

# **The state of the Church and the Family: The views of a typical Melbourne Catholic Parish on St Leonard's Parish Survey May 2015**

The survey results provide an insight into the views of Catholics in one parish community in Melbourne. They have a particular value because a major effort was made to contact most households who had identified as Catholic twenty years previously.

St Leonard's Parish in Glen Waverley is a middle class suburb of Melbourne, located 19 km east of the central business district.<sup>1</sup> A parish group had invited Catholics for Renewal in September 2014 to facilitate a discussion forum on challenges facing the family which attracted some 40 participants. The same parish group proposed in April 2015 a survey of all parishioners on a mailout list to seek their views on what they say as important issues facing the Church. In the light of Pope Francis' call for a focus on the family and the Synod of Bishops on the family in September 2015, the parish group wanted to find out the views of parishioners on the main issues facing the Church and in particular how these related to support for the family.<sup>2</sup> Pope Francis had specifically noted in the lead up to the Synod on the Family that 'it is the responsibility of the Church to accompany and support families, especially those most in need'.<sup>3</sup> The opening to the survey stated its purpose in the following words:

I am from St Leonard's, your local Catholic Parish. Pope Francis is holding a special meeting of the Catholic Church this October on the family. He has asked that we find out more about what the Church can do to help families. Pope Francis has asked for information from Catholics regardless of how connected they are to the Church.

We are keen to get your feedback and are interested in hearing your views. We began this process last year at a parish forum.

The parish group conducting the survey wanted in particular to obtain the views of people who were Catholics but who now had little or no connection to the Church. The Parish has maintained contact with all its members over the past nearly 20 years through its Parish Neighbourhood Groups (PNGs). These PNGs consist of 80 groups of some 10-15 Catholic households, each Group having a parish representative as its leader. Each Easter and Christmas, these leaders deliver to their 10-15 households a message from the parish priest. This message contains information on the ceremonies to be celebrated and times as well as giving basic information on parish activities. The parish representatives are asked to deliver this message personally, so as to develop friendship and to demonstrate that the parish is interested in all its parishioners. The survey, however, was the first time parishioners were asked to respond to a questionnaire. The aim of the survey was to obtain information about the needs of parishioners and specifically to gather thoughts from Catholics who may feel alienated from the Church.

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<sup>1</sup> The entry for Glen Waverley, Victoria in Wikipedia notes that Glen Waverley had the seventh highest number of one million dollar-plus house sales in Melbourne in 2013. Attachment 1 provides a detailed socio economic profile from the 2011 Australian Census of the self identified Catholic population within the parish boundaries.

<sup>2</sup> The parish group involved in proposing, administering and coding the results were Maureen McKenzie, Vin Faulkner, Fr Brendan Dillon and Jan Richards. Richard Curtain and Vivien Williams from Catholics for Renewal also took part in the meetings. Maureen McKenzie and Vin Faulkner took a lead role in coding the open ended responses and Richard Curtain did the data analysis and write-up. Helpful comments on the draft of the findings were provided by .....

<sup>3</sup> A media release on the Pope's call for prayers for the intentions of the upcoming Synod of Bishops on the family was given as background to the parish interviewers. See media release entitled 'Pope Francis on the family synod: 'We need prayers, not gossip' Vatican City, Mar 25, 2015 (CNA/EWTN News).

A total population of some 1,200 households were surveyed which is close to the 1,459 Catholic households within the parish boundaries identified by the 2011 census.<sup>4</sup> Only 152 responses were received, representing a response rate of 13 per cent.<sup>5</sup>

The low response rate from a population that in 1996 identified themselves as Catholics reflects a widespread lack of interest from the majority in taking part in the survey. The number of responses is consistent with the weekly Mass attendance in the parish of some 700 persons. The high non-response rate (87 per cent) suggests that many invited to respond were not interested in engaging at even this minimal level to provide feedback to the local parish or more widely to the Catholic Church. This conclusion is further supported by the following information about the age and connectedness to the church of the respondents.

The sex and age profile of the respondents clearly do not reflect the expected normal distribution of the adult Catholic population. The respondents to the survey compared to an expected sex and age profile are more likely to be women (63 per cent) and older (60 per cent were aged 65 years and over). Only 15 per cent of respondents were aged 20-44 years.

