



CENTRE FOR ECCLESIAL ETHICS

*Becoming a good and better Church*



B E L I E V I N G , N O T B E L O N G I N G

A research into why Catholics no longer come to Church

*Ecclesial drift, estrangement, and disaffiliation*

Diocese of Brentwood, Summer 2023

R E S E A R C H R E P O R T

*As a deer longs for flowing streams,  
so my soul longs for you, O God.  
My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.  
When shall I come and behold the face of God?  
My tears have been my food day and night,  
while people say to me continually,  
'Where is your God?'*

*These things I remember, as I pour out my soul:  
how I went with the throng,  
and led them in procession to the house of God,  
with glad shouts and songs of thanksgiving,  
a multitude keeping festival.  
Why are you cast down, O my soul,  
and why are you disquieted within me?  
Hope in God; for I shall again praise him,  
my help and my God.*

*My soul is cast down within me; therefore I remember you  
from the land of Jordan and of Hermon, from Mount Mizar.  
Deep calls to deep at the thunder of your cataracts;  
all your waves and your billows have gone over me.  
By day the Lord commands his steadfast love,  
and at night his song is with me,  
a prayer to the God of my life.*

*I say to God, my rock,  
'Why have you forgotten me?  
Why must I walk about mournfully  
because the enemy oppresses me?'  
As with a deadly wound in my body,  
my adversaries taunt me,  
while they say to me continually,  
'Where is your God?'*

*Why are you cast down, O my soul,  
and why are you disquieted within me?*

*Hope in God; for I shall again praise him,  
my help and my God.*

(Psalm 42)

*'On the boat of the Church, there has to be room for everyone:  
all the baptized are called on board to lower the nets,  
becoming personally involved in the preaching of the Gospel.  
Do not forget this word: everyone, everyone, everyone!*

*Whenever I have to speak about opening apostolic perspectives,  
I am deeply touched by that Gospel passage in which the  
wedding feast of the son is ready, but people do not come.  
So, what does the Lord, the master of the feast, say?  
'Go out to the highways and byways and bring everyone, everyone:  
the sick, the healthy, young and old, the righteous and sinners. Everyone!*

*Do not make the Church a customs station, selecting who can enter or not.  
All, with their past lives, their sins, as they are, before God, as they are, as in life.  
All people. Let us not have customs houses in the Church. Everyone!'*

Pope Francis

*Welcome Ceremony Address, XXXVII World Youth Day, 3<sup>rd</sup> August 2023, Portugal,*

## FOREWORD

*'Where have all our people gone?'* is a lament that populated many of the research conversations with priests from the Diocese of Brentwood hosted by the *Centre for Ecclesial Ethics* in the spring of 2022. As our Church and our world tentatively emerged from the global Covid-19 pandemic, many Catholic men and women and their families remained absent from the celebration of Mass and a wider participation in parish life. It was a pattern of ecclesial participation that would wax and wane to varying degrees over the following months across different communities, as the disruption and uncertainty of the pandemic slowly began to settle and recede and the rhythm and rhyme of the lives of the people of God began to find a more stable pattern once again, that was both familiar and new.

Such a retreat from active participation in the life of the Church however, whether transient or permanent, is a journey that has been undertaken by many Catholics in the months, years and decades before the pandemic, such that only one-fifth of baptised Catholics came to Mass in the diocese of Brentwood in 2019. *Why* is the question that lingers in response to this persistent ecclesial experience that continues to diminish the life of the Church in Essex, East London and beyond. Why do Catholic men and women no longer come to Mass? Why do so many Catholics no longer regularly practise their faith in the Church? What has happened for so many baptised Catholics to leave? How has our Church or Covid influenced and amplified such a movement away from the Church? *Where have all our people gone?*

A response to such questions will not be found without a movement beyond the walls of the Church, from within which so many are now absent. It is time to move outwards and listen to the stories of the baptised Catholic men and women who are no longer present, so that our Church might begin to appreciate the experiences and reasons why so many Catholics no longer come to Mass. It is from such an immersive encounter that our wider Church might begin to humbly understand why so many Catholic men and women still believe, but no longer feel as though they belong in the Church. *It is time to listen* - for 'whenever we encounter another person in love, we learn something new about God.'<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> *Evangelii Gaudium*, 272, [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco\\_esortazione-ap\\_20131124\\_evangelii-gaudium.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html), [accessed 16.01.24]

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>FOREWORD</b> .....	<b>4</b>
<b>TABLE OF CONTENTS</b> .....	<b>5</b>
<b>INTRODUCTION</b> .....	<b>6</b>
<b>EXECUTIVE SUMMARY</b> .....	<b>9</b>
<b>AIMS AND METHOD OF THE RESEARCH</b> .....	<b>14</b>
<b>PART I - WHOSE VOICES DO WE HEAR</b> .....	<b>18</b>
THE COHORT .....	18
<b>PART II - WHY CATHOLICS ARE NO LONGER COMING TO CHURCH</b> .....	<b>24</b>
UNDERSTANDING THE REASONS.....	24
<b>SECTION 1</b> .....	.....
<i>JOYS AND HOPES, GRIEFS AND ANXIETIES</i> .....	27
<b>SECTION 2</b> .....	.....
<i>THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC</i> .....	48
<b>SECTION 3</b> .....	.....
<i>ETHICAL, ECCLESIAL AND LITURGICAL DISCORD</i> .....	54
<b>PART III - LONGING FOR A DIFFERENT CHURCH</b> .....	<b>97</b>
BUILDING SOMETHING BETTER.....	97
<i>WHAT IS MISSING?</i> .....	99
<i>EMERGENT AREAS OF ECCLESIAL SIGNIFICANCE</i> .....	103
<b>CONCLUSION</b> .....	<b>110</b>
<b>POSTWORD</b> .....	<b>112</b>
<b>APPENDICES</b> .....	<b>115</b>
APPENDIX 1 - RESEARCH QUESTIONNAIRE .....	115
APPENDIX 2 - RESEARCH INVITATIONS .....	134

## INTRODUCTION

In 2019 there were approximately 42,912<sup>2</sup> people who ‘attended’ Mass in the Diocese of Brentwood, in which there were approximately 237,000 baptised Catholics. Following the Covid pandemic many Catholics were slow to resume participation in parish life and worship and many more have simply not returned. Our diocesan synodal processes, whilst very rich in their dialogue and discernment have often struggled to reach and engage with the wisdom and experience of those who are no longer active or present in the life of the Church. This research initiative in the diocese of Brentwood attempts to address this deficit.

The *Believing, not Belonging* research carried out during the summer of 2023, created a space through which Catholic women and men who no longer actively participate in the liturgical and wider life of the parish community might be seriously listened to, so as to understand the complex decision-making and reasoning which has led to a scenario in which many Catholics might still believe, yet no longer feel as though they belong in the Church.

This research aims to hear, listen and understand the stories of Catholic women and men who no longer regularly practise their faith in parish communities; and extends a particular attentive ear to uncover the signs of ethical, ecclesial, or liturgical dissonance that has contributed to such ecclesial separation amidst the wider influence of the global Covid-19 pandemic and longer-term societal influences.

Understanding *the why* that underpins such journeys and patterns of *ecclesial drift, estrangement and disaffiliation*, offers the Church the opportunity to discern whether and how it might reform, renew and reshape its praxis to reengage with the rhythm and the rhyme of the lives of such large numbers of baptised Catholic men and women today.

In this report I will offer a summary and analysis that is faithful to the stories, experiences and considered reflections of the Catholic men and women who so generously participated in this research - stories and experiences that will begin to address the deficit in ecclesial understanding and inform possible pathways of renewal. Many of these stories and experiences find an echo with

---

<sup>2</sup> See *Brentwood Diocesan Directory 2023*, pp. 58-59

those of their peers that often repeatedly reverberates throughout the report - it is a repeating echo that intentionally remains in the text in order to be faithful not only to the specificity of each story but to contextually underline the shared reality that emerges from the common experiences of many Catholics in this research.

Following this introduction, there is a brief overview of the aims and method of the research, after which Part One of the report offers an exposition and analysis of the research cohort that presents a portrait of the people of God who participated in this research.

The focus of Part Two that comprises the main body of the report is concerned with the stories and experiences that reveal the reasons given by respondents as contributing to their journeys and movement away from a regular practice of their faith. In the first section I explore the experiences and reasons that fall under the ordinary pattern of everyday life, that include the joys and hopes, griefs and anxieties of Catholic men and women today. In the second section I examine the direct and indirect impact of both the Covid-19 pandemic and its ecclesial response.

