

Pastoral Projects Office
Australian Catholic Bishops Conference

Research Project on

**Catholics
Who Have Stopped
Going to Mass**

**Summary Report
October 2006**

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Introduction

For quite some years now, Catholics have been drifting away from active parish involvement, so that by 2001 the percentage of the Catholic population at Mass on a typical weekend had fallen to 15.3 per cent. Anecdotal reports suggest that in recent years this drift has been noticeable even among people who were regular Mass attenders and active parishioners for many years of their adult lives.

This research aims to meet the desire of the Catholic bishops of Australia to know more about the reasons why people are ceasing to attend Mass so that action can be taken to stem the flow or reach out to those who have gone.

This report is a comprehensive summary of the full final report of the project.

The Research Question

The core objective of this research project is to discover the major reasons why some Catholics, aged from about 25 upwards, who were once regular Mass attenders, have stopped going regularly to Mass within the last five or so years for reasons other than age or ill-health.

The Research Team

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What we already know from existing research

1. Mass attendance

We know that Mass attendances are falling and that this not just due to the absence of young adults. According to an earlier study of Mass attendance (Dixon 2003), in 2001 there were fewer Mass attenders in all age groups under 75 than there had been in 1996.

2. Catholic identification

We know that some people are ceasing to identify themselves as Catholics. Around 60,000 people aged 15 to 24 who had identified themselves (or had been identified by their parents) as Catholics in the 1991 Census did not identify themselves in that way in the 2001 Census, when they were aged 25 to 34 (Dixon 2005). This phenomenon of disidentification also exists among older Catholics, although not to anywhere near the same extent.

Whereas ceasing to attend Mass is an early phase of the process of disconnecting from the Church, disidentification is the final step.

3. Catholic Church Life Survey 1996

We know the reasons why infrequently and non-attending Catholic parents of children at Catholic schools don't go to Mass. Although the 1996 Catholic Church Life Survey was primarily a survey of Mass attenders, it also included a questionnaire that was sent home to parents of children attending Catholic schools. Of the more than 18,000 responses received, about 5,500 were from Catholic parents who did not attend Mass at all, or attended once a month or less often. The reasons they most commonly gave for their infrequent or non-attendance, in decreasing order of frequency, were:

- No longer feeling that being a committed Catholic required going to Mass every week.
- Disagreement with the Church's teaching on, or attitude to, personal sexual issues.
- Weekends were the only time available for being with the family.
- Disillusionment with the Church because of revelations of sexual abuse by Church personnel.
- Weekends were taken up with playing sport or taking children to activities.
- Weekend work.
- Being married to a non-Catholic.
- No longer accepting many Catholic beliefs.
- Boring or irrelevant homilies.
- Weekends were the only time available for household chores.
- Mass holds little or no meaning for them.

4. Australian Community Survey

Another source of knowledge about the reasons people give for non-attendance is the 1998 Australian Community Survey. This postal survey of the general Australian community, a project of NCLS Research, included 2,430 respondents who said they were Catholic at the time of the survey or had been raised Catholic.

In order of decreasing frequency, the most common reasons given by those who were either raised Catholic or were Catholic at the time of the survey and who had stopped going to church regularly after the age of 25 were:

- They moved to a new area.
- Choosing to make their own decisions.
- Other things were more important.
- Time pressures / work schedule.
- Health reasons.
- Specific problems with the Church or with other attenders.

5. Other published studies

1. In the *Spirit of Generation Y* project (Mason, Webber, Singleton and Hughes 2006), 363 Australians aged 13-59, including 102 Catholics, were asked why they did not attend religious services. The Catholics were inclined to cite negative publicity about clergy and the Church's attitude to moral issues as reasons for non-attendance, and about a quarter of them said it was not necessary to attend Church to have a personal relationship with God. Many of the young people in the group (not just Catholics) said they:
 - were disillusioned by the churches' attitudes to moral issues.
 - were disillusioned by the restricted role of women in the church.
 - felt that the church was unrealistic and out of step with society.
2. In the 2002 book *Why People Don't Go to Church*, an analysis of the Australian Community Survey data, John Bellamy of NCLS Research and his co-authors found that there were several factors which discouraged people from attending church. They grouped the different factors into four broad categories:
 - a problem with the church or its people
 - a lack of motivation,
 - a lack of time, and
 - a lack of access (Bellamy *et al.* 1998).
3. The Research Project on the Participation of Women in the Catholic Church in Australia carried out for the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference (Macdonald *et al.* 1999) identified various reasons, particularly those related to gender issues, why people felt dissatisfied with the Catholic Church. Reasons given included:
 - a perceived lack of support by the Church for single women.
 - the Church's perceived discrimination against and active exclusion of those who were divorced and remarried without an annulment.
 - disagreement with the Church's teachings about sexuality, contraception, divorce, remarriage and abortion.