Another feature of the respondents' profile that differs substantially from a population of self-identified Catholics is the degree of connectedness to the Catholic Church. Respondents were asked to describe their connection to the Catholic Church, using a five-point scale ranging from 'highly connected', 'connected', 'occasionally connected', 'little connection', to 'not connected at all'. Four-out-of-five respondents (83 per cent) describe themselves as either 'connected' or 'highly connected'. The age profile of those who are more connected to the Catholic Church is overwhelmingly older than the age profile of those who are less connected. Among those who say they are connected or highly connected, near to two-in-three (65 per cent) are aged 65 years and over, and near to one-in-four (23 per cent) are aged 45-64 years. Only just over one-in-ten (12 per cent) of those who say they are connected or highly connected are aged 20-44 years.

These age differences for the respondents are even more stark for the self-identified 'highly connected'. In this grouping, three-out-of-four (74 per cent) are aged 65 years and over, about one-in-five (18 per cent) are aged 45-64 years and less than one-in-ten (8 per cent) of the highly connected are aged 20-44 years. These age differences make it necessary to report the results not only in total but also by age and the degree of connectedness to the Catholic Church.

## **Results**

Respondents were first asked to 'tell us what you believe, from your experience, to be the three most important issues the Church needs to address at this time'. Responses were recorded as open-ended. A small group of parishioners coded the responses by looking at the first 50 sets of replies to work out categories to cover each of the responses. This coding frame was then applied to the remaining responses. Issues related to the church were separated from issues related to the family and other issues. Respondents made in total 280 comments related to the Church itself. Some 107 comments related to the family and 24 comments related to other issues. Clearly concerns about the state of the Church itself was the issue that attracted most response.

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<sup>4</sup> See Attachment One. The 1,200 households include about 100 households that have since 1996 moved outside the parish boundaries.

<sup>5</sup> However, for purposes of analysis the number of responses is about 140 as eight respondents did not provide information about whether they were male or female, and ten did not provide information about their age.

## Key issues related to the Church

Table 1 shows the coded responses for the open-ended responses on the most important issues related to the Church.

**Table 1: Total number of responses related to Church issues in reply to the question: ‘tell us what you believe, from your experience, to be the three most important issues the Church needs to address at this time’, ranked by number of responses**

Total responses related to Church issues	N
Paedophilia /Sexual abuse: Apologise for sexual abuse	47
Supply of priests/ married priests/attracting men to priesthood/religious life	46
More religion to youth/attract youth back	33
Women priests/role of women in church	25
Attract people back to church	23
Loss of confidence in the Bishops & Hierarchy/no accountability	21
Accepting all people/ non-judgemental/kindness	20
Include laity in Church/pastoral care	14
Make Mass relevant to today	12
Unnecessary regulation by the Church /Do away with Roman Curia	8
Raise level of Catholic education/more programs	8
Present church in a better light	8
Modernise Bible language	7
Bring back Latin mass /Go back to pre 1962	3
Changes to church practice: eg bring back General confession	2
Vatican 2 changes not implemented adequately	2
Ecumenical unity	1
	280

**Table 2: Number of first-mentioned responses related to Church issues in reply to the question: ‘tell us what you believe, from your experience, to be the three most important issues the Church needs to address at this time’, ranked by number of responses**

First-mentioned responses related to Church issues	N
Paedophilia /Sexual abuse: Apologise for sexual abuse	27
Supply of priests/married priests/attracting men to priesthood/religious life	18
Attract people back to church	15
More religion to youth/attract youth back	14
Loss of confidence in the Bishops & Hierarchy/no accountability	11
Women priests/role of women in church	8
Accepting all people/ non-judgemental/kindness	8
Include laity in Church/pastoral care	7
Issues related to church practices	24
Total	132

The most important set of issues parishioners would like to see addressed by the Church is ‘paedophilia /sexual abuse: apologise for sexual abuse’ (47 responses). Related to this is the ‘loss of confidence in the bishops & hierarchy/no accountability’ (21 responses) and present church in a better light (8 responses).

Many identified as an important issue for the Church the ‘supply of priests/ married priests/attracting men to priesthood/religious life’ (46 responses). The issue of ‘women priests/role

of women in church’ attracted 25 responses. A smaller number of comments related to the need to ‘include laity in Church/pastoral care’ (14 responses).