In the third section of Part Two, I offer a more detailed examination and analysis of the more complex experiences of ethical, ecclesial and liturgical discord that have arisen for participants in this research and contributed to their ecclesial drift, estrangement and disaffiliation, that include ecclesial ethical teaching, experiences of clericalism, the clerical sexual abuse scandal, the role of women in the Church and liturgical discord.

Part Three of the report includes an overview of what is missing from the life of the Church for those who leave, and a concluding analysis of the areas of ecclesial significance that have emerged from this research, from which the people of God in Brentwood might collaboratively draw some ecclesial seeds of hope, opportunity and renewal as foundational to building something better for a re-imagined Church.

I am most grateful to each and every participant in this research for their time and wisdom, for it has afforded the research an experiential rigour and 'pastoral stamp' through its origins in 'the

different contexts and concrete situations in which people find themselves’ and allows our Church ‘to be seriously challenged by reality.’<sup>3</sup>

May God grant us the wisdom to respond with both humility and courage to the voices that we encounter in this research and *enlarge the space of our tent*<sup>4</sup> in deep attentiveness to the longing of all the people of God who yearn both to believe and also belong in a Church in which ‘there is room for everyone.’<sup>5</sup>

**Dr Liam Hayes**

*Director, Centre for Ecclesial Ethics*

MBIT, Cambridge

*February 2024*

---

<sup>3</sup> Pope Francis, *Ad theologiam promovendam*, 01.11.23, [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/la/motu\\_proprio/documents/20231101-motu-proprio-ad-theologiam-promovendam.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/la/motu_proprio/documents/20231101-motu-proprio-ad-theologiam-promovendam.html), [accessed 30.12.23]

<sup>4</sup> Cf. ‘Enlarge the space of your Tent’, *Working Document for the Continental Stage*, Synod 2021-24, <https://www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/common/phases/continental-stage/dcs/Documento-Tappa-Continentale-EN.pdf>, [accessed 11.12.23]

<sup>5</sup> Pope Francis, *Welcome Ceremony Address*, XXXVII World Youth Day, 3<sup>rd</sup> August 2023, Portugal, <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2023/august/documents/20230803-portogallo-cerimonia-accoglienza.html>, [accessed 06.12.23]



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

*'My faith has not wavered, my relationship with God will always be strong, but it is the judgement from the Diocese and the Church which needs to change to become more inclusive of everyone. Churches must open their doors to all, not just to those defined specifically as 'practising' Catholics.'*

This heartfelt appeal from a Catholic in the diocese of Brentwood strikes a resonant chord with the call of Pope Francis in his welcome address at the recent World Youth Day in Portugal. It is a plea of faith from both parishioner and Pope for a Church in which all are welcome, noticed and appreciated for who they are, a rather simple yet challenging invitation to re-imagine a different Church that is attentive to the joys and hopes, griefs and anxieties of all, not least those forgotten or estranged,

*'There is room for everyone, everyone. In the Church, no one is left out or left over. There is room for everyone. Just the way we are...There is room for everyone! All together now, everyone, repeat with me in your own language: Everyone, everyone, everyone.'*<sup>6</sup>

It is this apostolic refrain that we are called not only to give voice to in our own language, but also to allow it more importantly to infuse our personal and communal relationships, to permeate our ecclesial structures, and to reshape and renew our ecclesial practices, for 'on the boat of the Church, there has to be room for everyone: all the baptised are called on board to lower the nets, becoming personally involved in the preaching of the Gospel. Do not forget this word: everyone, everyone, everyone!'<sup>7</sup>

### ***No room for everyone***

It is an echo of this refrain that continues to resound in this research through the longing and yearning of the people of God in Brentwood, who though they might still *believe, feel as though they no longer belong in the Church*. It is the dreams of a forgotten people chiming with the dreams of the Bishop of Rome for a different Church in which there is 'room for everyone.' It is a people whose voices found a safe space to speak and be listened to in our *Believing, not Belonging* research, that simply attempted to listen and understand more deeply why so many Catholics are

---

<sup>6</sup> Pope Francis, *Welcome Ceremony Address*, XXXVII World Youth Day.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

no longer present in the Church - an understanding that will shed much light upon the complex reasons for the ecclesial drift, estrangement and disaffiliation of so many.<sup>8</sup>

The research drew into conversation a group of Catholic men and women of whom over half gradually lost interest in going to Mass for a myriad of reasons, of whom almost two-thirds experienced the Church as judgemental, and just under half witnessed too many scandals across the life of the Church. It is a people of which precisely half reflected that Covid sped up their drifting away from the Church, of which the friends of 47% have already left the Church and in which 59% feel uncomfortable in a Church that excludes people. It is a group in which rather tellingly 54% do not feel welcome, appreciated or as though they belong in their parish community.

It is however the stories and experience, the people and lives behind the statistics, rather than the numbers and graphs, that reveal the deeper underlying reasons why Catholic men and women have become estranged from their Church, why they have really moved away from a regular practice of their faith

*I attended Mass weekly, as I have done all my life, up until approximately 5 years ago when I became disillusioned with the Church and my attendance gradually declined. My faith remains strong but I am disillusioned with the institution of the Church.*

For this research unveils a portrait of a group of baptised Catholic men and women who remain highly articulate in their reflections upon their relationships with both faith and Church. It reveals a body of Catholics for whom faith remains precious, but for whom participation in the life of the Church has become more difficult to undertake and access through the pressure of competing family responsibilities, alternative weekly commitments and the stressful navigation of the many inflexible logistics of Church, parish and sacraments.

It is a participation that has been restricted through the limitations of health and trauma, death and grief and caring for others. It is a pattern of participation that has been further truncated and diminished through the accumulative impact of an ecclesial experience of judgement and condemnation in which people do not feel included, appreciated, or even visible - a Church in which

---

<sup>8</sup> Our research owes a debt of gratitude to the pioneering work undertaken by Professor Stephen Bullivant at the *Benedict XVI Centre for Religion and Society* at St. Mary's University, Twickenham and the wider body of research undertaken into changes of Catholic practice in the US and beyond. Many of the questions for the research questionnaire were intentionally similar in order to aid future comparative analysis. (See Stephen Bullivant, Catherine Knowles, Hannah Vaughan-Spruce and Bernadette Durcan, *Why Catholics leave, what they miss and How they might return*, (New York: Paulist Press, 2019) and also Stephen Bullivant, *Mass Exodus: Catholic Disaffiliation in Britain and America since Vatican II*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019)

hospitality appears selective if not absent for some, and in which for many their name remains unknown and their joys and hopes, griefs and anxieties a mystery.

### ***Ecclesial drift, estrangement and disaffiliation***

For many of these Catholics who no longer participate in the life of the Church a sense of 'ecclesial drift' from Church might accurately describe their journey, such as with those whose lives are busy and full of competing commitments; whereas for others a sense of 'ecclesial estrangement' is perhaps the most apt description that refers to a journey they might not have chosen and upon which they experience the Church as moving away from them, such as with those who struggle to recognise their understanding of the gospel reflected in the praxis of the Church; whereas for others the term 'ecclesial disaffiliation' is more appropriate to describe their intentional and chosen separation from the Church that is often in response to an unjust or scandalous experience with the clergy, or a clear fissure in ethical perspective and outlook. For many participants in this research however the complexity of the contributing factors that has resulted in a movement away from a regular practice of faith, could accurately be described by all three of these terms, either simultaneously when there is more than one contributory factor at play, or as related terms in a continuum that reflects the shape and pattern of their journey of ecclesial separation.

It is however the experience of the Covid-19 pandemic that this research reveals not only sped up, amplified and compounded the many existing patterns and causes of ecclesial drift, estrangement and disaffiliation, but also provided an 'enforced' period of reflection and discernment for many Catholic men and women that gave rise to a reappraisal of the shape and role that faith and Church occupied in their own life and that of their wider family and friends.

It is from this perspective that these Catholic men and women became reattuned and re-sensitised to the dissonance that arises from the significant and disturbing experiences of ethical, ecclesial and liturgical discord that had permeated and shaped their relationships and encounters with the Church - a dissonance that would find resolution in ecclesial drift, estrangement and disaffiliation.

