).¹ The study also revealed several new minor themes, identified in italics against the main reasons below.

Participant-centred Reasons:

1. Going to Mass not a priority (*Change in Mass attendance habits since COVID-19*)
2. Crisis of faith (*Connect to God in other ways, Attending weekly Mass unnecessary to maintaining faith*)²
3. Family or household-related issues (*No family or friends attending, Partner not Catholic, Partner or family unsupportive of attendance, Other living issues*).

Church-centred Reasons:

1. Liturgical issues (*Boring or depressing Mass, Do not connect with Mass, Mass not relevant, Issues with the liturgy or the structure of Mass, Mass not age-appropriate, Poor music*)
2. Challenges with the parish priest and clergy (*Challenges with priests born in other countries*)
3. Misuse of power and authority (*Clericalism, hypocrisy and contradictions in the Church, Lack of trust in the Church*)

¹ The 2007 study examined the reasons why certain Catholics, aged 25 and older, who formerly attended Mass regularly, ceased to do so within the past five years, excluding factors such as age or ill health. The omission of illness as a reason for non-attendance was intentional; Robert Dixon et al., *Catholics Who Have Stopped Attending Mass* (Pastoral Projects Office Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, 2007), 9.

² The theme of weekly attendance at Mass being no longer obligatory is not a 'new' concept, as it was mentioned in the supplementary findings of the 2007 report, but was not identified as a distinct theme at that time. It emerged as a theme in its own right in this study; Dixon et al., *Catholics Who Have Stopped Attending Mass*, 50.

4. Structural factors (*Disability support or access issues, Lack of priests, Lack of Traditional Latin Mass, Mass not offered weekly, Prefer to attend online Mass*).

Faith Life and Alternative Church Engagement

Despite their 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. Similarly, over two-thirds described God as very important.

For many, the Catholic faith was highly significant during childhood, shaped by family traditions (85%), school-based religious education (83%), and sacramental preparation (81%). Over half (53%) had participated in youth or church groups, while 55 per cent had attended spiritual retreats or conferences. Sixty-nine per cent agreed or strongly agreed that being Catholic was an essential part of who they are today.

Nearly two-thirds (64%) prayed regularly, and many expressed Catholic identity through sending their children to a Catholic school (44%), sharing their faith with others (40%), wearing religious symbols or displaying them at home (40%), and volunteering in the wider community (39%) or parish (29%). Other expressions of faith included through small groups, faith-based events, and private Bible reading.

Catholic school communities were valued more highly than parishes (74% vs. 51%). Participants often attended Catholic rituals for family events, but some resisted personal participation and had strong views against them.

Beyond Mass, engagement occurred through Catholic support or welfare services, education, health care, and social justice groups. A majority (62%) reported other connections, such as working or volunteering in Catholic schools and hospitals, and participating in prayer and study groups, youth events, religious communities, and Catholic cultural or social clubs. Spiritual connections included Catholic devotions, personal prayer, Catholic arts, and spiritual direction, while digital engagement occurred through online Mass, Catholic podcasts, social media, and Catholic seminars. Almost all respondents (96%) did not attend the services of other denominations, though a few did so for inclusivity or preference.

Attitudes Toward the Eucharist

The Eucharist remained deeply meaningful for many participants, though beliefs varied. Just over half (55%) affirmed the Real Presence of Christ, while 24 per cent saw the elements as symbolic and 21 per cent were unsure. Interviews revealed that even among irregular attenders, the Eucharist often held significance—sometimes more for its sense of tradition and community than for doctrinal beliefs. Some expressed discomfort receiving Communion when disagreeing with Church teachings, while others questioned transubstantiation or regarded the Eucharist as having little personal relevance.

Implications for the Catholic Community

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:** Experiences of abuse, particularly clergy sexual abuse, were cited as significant factors affecting trust and participation. Survivors and their families expressed deep disillusionment, highlighting the need for healing and accountability.
2. **Seeking Community Beyond the Parish:** There was a strong desire for community and belonging, which many respondents felt was not met within their parish settings. This led to a search for connection beyond parish Mass attendance, with some finding relational and spiritual fulfilment in Catholic schools, online communities, social justice groups, or other denominations.
3. **Spirituality Beyond the Church:** Several participants reported connecting with God through personal prayer, nature, online Mass, and acts of service, often finding these expressions more meaningful than the usual Sunday liturgies. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated this shift, with many discovering alternative forms of worship that were physically easier to access and spiritually more fulfilling.
4. **Burnout and competing priorities:** These were common experiences, especially among parents, carers and rural residents. Structural challenges, such as inconvenient Mass times, scarcity of clergy and limited access, further compounded these pressures, making Mass difficult for many.
5. **Generational Disconnect:** Younger Catholics were more likely to feel disengaged from parish life, citing a lack of relevance, inclusivity and community. While many affirmed core beliefs, they sought more relational and contemporary expressions of faith that aligned with their lived experiences.
6. **Indigenous issues:** These respondents had mixed views, some respondents expressed disappointment over the Church's perceived lack of support for the Voice Referendum and cultural inclusion. Contrasting views on using an Acknowledgement of Country revealed tensions around reconciliation and liturgical practice, highlighting the need for deeper engagement with First Nations' perspectives.

Strategies for Reconnection

Participants called for a renewed pastoral approach that reflects the diversity of Catholic experience and responds to contemporary spiritual needs. Suggestions included making Mass more engaging through better homilies, music, shorter services, more accessible Mass times, and greater liturgical relevance, as well as guidance for those unfamiliar with the service. Some proposed that days other than Sunday be approved to fulfil the weekly obligation.

Others advocated for a more inclusive and progressive Church that welcomed diverse voices and fostered compassion rather than judgment. Suggestions included greater involvement of lay people, the inclusion of women and married individuals in ministry, and acceptance of LGBTQI+ individuals and divorced and remarried Catholics. Respondents emphasised building stronger relationships within parish communities and broadening the Church's interaction with people beyond traditional settings.

Structural reforms, greater transparency and accountability, and improved priestly ministry were also highlighted.

Participants stressed the need for parishes to foster environments where people feel they belong and can participate meaningfully. A welcoming atmosphere—especially for families and younger people—was seen as essential. Respondents also emphasised building faith through formation focused on core Catholic beliefs and scripture. Greater parish involvement in volunteering, community outreach, and social justice initiatives was encouraged to reflect the Church’s mission and deepen engagement.

While many participants expressed openness to re-engagement, a number identified personal barriers that prevented more frequent attendance. A small group of respondents stated that they were not interested in returning to the Church at all, citing disillusionment or a shift in personal beliefs.

Limitations and Future Research

While the findings are based on a self-selected sample and are not fully generalisable to all Catholics in Australia, they provide significant insights into patterns of engagement and reasons for non-attendance at Mass.

Further research could focus on specific subgroups (young adults, Indigenous Catholics, culturally diverse communities) and explore long-term trends. Comparative studies and deeper qualitative work could inform more responsive pastoral strategies.

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Thank you,

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Leith Dudfield is a Research Assistant at the National Centre for Pastoral Research. Leith worked on interviewing participants, the coding and analysis of qualitative data, and reviewing the literature on declining Mass attendance, and contributed to the writing of this report. She also supported the project through numerous administrative tasks, including liaising with participants, applying for ethics approval, and editing and assembling documents.

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 *Thriving (& Surviving) in Ministry: A Profile of Catholic Clergy in Australia: Health and Wellbeing* (2025), *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).

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