Another cluster of issues related to the need to make the Church more welcoming to others. These responses were: ‘more religion to youth/attract youth back’ (33 responses); ‘attract people back to church’ (23 responses); and ‘accepting all people/non judgemental/kindness’ (20 responses).

A smaller number of responses related to the conduct of the liturgy. These were: ‘make Mass relevant to today (12 responses), modernise bible language (7 responses), and ‘changes to church practice: eg bring back General confession’ (2 responses). Other issues related to church practice were: ‘unnecessary regulation by the Church /do away with Roman Curia’ (8 responses), ‘raise level of Catholic education/more programs’ (8 responses), Vatican II changes not implemented adequately (2 responses) and a suggestion to ‘bring back Latin Mass/go back to pre-1962 (3 responses).

Table 2 shows the first mentioned issues related to the Church. The issue of ‘paedophilia /Sexual abuse: apologise for sexual abuse’ stands out ahead of any other first mention issue related to the Church.

### Issues related to the family

Table 3 reports on the open-ended responses related to the family. The most important set of issues identified relate to what was described in Table 1 & 2 as ‘accepting all people/non-judgemental/kindness’. The largest number of comments related to the need to improve the Treatment of divorced/separated people and the ‘treatment of homosexuals/ gay marriage’ (20 and 14 responses respectively). Another cluster of responses refer to the need for the Church to help build family relationships (17 responses), help families experiencing hardship (13 responses), more recognition of the family by the Church (7 responses), and more events for youth (3 responses). Issues related to sexual behaviour received less attention. These were: contraception (12 responses), and ‘living together before marriage’ (8 responses). A number of responses related to ‘loss of faith/practice/respect (13 responses). The same three issues in Table 3 were also mentioned first by respondents, confirming their importance.

**Table 3: Total number of replies related to family issues in response to the question: ‘tell us what you believe, from your experience, to be the three most important issues the Church needs to address at this time’, ranked by number of responses**

Coded responses	N
Treatment of divorced/separated people	20
Building family relationships	17
Treatment of homosexuals/ gay marriage	14
Helping hardship families	13
Loss of faith/practice/respect	13
Contraception	12
Living together before marriage	8
Recognition of family by the Church	7
More events for youth	3
	107

### Other issues

Respondents mentioned a small number of other issues. These were: ‘attack’ from radical religions e.g. Islam (5 responses), speak up for justice (4 responses), value of life & catholic values (4 responses), use social media/contemporary music ( 2 responses), euthanasia (1 responses) and climate change (1 response).

## Key issues and connectedness to the Church

How do the above ranking of issues differ by how connected to the Catholic Church a respondent feels? What are the most important issues raised by those who identify in the survey as 'occasionally connected', 'little connection' or 'not connected at all'. As noted above, only 11 per cent of the respondents in these categories responded to this question. These 15 respondents provided 43 responses to the question asking them to 'Please tell us what you believe, from your experience, to be the three most important issues the Church needs to address at this time'. Although the number of responses and respondents is low, the results are worth reporting as the total parish population was surveyed, and not representative sample. This means the survey results reflect the surveyed population accurately.

### Key issues related to the Church identified by those with little or no connection to the Church

Table 4 shows the top three responses on Church-related issues of the respondents who identified themselves as occasionally or not connected to the Church. The issue that stands out with nine responses is 'paedophilia /sexual abuse: apologise for sexual abuse'. Next in prominence is 'attract people back to the Church' (5 responses) and 'accepting all people/non judgemental/kindness' (4 responses).

**Table 4: Top three issues related to the Church identified by respondents who say they are occasionally or not connected to the Church, ranked by number of responses**

Responses from occasionally or not connected respondents	N
Paedophilia /Sexual abuse: Apologise for sexual abuse	9
Attract people back to church	5
Accepting all people/non judgemental/kindness	4

### Key issues related to the Church identified by those connected to the Church

How do these responses differ from the respondents who identified themselves as connected or highly connected to the Church? Table 5 lists the issues related to the Church identified by the respondents who they were connected to the Church.