For the research reveals that this part of the body of Christ have resolved to no longer accept the judgement of sexual ethical teaching, specifically concerning homosexuality, in which they do not recognise their face nor hear the story of their family and friends. They have decided to no longer tolerate or collude with a Church defined and disfigured by clericalism, or a Church in which abuse is allowed to fester and be covered up, or a Church in which women have no role, or one in which

accountability is a distant dream. It is a group of baptised men and women who have walked away and become estranged from a Church in which their spiritual needs are not met and whose operant ecclesiology for them remains but a thin and dim reflection of both the life and ministry of Jesus and the ecclesiology they have heard espoused so potently in her teaching.

### ***Potential reengagement and signs of hope***

The research however importantly also reveals a group of men and women who still care sufficiently about the Church and their world, their families and wider community to take the time to reflect and ponder on what they miss about their Church, what might keep them from returning to a regular practice of faith, and what the wider Church might be able to do to support and sustain such a reengagement.

It is a group of voices from the ecclesial peripheries that continues to dream and long *for a Church in which 'there is room for everyone.'* A Church in which welcome, hospitality and inclusion are at the heart of ecclesial practices and a Church in which judgement and exclusion is virtuously absent. A Church in which diversity and difference is cherished as integral to our Catholicity, and in which condemnation and clericalism are tolerated no more. A Church in which priests and people walk humbly together, treading a common path, albeit in different yet complementary ways. A Church in which relationships are nurtured, bonds of communion deepened, and prayer is fostered so that the priestly baptismal vocation of each and all can flourish. A Church in which the stranger is welcomed and those who are in need are noticed, a Church that is vigilant to those beyond the haze of our current ecclesial horizon.

It is a people who long for a Church in which we know the name and story of each and all, in which we appreciate and respond to their joys and hopes, griefs and anxieties. A Church in which each person's talents and gifts, expertise and competence is recognised, appreciated and integrated as gifts of God's Holy Spirit. A Church which has Christ at the centre, rather than a priest who dominates. A Church in whose teaching each person sees their face and hears their story, a Church whose teaching is servant for the flourishing of each and all and attentive to both human fragility and the summons of the gospel.

This moving and challenging research has extended an attentive 'ear of the heart' to the voices and experiences of those who no longer feel that they belong in the Church, but still believe. It offers an opportunity to the wider Church to understand more deeply why so many baptised Catholic men

and women no longer regularly practise their faith - by listening attentively, as one respondent remarked, to the 'alternative voices amid the groupthink.' It has created a space in which their longings and yearnings for a different Church might ring out in harmony with those of Pope Francis to *enlarge the space of your tent* and renew our Church.<sup>9</sup>

For it is ultimately the stories and dreams in this research that reveal the depth and breadth of the experience and insight of the neglected, separated and missing members of the people of God that might refashion the imagination of our ecclesial leaders and renew the face of the Church such that the 'actual image which the Church presents to the world today,' might accurately and authentically reflect the 'image of the Church as Christ envisaged her and loved her.'<sup>10</sup> A Church in which all the baptised people of God might both believe and also belong. *A Church for everyone.*

---

<sup>9</sup> Cf 'Enlarge the space of your Tent', *Working Document for the Continental Stage*, Synod 2021-24.

<sup>10</sup> Paul VI, *Ecclesiam Suam*, 9-11, [http://w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_p-vi\\_enc\\_06081964\\_ecclesiam.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_06081964_ecclesiam.html), [accessed 02.12.23].

## AIMS AND METHOD OF THE RESEARCH

As noted at the outset of this report, in response to an identified deficit in ecclesial understanding with respect to why so many Catholic men and women are no longer present in the life of the Church, the *Believing, not Belonging* research aims to:

- invite Catholic men and women who no longer regularly practise their faith in Catholic parish communities to tell the story of their journeys of ecclesial separation
- To provide a safe space and effective framework from which it is possible to hear and attentively listen to these stories
- To deepen our Church's understanding of the complex experiences and decision-making that underpins such ecclesial movements

The research aims to specifically:

- identify what has changed for Catholics that has contributed to their movement away from the Church
- identify and understand the ecclesial, ethical, societal, and relational factors that have contributed to such ecclesial separation
- understand the impact of specific ecclesial practices, relationships, structures and teaching upon patterns of ecclesial affiliation and practice
- understand the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and its ecclesial response upon patterns of ecclesial practice and affiliation
- identify the significant ecclesial ethical themes that emerge from the research that merit further consideration

We foresee that the research provides an opportunity for the wider Church and its leaders to begin to understand more deeply:

- the reasons for ecclesial separation that are revealed by the stories and experiences of so many Catholics
- the contours and character of ecclesial renewal and reform that might arrest such patterns of ecclesial separation and reconnect with those baptised Catholics who have become estranged.

## METHOD

The method used to engage respondents in this research was a confidential and anonymous online questionnaire that was hosted on the *Qualtrics* platform of the University of Cambridge for three months from May 2023.<sup>11</sup> The questionnaire comprised specific quantitative questions that would provide an overview of both the composition of the cohort and the factors that contributed to patterns of ecclesial separation, and more open-ended qualitative research questions that would enable each participant to tell their own story and narrate their own experience to reveal the deeper more complex reasons underpinning their movement away from the Church.

The survey drew upon the research questionnaire employed by Professor Stephen Bullivant in Portsmouth Diocese in 2015, but was adapted to specifically include additional questions that would enable an exploration of the impact of the global Covid-19 pandemic. The structure and many of the questions from the original questionnaire were intentionally maintained so as to enable future comparative and contrasting analysis between both these research cohorts. In this light the research owes a debt of gratitude to the work undertaken by Professor Stephen Bullivant at the *Benedict XVI Centre for Religion and Society* at St. Mary's University, Twickenham and his wider body of research that explores the changes of Catholic practice in the US and beyond.<sup>12</sup>

The invitation was extended to men and women who were:

- a) aged 18 years of age or older;
- b) have been baptised as a Catholic;
- c) either live or have lived within the diocese of Brentwood (that is, the County of Essex, the Unitary Authorities of Southend-on-Sea and Thurrock and the London Boroughs of Barking & Dagenham, Havering, Newham, Redbridge and Waltham Forest) and
- d) no longer practise the Catholic faith (for whatever reason).

---

<sup>11</sup> See Appendix 1 for the research questionnaire.

<sup>12</sup> See Stephen Bullivant, Catherine Knowles, Hannah Vaughan-Spruce and Bernadette Durcan, *Why Catholics leave, what they miss and How they might return*, (New York: Paulist Press, 2019) and also Stephen Bullivant, *Mass Exodus: Catholic Disaffiliation in Britain and America since Vatican II*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019)

In order to engage with the intended audience that is particularly hard to reach for the Church, the invitation to participate was extended through spaces in which Catholic men and women might still be present and reached beyond the walls of the familiar parish Church. In acknowledgement of the presence of many separated Catholics in Catholic education, the research invitation was specifically extended to all the primary and secondary schools within the diocese of Brentwood so as to engage Catholic parents, teachers, staff and governors.

The invitation was also extended in a similar vein to Catholic chaplaincies and a diverse array of Catholic networks and associations that included Youth Ministry Teams including BCYS, CAFOD, the CSAN federation, QUEST, and the wider academy. The Margaret Beaufort Institute and her federated network, alongside many religious orders and congregations provided access to another cohort of engaged Catholics who were not necessarily present in parish life or mainstream Catholic institutions. Members of Catholic parishes were also engaged, not with a view for those present in parish life to respond themselves, but with the remit to invite Catholics who were no longer present in the Church to participate in the research, especially those family, friends and colleagues of practising Catholics who were no longer present in the life of the Church.

The diocesan social media networks and websites were also employed as platforms to reach those further afield, including those no longer resident in Brentwood, alongside extensive use of parish websites, newsletters, printed invitations and personal invites for parishioners to invite family and friends. Extended interviews were also undertaken on local Radio (BBC Radio Essex) which were used to reach those who no longer had any connection with the Church.<sup>13</sup> The priests of the diocese of Brentwood were also invited to share the invitations across their own networks and to promote the research within and through their own parish communities as indicated above.

It is important to note that each invitation was framed as a personal invite from Bishop Alan Williams to those who were no longer present in the life of the Church to emphasise both the importance attached to the research by the diocesan Bishop and the serious attention that would be given to the collected responses by the principal researcher and the wider Church. It is important to note that whilst this approach is helpful in eliciting a larger number of responses, it

---

<sup>13</sup> See Appendix 2 for the collection of research invitations that were issued.



also accurately reflects the enthusiasm and sincerity of both the lead researcher and the Bishop to value and engage with the responses and experiences of participants in this research.