The Research Method

The research team conducted forty-one interviews with mature-age Catholics who had stopped attending Mass in recent years.

The aim of the interviews was to discover what factors participants perceive as having led to their disconnection from Church life, whether they still see themselves as belonging in some ways to the Church, and whether they could foresee any changes which would encourage them to renew Church involvement.

Interviews were conducted in seven dioceses: Bunbury, Hobart, Melbourne, Parramatta, Perth, Rockhampton and Sydney.

Qualitative research

The methodology adopted for this research project was qualitative rather than quantitative. This means, among other things, that there was no attempt to construct a statistical sample that was representative of all mature age Catholics who have stopped going to Mass.

Reasons for adopting a qualitative methodology

1. A qualitative methodology allows us to listen in depth to the varied and complex stories of participants and obtain very rich, detailed data of a kind that cannot be obtained from a questionnaire made up of closed questions with pre-set responses.
2. As noted above, we already have a considerable amount of quantitative data on the reasons why Catholics do not go to Mass and on related questions.
3. Obtaining a large random sample of Catholics who matched the criteria of interest, either by post or by phone, would have been a very costly enterprise.

Example of other qualitative studies on related topics

1. Using a method remarkably similar to that of our own study, American sociologist Dean Hoge used a mix of qualitative and quantitative approaches in his 1981 study *Converts, Dropouts, Returnees: a study of religious change among young adults* (Hoge 1981). Hoge selected seven dioceses geographically representative of the United States, and asked diocesan personnel in each diocese to help select four or five parishes from the study. In each selected parish, parish census lists were used to identify a number of converts, dropouts and returnees who were then interviewed over the phone.
2. *Young Catholics at the New Millennium* is an entirely qualitative 2001 study based on interviews with young Catholics in Ireland, Italy, Malta, Poland, Great Britain and the United States. At least 45 interviews were conducted in each country, with Poland conducting the greatest number (82). The study makes no claim to represent the views of all young Catholics. It is, instead, ‘an in-depth account of how young adults come to realise their personal identity in matters of religion and morality, how they develop their personal relationships and what they value in life’ (Fulton *et.al.* 2000: 1).

The Participants

A total of 41 people participated in an interview. Of these, 28 were women and 13 were men. Over two-thirds of the participants were aged 50 to 69 and almost half were aged between 50 and 59. The oldest person was aged 74 and the youngest 29.

Forty-four per cent of those interviewed had attended university, with 20 per cent having completed postgraduate studies. Between one fifth and one quarter held a diploma or certificate while the remaining third had not completed any tertiary level education.

All except one of the participants were born in Australia. Eight were second generation Australians, five of whom had two Italian-born parents.

Three of the participants were converts to Catholicism. Five had spouses that had become Catholics as adults and 12 had non-Catholic spouses.

Only eight participants said they had been 'Sunday only' Catholics or had only taken on minor or occasional roles in the parish. Instead, 22 had been quite involved or heavily involved in parish life, generally participating in and often helping to run a number of programs.

As a group, the participants were younger, better educated and far more likely to have been born in Australia than Mass attenders as a whole (Dixon 2005). They were also much more likely to be married to a non-Catholic, but the ratio of women to men was about the same as among Mass attenders generally.

The fact that the participants were younger on average and less ethnically diverse than Mass attenders in general is not a problem with this research. Data from the National Attendance Count and the National Church Life Survey suggest that the problem of decreasing frequency of Mass attendance is not very applicable to older attenders (those aged over 75) or attenders born overseas, since overseas-born attenders are over-represented among Mass attenders (Dixon 2005: 104). The fact that they are better educated than Mass attenders in general is likely to be related to their willingness to talk about their experience of the Church and matters of faith.

Reasons Why People Stop Going to Mass

In a few cases, the decision to stop going to Mass was made deliberately and took effect suddenly. More commonly, regularity of attendance declined over time, and there might never have been a decision to stop going to Mass. Instead, people found that they had ‘got out of the habit of going’ and, having stopped, could not think of good enough reasons to start going again, although they might well continue to attend occasionally, such as at Christmas and Easter, or for special occasions, or when they were with their mother.