**Table 5: Top five issues related to the Church identified by respondents who say they are connected or highly connected to the Church, ranked by number of responses**

Responses from the connected respondents	N
Supply of priests/ married priests/attracting men to priesthood	42
Paedophilia /Sexual abuse: Apologise for sexual abuse	35
More religion to youth/attract youth back	29
Women priests/role of women in Church	20
Loss of confidence in the Bishops & Hierarchy/no accountability	16
Attract people back to church	16

The top issue related to the Church for the connected respondents is the future supply of priests (42 responses). Paedophilia /sexual abuse: apologise for sexual abuse comes second with (35 responses) and the issue of attracting youth back to the Church (29 responses) is third. Fourth is the issue of 'women priests/role of women in Church' (20 responses). Equal fifth in rank with 16 responses each are: 'loss of confidence in the Bishops & Hierarchy/no accountability' and 'Attract people back to church'. Amongst the highly connected respondents, the issues related to the Church are

much the same with first two issues in Table 5 also ranking first and second for the highly connected. However, it is worth noting that the highly connected respondents have ranked in third place the issue of ‘loss of confidence in the bishops & hierarchy/no accountability’.

**Key issues related to the family identified by those with little or no connection to the Church**

The responses related to the family of respondents who say they are have an occasional or no connection to the Catholic Church are few in number. The top thee family-related issues they identity are reported in Table 6. These are in order of importance: treatment of homosexuals/ gay marriage, building family relationships, and helping hardship families.

**Table 6: Top three issues related to the family identified by respondents who say they are occasionally or not connected to the Church, ranked by number of responses**

<b>Responses from occasionally or not connected respondents</b>	<b>N</b>
Treatment of homosexuals/ gay marriage	6
Building family relationships	5
Helping hardship families	5

The respondents who say they are connected or highly connected to the Church, however, have a different ranking of family related issues. Table 7 reports their top five issues related to the family. At the top is the Church’s treatment of divorced/separated people and placed fifth is the treatment of homosexuals/ gay marriage.

**Table 7: Top five issues related to the family identified by respondents who say they are connected or highly connected to the Church, ranked by number of responses**

<b>Responses from the connected</b>	<b>N</b>
Treatment of divorced/separated people	19
Building family relationships	11
Contraception	9
Loss of faith/practice/respect	9
Treatment of homosexuals/ gay marriage	8

**Main joys & hopes of marriage and family life today**

Three quarters of the respondents are parents and half of these parents are living with their children who range young children to children who are aged 21 years & over living at home. The survey asked respondents to say in their own words what they see as the main joys and hopes of marriage and family life today? Attachments Two and Three list the open-ended responses separately for women and men in three age groups of 20-44 year, 45-64 years and 65 years and over. The questions asked were:

- What are the main joys and hopes of marriage and family life today? Please give examples or tell us a story that shows what you mean.
- What are the most pressing struggles and fears that challenge marriage and family life today? Please give examples or tell us a story that shows what you mean.

Women and men have different emphases in what they see as the joys and hopes of marriage. A third of men’s comments highlighted the joy of bringing up children or their involvement with grandchildren. On the other hand, only one quarter of women mentioned children or grandchildren.

Women were much more likely to mention happiness although men were more likely to refer to enjoyment or joy. More women highlighted sharing but both men and women referred to support as a key aspect of marriage.

In relation to the most pressing struggles and fears that challenge marriage and family life today, the issue highlighted by one-in-five comments related to financial pressures. This was followed by two separate issues of work and family balance and divorce and breakdown of families. Each of these issues were referred to in one-in-ten of the comments. Children affected by drugs etc and drugs & alcohol was a matter of concern mentioned in some 7 per cent of comments. The harmful effects on family life of a preoccupation with social media and the internet are referred to in one-in-twenty comments. Also mentioned in the same proportion of comments is peer pressure. Children rejecting the church, the generation gap and the damaging effects of a consumer driven outcome were also matters of concern.

Surprisingly, religion or faith is mentioned by respondents as an aspect of their view of the joy or hopes of marriage and family life. When it is mentioned, it is usually by those aged 65 years and over. One 45-64 year old male respondent asked: ‘Simple. Jesus is the centre of families. How can the church promote that?’

### **Assessments of the effectiveness of pastoral care for families**

Respondents were asked to assess how effectively the Church is at offering pastoral care to four different types of family arrangements? They were asked to use a five-point scale to rate how effectiveness in relation to four type of family arrangements. Few respondents answered these questions with the number responding ranging between 45 and 57 responses. This suggests that many felt they did not know enough about pastoral activities to offer a view.