The research has not been structured nor aims to make any specific claims of universalizability, but it does provide an authentic narrative of the lives, faith and beliefs of a significant cohort of baptised Catholic men and women in the Diocese of Brentwood who no longer regularly practise their faith. As such it constitutes an important repository of wisdom through which the wider Church might re-engage with a separated part of the body of Christ, and a source of inspiration for those responsible with leading and shaping ecclesial renewal. This report thus provides a graced opportunity to encounter the stories, experience and wisdom of the men and women who are no longer present in the Church so that they may be heard anew once more.

## PART I - WHOSE VOICES DO WE HEAR

### THE COHORT

The research was 'live' for a three-month period from 7<sup>th</sup> May until 7<sup>th</sup> August 2023, during which 604 responses were received.<sup>14</sup> From these initial responses only 12 respondents formally declined to participate, whilst a further 94 did not begin to answer the questions in the main body of the questionnaire, which gave rise to an overall cohort of 498 respondents.<sup>15</sup> Whilst participants in the research survey were asked to confirm the eligibility criteria, including that they were no longer practising their faith (for whatever reason), 128 participants completed the survey whilst acknowledging that they practised their faith 'at least once a week or more.'

As the research will show this is indicative of a people who long to be listened to and appreciated in an institution which clearly retains value and importance and in which many remain highly active. It is revealing of a people who continue to seek further opportunities to tell their story and share their experience of faith and Church. It exposes however, as we shall see, a less than uniform spread of such effective listening opportunities through which priests and people might communicate and reflect together on significant issues of life, faith and Church - all notably within the context of a diocese that has recently engaged in the global synod process and continues on a journey of diocesan renewal.

For the purposes of this research report however, given that a stated aim was to engage with those who no longer regularly practise their faith, this 'weekly cohort' has been removed from the main research analysis so as to enable a clearer focus upon the principal cohort of 370 respondents who no longer practise on a regular basis.<sup>16</sup> The 'weekly' cohort however is far from ignored, and serves

---

<sup>14</sup> As with the Portsmouth survey the background and demographic information requested was kept to a minimum to aid the participation and completion rate.

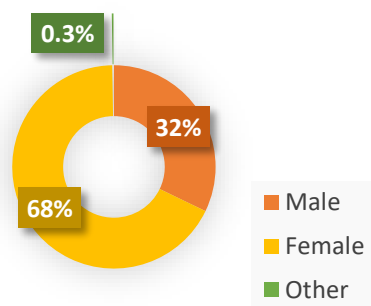
<sup>15</sup> Whilst the understanding of practice within and beyond the Church varies considerably, it was important to allow participants to interpret the understanding of the criteria of practice for themselves, which itself sheds light on patterns of ecclesial self-understanding and notions of practice and obligation within contemporary Catholicism.

<sup>16</sup> It was decided to focus on all those who participate in Mass on a fortnightly or less basis, so as to understand and spot the patterns and factors that are common amongst all men and women who do not attend Mass on a weekly basis. Of the 468 respondents in this cohort only 41 identified as practising their faith on a fortnightly or less basis. An insight into the Church's canonical understanding of practice can be seen in Canon 1247 that asserts that 'on Sundays and other holy days of obligation, the faithful are obliged to participate in the Mass.' *Code of Canon Law*, [https://www.vatican.va/archive/cod-iuris-canonici/eng/documents/cic\\_lib4-cann1244-1253\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/archive/cod-iuris-canonici/eng/documents/cic_lib4-cann1244-1253_en.html), [accessed 11.12.23]

to underline the important and shared concerns of all the baptised people of God that merit further ecclesial attention, and to offer a comparative analysis with the main cohort of those who no longer regularly practise their faith.

### A portrait of our principal cohort

The research data provides an outline of the shape and composition of the principal research cohort of 370 ‘non-weekly practising’ Catholics, of whom 250 (68%) were female, 119 (32%) were male and 1 person identified as other.<sup>17</sup>



PRINCIPAL COHORT	%	Count
Male	32.16%	119
Female	67.57%	250
Other	0.27%	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>370</b>

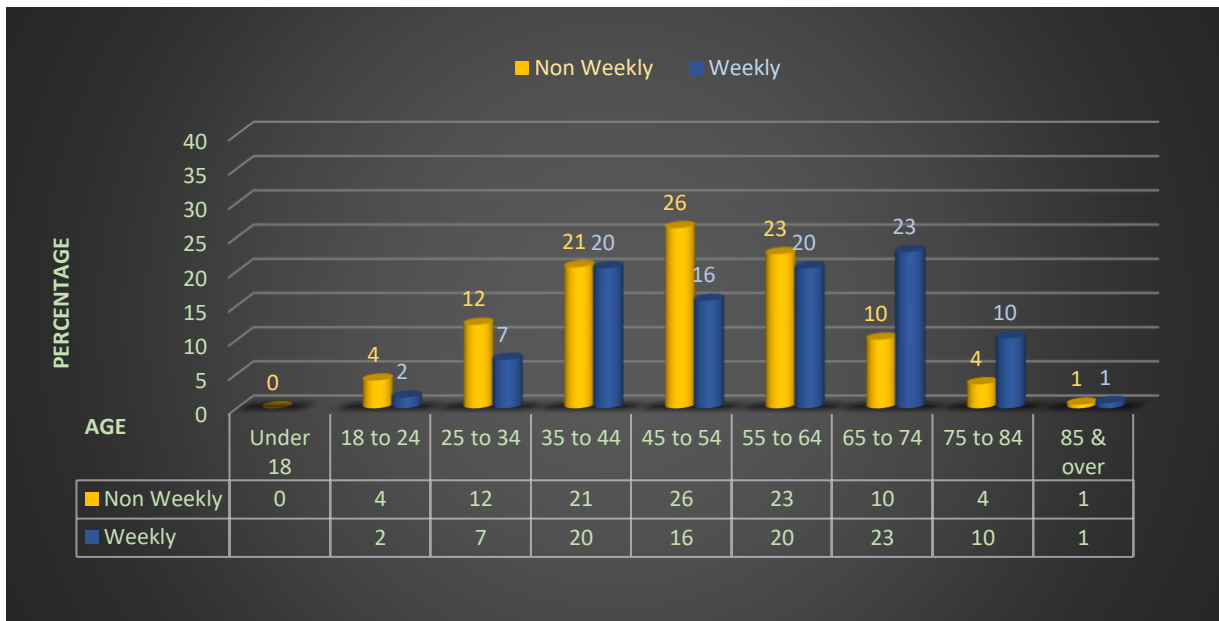
This reveals a cohort in which women are over-represented when compared with the wider Catholic population, whose national split by gender is in the region of 56-59% to 41-44% respectively.<sup>18</sup> It is noteworthy that the gender breakdown in the weekly cohort for this research is strongly consistent with the national data and underlines the reliability of the sample.

This gender breakdown in our main cohort might suggest therefore that a larger proportion of those estranged or disaffiliated from the Church are women, noting also that there is a larger statistical pool from which this group would originate. It is perhaps more likely to be explained however, in sympathy with the insight of Bullivant et al., that not only are women more likely to participate in surveys than men, including online research, but that women are also disproportionately more likely to be ‘religiously interested’ to take the time to share their stories of faith and disaffiliation.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>17</sup> This contrasted with the weekly cohort composition of 74 (56%), 54 (42%) and 2 (2%) respectively.

<sup>18</sup> See the research into the Catholic community by Linda Woodhead as part of her wider research in Linda Woodhead (Ed.), *Religion and Personal Life*, (London: DLT, 2013). This is also broadly consistent with the recent analysis of Stephen Bullivant, which reported a ratio of 41: 59 for male to female. See Stephen Bullivant, *Contemporary Catholicism in England and Wales*, <http://www.stmarys.ac.uk/benedict-xvi/docs/2016-may-contemporary-Catholicism-report.pdf>, [accessed 12.12.23]

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Bullivant et al, p. xvi-xvii



In terms of age the cohort is significantly spread across all eligible age groups, and more evenly so in the non-weekly sample. The age profile carries similarities with that of the general Catholic population, other than the larger number of respondents in the 45-54 age band (26% to 19%) and a smaller number of respondents in the over 65 band (15% to 23%).<sup>20</sup> The latter might reasonably indicate a lower level of drift and disaffiliation among the older age groups alongside an element of disinclination to participate in online surveys; whereas the former suggests a significantly higher percentage of those disaffiliating come from this age band, not least in comparison with weekly Catholics. It is also noteworthy that almost 60% of responses came from respondents in the age profile 25 to 54 years of age, and 70% if the profile is extended to 64.