It was often difficult to identify a single, clear reason why the participants in the research project had stopped going to Mass. Usually there was a combination of factors, and the combination was often made up of one or more church-related factors together with one or more personal factors. Sometimes the real source of discontent or disconnection lay in the distant past, and the cessation of Mass attendance occurred when a relatively minor incident proved to be ‘the straw which broke the camel’s back’.

Participants often expressed disagreement with the Church’s teaching or disappointment with some aspects of its performance, but these disagreements and disappointments were not necessarily a cause of their cessation of Mass attendance. For example, nine participants made comments along the lines of the Church lacking compassion for and acceptance of homosexual people, but in only two cases was the Church’s attitude a contributing factor to the participants’ decision not to attend Mass.

In the following section, an attempt has been made to describe only those factors which participants themselves identified as being the main reason, or one of the main reasons, why they stopped going to Mass. The reasons will be classified under two headings: church-centred and participant-centred, although it is often difficult to separate them in practice. Under each heading, the reasons are arranged in approximate order of the number of times they were identified as a main reason. The first three ‘Church-centred’ reasons were not only the most commonly mentioned but were also the factors that had the most powerful impact on participant’s decisions regarding Mass attendance.

Church-centred

1. The misuse of power and authority in the Church

Among the most common causes for the cessation of Mass attendance given by participants were those that had to do with a perceived misuse of authority and power at all levels of the Church. Participants often used the word ‘disillusionment’ to describe how they felt about this. They complained of the silencing of prominent theologians and other Catholic thinkers, and of the refusal to allow the celebration of the Third Rite of Reconciliation. In their view, decision-making in the Church was characterised by a lack of consultation and accountability. They felt that the Church’s focus was on rules, not compassion, and many made comments along the lines of ‘Jesus is not at the heart of today’s Church’.

Several specific issues have been included as sub-categories of this reason. They are:

- Sexual abuse — the breach of trust involved in the crime itself and the perceived failure of the Church to respond appropriately once the offences had come to light. In

general, only participants who actually knew victims or perpetrators stopped attending Mass solely because of the issue of sexual abuse.

- The view, expressed by both male and female participants, that women are not fully valued by the Church because of the dominance of the exclusively male hierarchy.
- Dismissal from paid employment in the Church because of remarriage without annulment.
- Unjust or unprofessional treatment from Catholic employers.

2. The irrelevance of the Church to life today

For some participants, a major factor contributing to their decision to stop going to Mass was their belief that the Church as an institution was out of touch with Australian society. In their eyes, the Church had lost its ability to connect with the day-to-day lives of ordinary people and as a result they no longer regarded it as having the authority to guide them in living an authentic life. This perception was particularly strong in relation to *moral teachings*, *leadership* and *organisational practices*.

The *moral issues* which most commonly affected participants' attendance were pre-marital cohabitation and contraception. Although many participants were also critical of the Church's stance on other moral issues such as stem cell research and the use of condoms in the context of the African AIDs crisis, these issues were not crucial components of their decision to stop going to Mass.

Another cause of participants' loss of confidence in the Church was the perception that its *leadership* is poor — it is not intelligent, not vibrant and not relevant. The Church's leaders were not considered to understand the experience or needs of modern-day Australians. Instead, they are seen to have closed minds and to be insistent on preserving the status quo. Although priests were often described in terms such as these, they were also often excused on the basis of their increasing age and the heavy workloads they continue to bear as numbers decrease.

This concern for the difficulties faced by priests led many participants to comment on the Church's *practice* of requiring priests to be celibate. A common position was that celibacy denied priests the happiness and the practical and emotional support that married couples enjoy, and that this impacted upon both their personal wellbeing and on their ministry. Another common view was that celibacy has contributed to the clergy being out of touch with the experiences of every-day people.

The *practice* of refusing communion to people who have remarried without first obtaining an annulment of their previous marriage was regarded by many participants as vindictive and insensitive as well as being another example of a Church that has failed to understand changes in society and the ways in which the institution of marriage in Australia has evolved.

3. Lack of intellectual stimulation

A common cause of declining attendance among participants was that they did not find much intellectual satisfaction in going to Mass. Several commented that the sermons delivered in their parish were of poor quality, being ill-prepared, theologically unsound, badly delivered and irrelevant.

A lack of intellectual satisfaction was a key reason why several participants said they did not get anything out of going to Mass any more and that they came away from Mass feeling angry, frustrated and wondering why they were still attending.