Table 8 shows that few of those who did respond to this question rated the Church’s pastoral care as effective. This was particularly the case for families involving divorced and remarried people and lesbian and gay persons and families, with couples living together and their families and other persons, couples or families not already mentioned not fare behind in assessments of effectiveness.

**Table 8: Responses assessing effectiveness of Church’s pastoral care to different type of families, per cent and number of responses**

<b>Types of family arrangements</b>	<b>Effective</b>	<b>Not rated as effective</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>N</b>
Families involving divorced and remarried people	15.6	84.4	100	45
Lesbian and gay persons and families	15.9	84.1	100	44
Couples living together and their families	22.8	77.2	100	57
Other persons, couples or families not already mentioned	30.9	69.1	100	55

Attachment Four, available separately, lists the open-ended responses given to the question: What can be done to improve pastoral care for these groups. Again few answered this question. However, this was probably because they did not have enough space on the questionnaire to write in a response. A further related question was asked about how ordained ministers and others can work effectively in the area of marriage and family. Nearly everyone (96 per cent) did not reply to this question. Again, this was most probably due to the lack of space at this point in the questionnaire to offer a written response.

## Conclusion

The list of most important issues identified by respondents are based on open-ended responses. The rank order of issues, therefore, provide a valuable insight in how parishioners in a typical Melbourne parish view of the Church. The need for the church hierarchy to apologise for sexual abuse of children is at the top of the list. This issue in particular was highlighted by those who rated themselves as now having little or no connection to the Church. It was also important, ranking second, for those who said they were connected to the Church. This evidence shows that one obstacle to people's closer identification with the Church is the absence of an apology from Church leaders backed by a satisfactory system of compensation funded by the Church for those affected by the abuse. The failure of Catholic bishops to engage in a positive way with the wider society, in the style and content of the message of Pope Francis, is seen by many younger Catholics as evidence of the failure of the Church.

The issue major issue identified is the an adequate supply of priests. This issue was at the top of the list of those said they connected to the Church. This concern reflects the key role priests have played at the centre of parish communities in mainstream Australian Catholicism. Indeed, a priest-led parish is the hallmark of the social life that most older Catholics identify with as the essence of their experience of Catholicism.

However, due to a range of sociological changes in many countries since the 1970s, the supply of priests from domestic sources has fallen dramatically. The average age of priests is getting older and many more will enter their seventies in the next few years from the large group who were ordained in the 1960s and 1970s. In contrast few new priests are being ordained. Many parishes in Australia no longer have a full-time priest or share their priest with another parish.<sup>6</sup>

The main response of the hierarchy to the problem of a declining domestic supply is to import priests from developing countries. The option of making much more use of permanent deacons in parishes has not been utilised in Australia at the levels they are utilised in the USA.

Pope Francis notes in *Gaudium Evangelii* that:

*The individualism of our post-modern and globalised era favours a lifestyle which weakens the development and stability of personal relationships and distorts family bonds. Pastoral activity needs to bring out more clearly the fact that our relationship with the Father demands and encourages a communion which heals, promotes and reinforces interpersonal bonds (para 67).*

The survey results suggest some scope exists to reinvigorate the social life of the parish with particular emphasis on meeting the social needs of the younger generations of Catholics. One way to do this is for the parish to engage younger generations of Catholics is to provide opportunities to learn about and act on the Church's social teachings. The most recent example of this is Pope Francis' encyclical letter *Laudato Si'* on meeting the challenge of climate change and much more. One [US Catholic commentator has already noted](#) that Pope Francis addresses the one of the top concerns of the generation reaching adulthood in the decade from 2000. Setting up a parish discussion group, led by an environmentalist, to read, reflect and act on the encyclical may be of interest to young Catholics. These young people may be seeking a way to engage with the Church on an issue they identify with strongly but are unclear on how to join with others to do something in their community about the issue.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> For details, see Peter Wilkinson, 2012, *Catholic Parish Ministry in Australia: The Crisis Deepens 2012 Update*. Catholics for Ministry and Women and the Australian Church, March.

<sup>7</sup> See Jeffrey D. Sachs, 2015, ['The Great Gift of 'Laudato Si''](#), *America Magazine*, 6 July