Eighty per cent of participants identified themselves as white, over six per cent of mixed origin, over five percent identified as black, and two per cent identified as both Asian and others (that included Irish, white gay, European, dual nationality European, Lebanese and British). This pattern generally reflects the wider Catholic population in which

Answer	%	Count
Other, please specify	2.13%	8
Prefer not to say	3.47%	13
Mixed origin	6.67%	25
Asian (other origin)	1.07%	4
Asian (Chinese origin)	0.00%	0
Asian (Pakistani origin)	0.00%	0
Asian (Indian origin)	1.07%	4
Black (other origin)	0.00%	0
Black (Caribbean origin)	2.40%	9
Black (African origin)	2.93%	11
White (any origin)	80.27%	301
<b>Total</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>375</b>

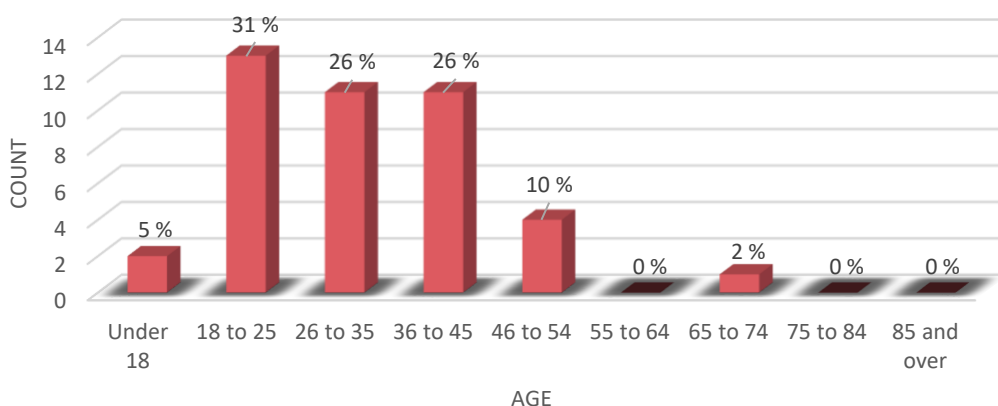
<sup>20</sup> Cf. Bullivant, *Contemporary Catholicism*, pp.9-10 – 18-24 8.3%, 25-34 15.3.1%, 35-44 21.1%, 45-54 18.6%, 55-64 13.4%, 65+ 23.3%

there is a higher proportion of black men and women and a lower proportion of Asian men and women than in the wider general population.<sup>21</sup>

Four-fifths of respondents continue to live within the diocese of Brentwood, whilst approximately one quarter of respondents have either moved away or maintain a close family connection with the diocese.<sup>22</sup>

	Answer	Count	%	Sample size
	Currently live in Brentwood Diocese	300	81.1%	370
	Close family connection to Brentwood Diocese	48	13.0%	370
	Used to live in Brentwood Diocese	46	12.4%	370
	Total	394		

Eighty-six per cent of respondents were raised in a Catholic family, and of the fourteen per cent who were not, 83% became a Catholic between the ages of 18 to 45.



In terms of identity 9% of respondents in our cohort no longer considered themselves Catholic, of which just over one third now identified as Christian, almost thirty percent identified as no religion and over six per cent specifically identified as Anglican. A further 17% of respondents reflected that only sometimes did they now consider themselves as Catholic, including one who suggested that *‘Catholics lapse rather than entirely leave’* whilst many others simply identified as *‘culturally Catholic.’* For others however the negative impact that the Church had upon their faith identity and belief was stark, I *‘desperately want to believe but don’t see the Catholic Church as a welcoming or modern institution which makes me question my faith’*, a sentiment that we shall see is far from rare, whereas for some an identity or association with the Church was all but extinguished *‘I’m actually embarrassed to admit I was ever a Catholic or that my family were.’*

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Respondents were able to select more than one response to this question which accounts for the total count being greater than the sample size.

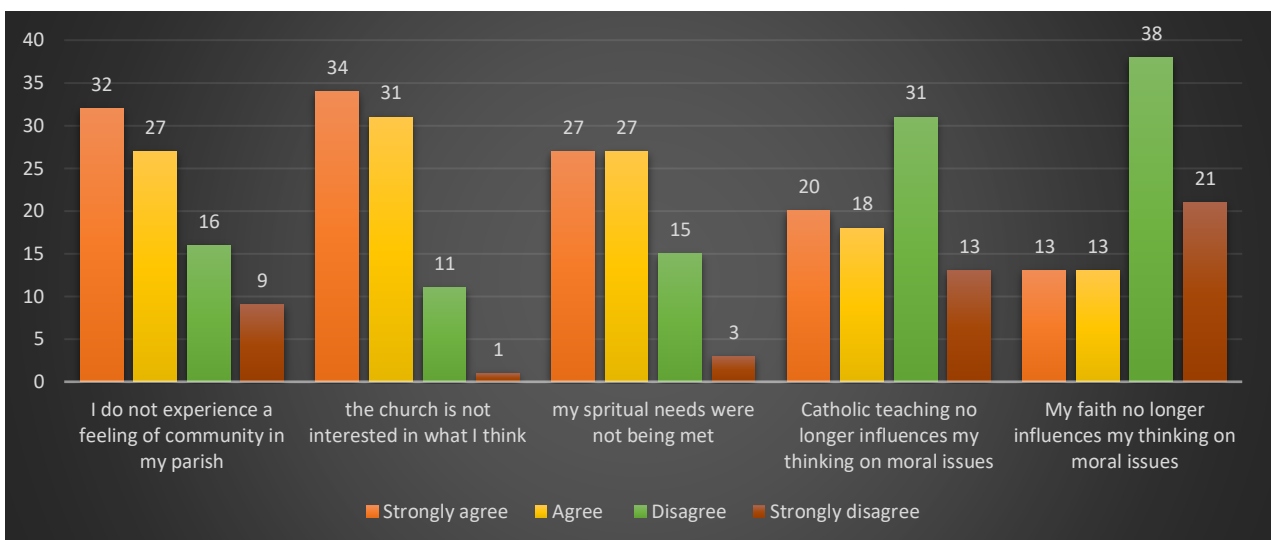
Almost three-quarters of respondents however still regard themselves as Catholic whilst not regularly practising their faith in Church, which as I will outline is a significant finding from this research, such that the following reflection is far from rare

*I attended Mass weekly, as I have done all my life, up until approximately five years ago when I became disillusioned with the Church and my attendance gradually declined. My faith remains strong but I am disillusioned with the institution of the Church.*

It is not the faith of Catholic men and women that has necessarily shifted for many of these respondents but rather the manner, location and character in which this faith is expressed - a faith that is no longer regularly expressed within the Church.

*the terminology "lapsed Catholic" is patronising and mistaken. I am a disavowing Catholic. Yet what I'd like you also to see is that disassociating myself from the Catholic Church does not mean that I am not a Christian...I pray. I read scripture. I daily attempt to follow the Rule of St Benedict. I learned Biblical Greek to read the New Testament in the original. I am now learning Biblical Hebrew. I read books of theology.*

The research paints a portrait of a group of Catholic men and women of whom 59% did not experience a feeling of community in their parish, 65% did not believe that the Church was interested in what they thought or believed, and 38% acknowledged that Catholic teaching no longer influenced their thinking on moral issues.



It is a group in which significantly the spiritual needs of 54% were not met, yet for almost 60% faith continued to influence their thinking on moral issues. From such experiences this group of Catholics began journeys away from a regular practice of faith, men and women who still believe, *but no longer feel as though they belong in the Church.*<sup>23</sup>

The portrait of this principal cohort reveals a rich cross section of the People of God connected to the Diocese of Brentwood who no longer regularly practise their faith but still believe, and as such they are a group of Catholics who are not significantly dissimilar to the wider general Catholic population.<sup>24</sup> They are however as we shall see a group of Catholics whose positive reception of the prevailing ecclesial imaginary and its constitutive practices, behaviours and structures can no longer be assumed.