A few believed that their parish priest promoted an anti-intellectual environment where his word was law and critical thinking discouraged. This was seen as unacceptable in an age when the educational levels of parishioners and their expectations regarding homilies were a lot higher than in the past.

4. Problems with the priest in the parish

For several participants, the behaviour, personality, attitude or lack of competence of particular priests, usually a priest in their own parish, was a crucial component of their decision to stop going to Mass. These included situations where:

- The priest was convicted of sexually abusing children.
- Priests had problems with alcohol.
- The priest was known to be having a sexual relationship with a woman.
- Priests behaved insensitively, ungraciously, rudely or arrogantly.
- An unsuitable priest from overseas was appointed to the parish.
- Priests were simply out of touch with contemporary Australian life and specifically with work and family life.

5. Structural factors

For around one quarter of respondents, structural factors contributed to their ceasing to attend Mass. Structural factors refer to parish and diocesan administrative decisions to do with Mass times, parish mergers, and so on. Such factors included:

- Mass was celebrated at a time which clashed with other priorities such as work.
- Mass was celebrated too early on Sunday morning for families with children.
- The parish had been merged into a larger neighbouring parish, resulting in a loss of a sense of belonging and identity.
- Communion services in the absence of a priest were not a satisfactory alternative to Mass.
- The new parish priest was not as good as the former one.

6. Concerns related to the parish as a community

Seven respondents said that poor community life in their parish was a factor in their ceasing to attend Mass. For these people, life in their parish was characterised by:

- People not feeling welcomed.
- A sense that there was nothing available in the parish for single people.
- A lack of a sense of community, or erosion of a previously-existing community spirit.
- Poor communication.
- The existence of unkind gossip.
- A belief that the people at Mass lacked sincerity in their worship.

While these participants may have stopped going to Mass, it was often not without a sense of sadness for the community they had lost.

7. A sense of being excluded by Church rules

Three female participants felt excluded from the Church because they had remarried without an annulment of their first marriage. All three felt as though they had been let down by the Church and had been pushed out against their will at the very time when they most needed the Church's care and understanding.

In two cases, participants had stopped going to Mass because they felt the Church's approach to homosexuality excluded a close relative. Their refusal to attend was an expression of anger at the Church and of solidarity with their relatives.

Participant-centred

8. Crisis of faith

A large group of respondents had suffered what might be called a crisis in faith. For them, the Catholic faith no longer provided meaning or made sense. The issue for the majority of them was that as adults they no longer found the rigid and rather severe Catholic faith that had been presented to them as children helpful. They spoke about fear and guilt, saying that these things prevented them from being able to trust in God and reach a more mature faith. Even after they had stopped going to Mass, they continued to feel guilt and to be conscious of a fear of going to hell.

For other participants, a crisis of faith involved:

- A sense of uncertainty about things such as the meaning of life and the existence of God.
- The role of religion in world conflicts.
- A sense that all religions and not just Catholicism lead to God.
- An inability to accept Christian doctrines.

However, it is noteworthy that only one person said their faith was challenged by their education and knowledge of science. Science played an almost non-existent role in crises of faith.

9. Family or household-related issues

Many respondents cited a family or household-related issue as at least part of their reason for ceasing to attend Mass. These reasons covered situations such as the following:

- Moving to a new location.
- Mothers attending Mass without a partner finding it difficult to get young children ready on time.
- Mothers attending Mass without a partner finding it difficult to supervise young children at Mass and, as a consequence, being unable to participate in and appreciate Mass as they would have liked.
- Older children attending under duress or refusing to attend, leading to family conflict and eventually a decision by the parents to stop going as well.
- Older children moving away from home, removing the incentive for the participants to set a good example.
- Middle-age participants ceasing to attend once their parents had died.

Some participants stopped attending at the same time or some time after their Catholic spouse had stopped. Only two of the twelve participants with non-Catholic spouses attributed their decision to stop going to Mass to the influence of a critical and unsupportive partner. Most other participants with a non-Catholic spouse said that their partners had always been supportive of their attendance at Mass.

10. Going to Mass simply not a priority

A very common view expressed by participants was that attending Mass was simply not as important to them as it used to be, so that in the face of competing priorities, other things seemed more important. Examples of things which were given higher priority than Mass attendance included:

- Resting after a busy week at work.
- Spending time with family members who were not around during the week.
- Caring for ill or disabled family members.
- Spending time on business matters.
- Resolving family issues.
- Pursuing recreational activities such as meeting friends or going surfing.
- Going away on weekend breaks.

A common response from participants was that they had just got out of the habit of going to Mass. A couple admitted that this had happened due to laziness.