Whilst these initial insights into this research cohort do not necessarily admit of generalisability, they do however point towards a deeper and authentic understanding of the lives, experience and reflections that underpin a significant change in Catholic practice for a growing number of Catholics today, not least since the Covid pandemic. As such it presents an enriched and expanded epistemic repository from which the Church might draw to inform a renewal in its learning, praxis, structures, leadership and teaching - a renewal that is the confirmed longing and yearning of so many of the people of God who participated in this research.

This research engaged many men and women who ultimately still consider themselves Catholic but no longer regularly practise their faith, a consistently growing group of Catholics who *believe, but no longer feel as though they belong in the Church.* It is to the reasons why such Catholic men and women have moved away from a regular practice of their faith that we now turn our attention.

---

<sup>23</sup> This deficit in the meeting of spiritual needs also extended to those who continue to identify as weekly practising Catholics, of whom 38% stated that their spiritual needs were not being met by the Church.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid. pp.14-15

## PART II - WHY CATHOLICS ARE NO LONGER COMING TO CHURCH

### UNDERSTANDING THE REASONS

Part Two is concerned with the reasons given by respondents for their movement away from a regular practice of their faith. The exposition and analysis of these reasons is divided into three thematic areas that draw upon their quantitative and qualitative responses, namely experience, Covid and ecclesial dissonance which respectively explore the joys and hopes, griefs and anxieties of the cohort, the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and their experience of ethical, ecclesial and liturgical discord as reasons that contribute to ecclesial drift, estrangement and disaffiliation.

The narrative of each person's experience is both unique yet also strikes a chord with the stories of their fellow respondents that are at once moving and challenging. Each narrative provides a nuanced understanding to which the statistical data can alone but point. The nature of each narrative, and the reasons underpinning movements away from regular practice are invariably complex, the principal reason often being one amongst many reasons identified by participants,

*abuse scandals, misogynistic attitudes, and outdated dogma...also particular priest at local Church has been rude and made plain he was not happy that he was assigned at that parish.'*

*I used to attend Mass every Sunday and feast days without fail. Several factors stopped this - disillusionment with a certain parishioner with whom I worked alongside when he ran the RCIA programme in an unsuitable manner; the pandemic; death of a favourite priest; financial worries necessitating longer working hours/days*

The important corollary to the above that also merits attention is that for the significant majority of respondents the movement away from a regular practice of faith was a gradual one, rather than a discrete reaction to a specific one-off event or experience, although there were noticeably respondents for whom this was the case. A movement away from the Church for so many Catholics was rarely impetuous, but rather a considered and often lamented parting of ways.

One final general observation is noteworthy at this stage. Many respondents commented upon how grateful they were to be asked by someone in a position of Church leadership to share their story, thoughts and reflections.



*I also would like to congratulate the bishop on his decision to launch this Questionnaire. It is the first attempt I have seen to reach the 80% and it has been a pleasure on my part to set out the views I have set out here, and I am glad to be listened to if I am.*

It was a rare ecclesial experience of being valued and appreciated for many respondents, despite this period coinciding with the global Synod process, and the recent diocesan process of renewal. It was a positive experience that was often in sharp contrast to a normative Church praxis, through which respondents experienced a grave deficit in ecclesial interest in their thoughts, reflections and even well-being. Importantly for many respondents the research survey itself served as a useful structure and process to nudge, enable and support them to reflect again upon their own thinking with regards to their relationship and engagement with both Church and faith.

In my analysis of this data over an intentionally ponderous period of four months I have been moved, inspired, angered, ashamed and challenged through my immersion into these living testimonies of faith that respondents have offered to the wider Church. Whilst many of these testimonies inevitably reflect some negative ecclesial experiences given the estranged and separated audience of the research, it would be imprudent to reduce this substantial repository of ecclesial wisdom to subjective anger and jaundiced regret. Notwithstanding the many significant and substantial commonalities that emerge from the research narrative, the genuine thoughtfulness and seriousness with which the responses are invariably given indicate a people for whom faith remains precious amidst an oft lamented separation from the Church.

For many of these Catholics who no longer practise their faith a sense of '*ecclesial drift*' from Church might accurately describe their journey, such as with those whose lives we shall see are busy and full of competing commitments; whereas for others a sense of '*ecclesial estrangement*' is perhaps the most apt description that refers to a journey that they might not have necessarily initiated or chosen, on which they experience the Church as moving away from them, such as with those who struggle to recognise their understanding of the gospel in the praxis of the Church; whereas for another group the term '*ecclesial disaffiliation*' is more appropriate to describe their intentional and chosen separation from the Church often in response to an unjust or scandalous experience with the clergy, or a clear fissure in ethical perspective and outlook.

Yet, for many participants in this research the complexity of the contributing factors that has resulted in a movement away from a regular practice of the faith, could accurately be described by all three of these terms, either simultaneously when there is more than one contributory factor at play, or as related terms in a continuum that reflects the shape and pattern of their journey of ecclesial separation.

It is to the ordinary lived experience of Catholic men and women that we now turn, expressed in the joys and hopes, griefs and anxieties of their lives, that reveal a palette of 'ordinary' reasons that contribute to a movement away from a regular practice of faith.

## SECTION 1

### JOYS AND HOPES, GRIEFS AND ANXIETIES

The experience and lives of Catholic men and women who participated in this research had a significant influence upon their reasons for moving away from a regular practice of faith, indeed the often ordinary pattern of everyday life and significant events invariably occupied a space in the reflections of each research participant. The rhythm and rhyme of *'the joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties'*<sup>25</sup> of an ordinary life experience sheds much light on the reasons why Catholics have moved away from their Church, reasons that often present as very human and ordinary in nature.

Such experience was often complex, personal, and multi-layered, and not infrequently accompanied by other significant factors underpinning a movement away from Church. This focus upon the experience and life of Catholics will fall into five thematic areas, namely: the rhythm and pattern of life; new beginnings, milestones and periods of re-appraisal; health and trauma; parish logistics; and the clergy.

Elements of these themes will also be found in future sections, and a prefiguring presence of factors considered in later sections will seep through the porous edges of this provisional categorisation of complex reasons for ecclesial separation. Yet it is to the significance of the presenting *prima facie* reason of a deficit in welcome, appreciation and belonging that we first turn our attention.

---

<sup>25</sup> *Gaudium et spes*, 1, [https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19651207\\_gaudium-et-spes\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html), [accessed 01.01.24]

## *An ecclesial deficit in welcome, appreciation and belonging*

A Church in which Catholic men and women do not feel welcome, appreciated or as though they belong, was an experience shared by a significantly large number of participants in this research, and cited as a causal factor in their movement away from a regular practice of faith,

*I often feel unwelcome and unworthy to be there.*

*The Church does not welcome people like myself.*

*The priest is very negative at times and I often feel unwelcome.*

Indeed over 53% of Catholics observed that they do not feel welcome, or as though they belong in their parish, and 65% did not believe that the Church was interested in what they think or believe,

*Instead of feeling welcomed, I have felt intimidated and judged for being new and not a regular familiar face.*

*I no longer feel any comfort or joy attending Mass. There is not a nice atmosphere at our Church and attending Mass feels like a chore.*

*My wife attends a local Church of England service and she always comments about how [in contrast] she was always made to feel welcome and connected.*

This *prima facie* reason identified by a significant proportion of respondents is often the principal presenting factor for a movement away from a regular practice of faith. The research suggests that when Catholic men and women consistently feel unwelcome, undervalued and ignored, when they experience judgement and condemnation, or simply remain unseen by fellow parishioners and clergy, they eventually walk or drift away from engagement in such parish communities and find value, recognition, appreciation and love elsewhere.

*I have found community beyond Catholicism almost exactly at the same time as I felt the Church turned its back on me when I was in need...the baptist Church provided a football community, the rugby family welcomed us and I found God where I was - as we weren't welcomed in his [God's] house.*

This shared experiential deficit in welcome and belonging reveals a portrait of a separated people of God for whom faith remains precious, but participation in the life and praxis of the Church has

often met with indifference, hostility and rejection and become discordant with their life, beliefs and values, and even damaging to their health and flourishing

*My faith has not waivered, my relationship with God will always be strong, but it is the judgment from the Diocese and the Church which needs to change to become more inclusive of everyone. Churches must open their doors to all, not just to those defined specifically as 'practising' Catholics.*

It suggests a picture of a Church in which not all of its people feel included or valued, visible or appreciated, a Church in which hospitality often appears absent. From within this precious part of the body of Christ that is no longer visibly membered with the separated corpus, echoes the yearning of a people to be *'made to feel welcome and important'* again - a people who long for the Church to *'become more tolerant and welcoming'*, so that perhaps they might once again believe and also belong,

*I would love to return to the Church, the community, the faith - but it doesn't feel like a place where I would be welcome.*

*I would return to the Church ... If I was made to feel more welcome and the experience was more rewarding.*

Underlying this principal presenting reason of a deficit in welcome, appreciation and belonging lies a more complex web of deeper reasons that underpin this receding pattern of ecclesial participation and contributes to the expanding and common experience in which Catholics continue to believe, but no longer feel welcome in the Church. It is to the more complex web of these five thematic areas of 'ordinary' reasons that we now turn our attention.

## *The rhythm and pattern of life today*

Life is busy and full for Catholics today. The rhythm and pattern of life, according to Catholics who are no longer present in Church, is a factor that has influenced a movement away from their regular practice of faith. The shape and pattern of modern living, especially family life with children and elderly parents, is often unrecognisable from that of previous generations. Each day, including Sunday appears to be full of activity. It is unsurprising that one third of respondents cited their personal schedule as a factor in moving away from Church, whilst work schedules were significant for just under one fifth of respondents. The attention given to such reasons found a more extensive expression in the narrative responses which suggested that a time set aside for going to Church and participating in Mass was squeezed by many other competing personal and work commitments,

*I have a family, and for myself and my fiancée routinely attending Mass has become increasingly difficult due to time pressures of family life. We both work full time hours, but over long days, evenings and weekends. This coupled with trying to manage the house, running household errands like food shopping, homework, children's activities (parties, days out etc), seeing family and friends, it is very difficult to go to Mass every Sunday at the same time.*

*Pre covid I attended Mass weekly. Since the pandemic I have become an auntie and I'm often called in for help at a weekend. This prevents me attending Mass. I probably should make more of an effort. But trying to fit everything and everyone into a weekend is complicated.*

*I attended weekly until I had my fourth child. I found it hard to try and keep them all still and quiet. It was a real struggle and then as they got older they had activities that seemed to always clash with Mass times.*

*The requirement to attend Mass every single Sunday doesn't fit in to modern 21st century family life. An open door policy, welcome any time without the fear and guilt of committing a sin I'm sure would make lots of families feel much more comfortable at Church and able to come when busy family life permits.*

*Life is just too busy, I work Saturdays so can't attend Saturday Mass and my son plays Sunday football so can't attend on Sundays*

*I used to attend weekly but owing to work commitments which mean I have to work alternate weekends, I can only attend alternate Sundays.*

*I attended more often when my mother was alive. Over the last few years I have been attending at least once a month, but struggle with childcare, or my children have activities on Sundays.*

*I used to attend Mass very frequently, however, time constraint is always an issue trying to manage work and family*

It is important to notice the rising emergence of ‘caring for elderly parents’ as another significant pressure on the capacity of Catholic men and women to attend Mass. The paradox of such a time barrier that is essentially rooted in care, love and attentiveness, to participation in a celebration of the Eucharist, whose defining characteristics include care, healing, love and tenderness, should not go unnoticed.<sup>26</sup>

*I struggled with Sunday attendance due to caring for elderly parents whilst working full time. We did not attend during COVID and haven't returned.*

*Yes, I attended weekly when my children were younger. I have been caring for my terminally ill mother and elderly father and between that, work and family commitments it has been difficult to make time. I have also found it hard to return after covid.*

The alternative pastimes and hobbies of children, especially team sport commitments, were also frequently acknowledged by participants as part of a newly emergent schedule for Sunday mornings.

*weekends are really busy with a young family, and it can be hard to make Mass work with various schedules' I go most weeks but occasionally I miss. Usually due to commitments coaching youth football.*

*Since my son has been part of a football league, games are on Sunday morning which means that we are unable to attend Mass even though we would like to. Where we can we will go on a Saturday evening but this is not always possible if we have plans which unfortunately means we are unable to commit to the 6pm Mass*

*Yes, a change of priest along with changes in my personal life and child entering semi pro sports competitions mostly held on Sunday mornings. Then the pandemic hit and I never really returned.*

---

<sup>26</sup> Cf John 13:1-15

*My son takes swimming classes. Before April the classes were Sunday afternoon, allowing us to attend Church. But since April they have been moved to the morning, clashing with Church.*

Interestingly for a few participants, as they approached their later years, time became less pressured, and permitted an increase in attendance

*Actually the opposite. Life is very busy and finding time over the years was the main issue. I have found more time to attend Church than I used to and hope that “even more” are the two words going forward*

The complex pattern and pressured rhythm of life for many Catholics, defined more than ever by schedules of work, family and caring responsibilities remains an underlying factor for a decreased pattern of Church attendance for many in this research.



## *New beginnings, milestones and re-appraisal*

Many respondents, as they reflected back upon journeys of faith lived through and with the Church, identified certain milestones in their life, or significant life events, as precipitating a time of developmental change and reappraisal. From the onset of teenage years to participation in confirmation programmes, to the beginning of university education, or a 'moving away' from home - respondents recalled how such milestones and significant periods of life transition served as a catalyst for a growth in ecclesial or faith development

*Once I was old enough to question the beliefs that I was taught growing up, I had more questions than answers and it didn't make sense to me anymore. My confirmation classes were actually the trigger that made me begin to more critically question what I was taught. Currently I consider myself to be agnostic.*

Catholic men and women, perhaps for the first time, paused to question for themselves the freedom, motivation and intention underpinning their ecclesial participation, often in a dialectic with an experience of enforced Church attendance as children. Many forged new decisions to stay away from Mass as an expression of growth and integrity, consonant with their own life perspective rather than that of their parents, and often in response to a growing self-understanding that they no longer believed in the tenets of Catholicism or even in God.

*Growing up I attended Mass every Sunday until around the age of 14 or 15, though I can't remember specifically when I stopped. As long as I recall, however, I did not want to attend Mass and was made to do so by my parents. Essentially as soon as I was given the choice whether or not to attend Mass I chose to stop, as it was never something I enjoyed, nor did I find personally that I gleaned any value from attending.*

*I was raised Catholic but during my teenage years I started going to Mass less. I didn't feel as welcome there as I had as a child. I realised I went more to keep my mum happy than because I actually believed.*

*Up until the age of 16 I attended Mass regularly, this was something that we were told as children was an important part of family life. Until teenage years this was something I would attend happily, but as I became a teenager and started to learn more about other religions and those with no religion I started to question whether Catholicism was something I thought was important or right for me.*

*After leaving Catholic secondary school and attending a non-religious sixth form college I decided that the values and principles that the Catholic Church taught did not align with my view on the world. Some stances (for example those on abortion or the Church's views on gay marriage) were strongly opposed to mine and what I thought was right - so I stopped attending Mass.*

*When I was a child I would attend Church every week with my parents, who brought me up to be Catholic. I was baptised and confirmed. In simple terms, what changed was that I always had a doubt as to the existence of God. In my view it is important to define what I mean by 'God.' I mean the 'celestial butler' idea of God, the anthropomorphised version of God.*

Yet such journeys of maturation and faith development were not reserved to children or adolescents, for not infrequently parents themselves cited that when their children ceased to attend, they either reflected that they had completed their duty of raising children in the faith and could now stand back, or they took the opportunity to reflect themselves upon what they actually believed, with many now concluding that the Catholic faith jarred too strongly with their own experience and world view that had changed

*When I was younger and prior to attending university. I attended more in the run up to my wedding and when my son was preparing for first holy communion.*

*Having to attend Mass every week is currently no longer a priority in my life.*

It is also worth noting the pejorative association that the concept of habit carries for many Catholics regarding Church attendance.

*I think humans are creatures of habit and when you get out of the habit of what had been a lifelong habit it can be very difficult to return.*

*Covid made me stop and think why I went to Mass and question whether I missed it. I decided I was in the habit of going. I suspected I was going because I always had and it was a habit, Catholic guilt kicked in if I didn't*

Habit for many was often associated with a valueless practice that simply 'carried them' along to Mass with no intentional choice or decision made to participate, which rendered such attendance as 'hypocritical' in the minds of many. The decision to stop attending Mass recovered for many an ethical coherence to their life of faith.