Ongoing Spiritual Life

Mass attendance

Half the respondents said they still attended Mass occasionally, for example:

- When visiting their mother or an elderly relative (this was the most common reason).
- At Christmas, Easter or special family events.
- For funerals.
- With their still-regularly attending spouse.
- As part of their work at a Catholic school.

Almost one-third of the participants said they might return to weekly Mass attendance in the future. A few said they fully expected to return, but most said their return would be dependent on the issues they had with the Church being resolved.

Only three respondents said they would definitely not be returning to regular Mass attendance, although for a few others this was implied.

Continuing Catholic identity and connections

More than half the participants said they still had faith even though they did not attend church. Most of these continued to identify themselves as Catholics, sometimes vehemently so, while a few identified themselves as Christians first and Catholics second. Several people stressed that they would like Catholic services for important family events and that they wanted a Catholic funeral when they died. Some participants said they would never consider joining another denomination because they could not see themselves as anything but Catholic.

Although all of the people in this study have moved away from weekly Mass attendance, about four-fifths of them still had some sort of connection to Catholic life and faith. These types of connection varied considerably in their level of formality and their closeness to the core of Catholic life. They took the form of, among other things:

- Working as employees in Catholic organisations.
- Serving as volunteers in Catholic organisations.
- Studying theology at Catholic institutions.
- Membership of Catholic groups.
- Receiving pastoral support such as counselling from parish staff or spiritual direction from a priest or religious.
- Participating in their local parish by providing practical support such as making financial contributions, mowing the church lawns and assisting with taxation issues.
- Reading newspapers, journals, newsletters and websites produced by Catholic groups.

Involvement in other denominations

Several participants had become involved in the activities of other Christian denominations. Some now attended the services of that denomination, while others had been part of Bible study courses run by another denomination but had chosen not to join it formally. In some cases the association with the new denomination had been brought about through their children.

Non-Church spirituality

About half of the participants spoke of their desire to develop a spiritual life that was not dependent on the Church or on Mass attendance. These forms of spirituality included:

- Developing a new and personal relationship with Christ.
- Expressing one's religious values in daily living.
- Faith as an inter-personal journal lived in dialogue with one's partner and friends.
- Voluntary work in the community in both Catholic and secular institutions.
- Teaching young people about God at school.
- Organising funerals.
- Conducting special family liturgies, for example at Easter, or for weddings and baptisms.
- Expressing spirituality through art, music, sport or interaction with nature.
- Ecumenical and interfaith expressions of spirituality.
- Private devotion, for example, prayer, meditation, personal reflection on the rosary, use of pictures and icons.

Research Findings

Major findings

The major findings of this study are that:

1. A large majority of participants believe that the Church is out of touch with the current world and is not relevant to their own lives.
2. In general, participants' alienation from the Church has been a gradual process in which changing attitudes to Church teaching have interacted with negative personal experiences of Church personnel and regulation.

Supplementary findings

1. Several participants abruptly stopped going to Mass following a 'triggering incident', the 'straw which broke the camel's back', although the seeds of alienation and discontent had been germinating for many years, and even as far back as school days.
2. The reasons participants gave for ceasing to attend Mass are familiar and consistent with other research. This project did not uncover any new or unexpected categories of reasons that might turn out to be common among many former Mass attenders.
3. For the majority of participants, it was difficult to isolate a single reason why they stopped attending Mass.
4. The disagreement with specific Church's teachings, disappointment and frustration with its lack of connection to everyday life, and anger arising from specific policies or practices expressed in some shape or form by every participant were very frequently not the *cause* of their ceasing to attend Mass. However, once they had stopped attending, these issues acted as *barriers* to their return to Mass attendance.
5. Many participants, but by no means all, displayed a very poor knowledge of the Catholic faith. When asked whether they agreed with the Catholic position on a particular issue, many said they did not know what the Catholic position was. Others expressed disagreement with specific Church teachings despite having only a very hazy idea of what those teachings entailed. Nuances in Catholic thought — for example, the distinction between condemnation of homosexual acts and compassion for the homosexual person — were often completely missed.
6. On the other hand, a number of participants were theologically well-educated and articulate. These people were often disenchanted with what they saw as the Church's failure to implement fully the reforms of the Second Vatican Council.
7. Participants were virtually unanimous in insisting that they wanted to make their own decisions about the way they live their lives, without interference from the Church.
8. It was important for virtually all participants that they nurture the spiritual dimension of their lives. For some, that spiritual dimension had a strong connection to the Catholic community. At the other extreme, participants' spiritual lives had little or no connection with the Christian faith or any organised form of religion.

Concluding Remarks

- The factors identified by the participants in this research which led them to stop going to Mass are also influencing people who are still regular Mass attenders. Except in the case of sexual abuse, where one hopes the worst is over, there is no reason to think that the impact of those factors is declining. In other words, if no action is taken, there are Catholics who are regular Mass attenders now but who are already on a path that will make them disappear from church life within a year or two.
- It would be possible to adopt a perspective which finds fault with every participant regarding their non-attendance at Mass — laziness, lack of faith, placing unreasonable expectations on priests, lack of respect for legitimate authority, getting priorities wrong, and so on. However, this attitude is most unlikely to attract them back to Mass or to prevent people who are still attending from leaving.
- The Church does have the capacity to take actions which will reduce the likelihood of current attenders joining the ranks of those who have stopped attending and increase the chances of returning of some of those who have left. Very few of the reasons given by participants in this project refer to matters that the Church can do nothing about.
- It might seem at first glance that the Church can only have an influence in relation to the Church-centred reasons outlined in this report. In fact, action to reduce the impact of those reasons and to make Mass attendance more appealing could result in the participant-centred reasons becoming less influential as well.
- It seemed that all it would take to get several participants to return to regular Mass attendance, or to at least give it a try, was a warm personal invitation.

Participants' Attitudes to the Project

All the participants in this research had at least three opportunities to decline to take part: when first approached by the parish council, when they received the project information and consent form from the Pastoral Projects Office, and when they were contacted regarding a suitable time and place for an interview. Some people did pull out at each of these stages. The fact that the 41 people interviewed did not decline to take part is an indication of how seriously they took the project and how much they wanted to communicate with the bishops about their experiences and feelings.

Many participants expressed a genuine gratitude for being given the opportunity to explain why had stopped going to Mass. The majority said that once they had decided to take part in the project, they had given a considerable amount of thought to their reasons, and many said they had discussed the project with family members, colleagues and friends prior to being interviewed. Quite a few brought a written statement or a list of dot points to the interview.

A few were less positive about the research. They said they had participated in these sorts of projects before and, as nothing had ever come of them, they doubted that any changes would occur this time.

The Next Steps

The phenomenon of mature-age, long-term Mass attenders ceasing to attend Mass is a critical issue for the Catholic Church in Australia, and, as a result, the current project has attracted widespread interest among all those who are vitally concerned about the future health of the Church.

Already, at least one publisher has expressed interest in publishing a book on the project for a general readership, and the *Review of Religious Research*, an American refereed journal, has asked the research team to submit an academic article.

This research project will only be truly valuable if it leads to action being taken, at all levels of the Church, to halt and then reverse this phenomenon.

This summary report contains only one recommendation:

That the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference authorise the release of this report, and the full version which will be available shortly, so that they can be widely discussed in the Catholic community.

Additional recommendations can more appropriately be formulated after the reports have been discussed at diocesan and parish level, and feedback has been received.

It is expected that recommendations suitable for various levels of the Church will be formulated. For example, it might be recommended that:

- The Bishops' Conference commission further substantial research on issues identified in this report, and write a pastoral letter in response to the findings of that research.
- Diocesan bishops encourage parishes to have programs which focus on outreach to those who are disconnecting from parish life and offer diocesan support for those programs.
- Parishes review and evaluate practices and policies, and especially the way the liturgy is celebrated, to ensure that all people are welcomed and respected.

When the bishops commissioned this research project two years ago, they were inviting Catholics who had stopped attending Mass to enter into conversation with them. Forty-one people responded to that invitation. By releasing the report, the bishops will be expanding the conversation to include all those who care about the vitality of the Catholic Church in Australia, and inviting them to suggest ways in which the Church can be transformed so that more people choose to attend Mass and fewer choose to stop attending.

The Full Report

In addition to all the material in this summary report, the full report will contain:

- Expanded sections on previous research, the research method and the reasons people give for not going to Mass.
- Illustrative quotes from the interviews.
- Case studies of some of the people interviewed.
- A more extensive list of references.
- A number of appendices.

As well, several expert commentators are being asked to respond to the report. It is hoped that these commentaries will be ready in time for them to be included in the full report.

The commentators include a theologian, a religious educator, a bishop, a sociologist and a liturgist. The purpose of including these commentaries is to enhance the capacity of the report to act as an instrument for theological reflection on a critical pastoral issue in the Australian Church.

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