These milestones in life - that extended to births, personal sickness, caring for others, and death - afforded Catholics, often for the first time, with an opportunity to take stock of the meaning and importance of their faith and their engagement with Church. As we shall see such a phenomenon of re-appraisal was to occur rather unexpectedly for vastly greater numbers of the Catholic population, in a more forensic and extensive manner through the 'space of reflection and re-evaluation' created by the shared experience of the global Covid-19 pandemic, the accompanying lockdowns and the forced disconnection from Church life.<sup>27</sup>

*I have always enjoyed sitting in an empty Church, having a chat (in my head) and thinking my thoughts, I still do so. My relationship with God hasn't changed. Covid hasn't made a change to my relationship with the Church, but the enforced break from attending Mass, has. I no longer feel guilty about not attending.*

It was to be an experience as we shall see that would impact deeply not only upon the health and livelihoods of Catholics but also upon their relationships of faith and patterns of ecclesial practice.

---

<sup>27</sup> See Section 2 of Part II of this report.

### Health

It is appropriate at this stage, in light of the above reflections regarding important milestones in life and changes in habit, to address the issue of health which in and of itself can often precipitate a change of life and a time of re-appraisal for many men and women that leads to a new pattern of ecclesial participation that is rarely freely chosen and often lamented.

*I stopped while receiving treatment for cancer and when I started to attend Mass it was never as frequent and gradually dropped off altogether.*

*My disability has got worse, and my Carers are not allowed to push my wheelchair*

*I would attend 3/4 weeks every month. I became ill and have had lots of health problems. I am a teacher so I work very long hours (despite the perception) and that, combined with my health complaints, means I am exhausted. When I attend Mass, I am regularly reminded that it is my obligation to attend every week. The parish priest seems to lack any empathy for the real life that his parishioners lead. There is a passive aggressive tone to the reminders about our obligation that makes any Mass missed an anxious event in the build up to the next attendance.*

As well as a change in the personal health of individual respondents leading to a decline in practice, the health of partners and immediate family that necessitated care and attention also often resulted in a decline due to a genuine scarcity of time and energy

*Since being received into the Catholic Church, I attended Mass once, sometimes twice during the week, but always Sunday and Holydays. However, late last year my husband was diagnosed with Alzheimer's and since that time, I have been caring for him and have been unable to attend Mass.*

Such a change in patterns of practice was also impacted by certain logistical barriers to participation, of which an increased awareness arose through a change in health and wider circumstances,

*When I lived at home I was very much part of the parish I enjoyed the community and attending Mass. I have Downs Syndrome and when my mum was told she had a*

*problem with her health I left home and moved to supported living. From then on I lost my parish and could only go to Mass if mum travelled a long distance to take me*

Without such support, or even an awareness of such needs, a sense of abandonment and 'being let down' was also experienced by many other respondents, a sense that was amplified for previously active parishioners whose feelings of grief and loss were palpable through both the personal lack of capacity to attend Mass and the deficit in ecclesial outreach and care that they experienced

*Since a small baby I have attended Mass weekly as a minimum. I have been shielding due to severe health issues and since that time after attending my current Church for 60 years I have not had a phone call or letter from Parish Priest. Just emails and phone calls from previous parish priests. Feel badly let down.*

I shall return to the direct and indirect health impact of Covid upon participation in the following section, but it is sufficient to observe at this stage an insight into the extent of this impact for many Catholics,

*I have a vulnerable widowed sister who lives nearby so I didn't go back to Mass firstly [after covid] for her protection. I have missed celebrating in community but haven't gone back.. I have bumped into other parishioners from time to time .. I always feel the need to excuse myself of my non-attendance ...I miss Mass but am yet to return fully*

### **Trauma**

The experience of trauma in the lives of many Catholics, including that which is related to health and death, is also cited as a significant reason for a movement away from a regular practice of faith. It often involved a profound struggle to come to terms with suffering, loss and grief in terms of both a wider faith and a specific relationship with God, that was expressed quite starkly in the rather poignant observation offered by a recently widowed Catholic - in response to what had changed that might have contributed to a change in his ecclesial participation, he simply replied 'my wife died.'

Whilst other participants noted the consolation of faith in a time of trauma, loss and grief,

*I realised that Catholicism was the only belief system that really made sense of it to me - that provided a narrative of finding meaning in suffering / self-sacrifice. I began going to Church again.*

a search for meaning in such experiences was often met with unanswered existential enquiry and perhaps surprisingly a sense of growing ecclesial estrangement in a time of confusion that was often amplified through the lack of ecclesial concern, attentiveness and accompaniment experienced by Catholics in situations of trauma,

*The main turning point was when I walked out of a service after the sudden death of my step mother from a car accident. I couldn't understand how God could have allowed abusive mother to live but took my loving step mother*

*Attended Church once a week and then my twin brother died. Why was he taken from us? How is that fair?*

It is also important to notice the frequency with which trauma and death is the catalyst for a period of re-evaluation regarding the faith of respondents, and their relationships with both Church and God - a time of reappraisal that mirrors those that emerge from the 'milestones' and new beginnings that we explored above. The incidence of such periods of re-evaluation and 'taking stock' of life and faith occupy a regular place in the rhythm of life for Catholic men and women,

*Recent deaths in the family have caused me to reflect on Catholicism especially in regards to life after death. It has been hard to see loved ones suffer so much and to still believe that Christ allows such suffering. Their deaths have also raised questions regarding what happens to those we love. After a lifetime of believing in the resurrection I now find myself surrounded by doubt and find it easier to rationalise that my loved ones are literally dead and buried. These thoughts find me alienated from my Church.*

The struggle with health and trauma, theodicy, grief and loss emerge as causal factors that can lead to a changed pattern of ecclesial participation through ecclesial drift estrangement.

## *The Parish*

The research reveals that the experience of parish life by Catholic men and women, across its many constituent relationships, practices and structures, has a significant impact upon the levels of ecclesial engagement and participation by those who no longer admit to a regular practice of faith. Indeed the personal experience, encounter and reception of Church by those who no longer regularly practise their faith is cited by many as a causative factor in their journey of estrangement or disaffiliation from the Church.

### *Church logistics*

For many respondents the time and length of Mass was cited as a significant reason for a decline or cessation in attendance. The celebration of Mass for many was too long and reduced the time available for other valued experiences, whereas the scheduled times of Mass often clashed with alternative commitments, as noted earlier.

The increased number of Masses scheduled in many parishes during various stages of the pandemic to adapt to the appropriate spacing of people helped some Catholics to access the celebration of Mass. The subsequent return to a pre-pandemic schedule for the celebration of Mass in many parishes was experienced by some as an issue of restricted access and choice that inhibited their Covid pattern of attendance or a wider resumption of ecclesial practice.

The logistics and requirements to participate in sacramental programmes was cited by many other respondents, most notably parents, as having a negative impact upon participation in the wider Church. The requirements to participate in such programmes were cited by many as an unnecessary burden and an onerous strain on both the individuals concerned and the wider family unit, such that for some they would no longer allow their other children to participate in future programmes. This was most acutely felt with regards to sacramental preparation programmes for First Holy Communion,

*I put my first child through the communion programme and the coordinator was rude and obtuse [and] treated the adults like children. The programme insisted on was intensive and took over my child's life for 8 months, with Saturday classes for the*

*children as well as frequent zoom calls for parents. It was excessive and I lodged a complaint with the school. I have been to Catholic school, my child attends Catholic school - why was such an excessive programme required. If this is the same for my second child he will not be doing his first holy communion.*

### **Accessibility**

A further theme that emerges from the responses in this section concerns accessibility for participating in the celebration of the parish Mass. Whilst the research has identified significant barriers in terms of health, logistics and personal capacity that can lead to a reduction in participation for many, it is important to notice the experience of *attending alone* that for many emerges as a further barrier to participation and belonging,

*I went to Church alone for so many years but no one at Church spoke to me and I had no friends or family to go with. So eventually I stopped going.*

*For more than 29 years ago I attended Mass more often. Time, distance & going on my own were contributing factors for me to stop attending.*

*I don't feel like I "belong" in my new parish*

This is significant in terms of understanding how single people and older, often widowed people access participation in a Sunday community that is often defined by the rhythm and pattern of family and school life, a rhythm which is often difficult for some single men and women to identify with when they live alone. This absence of belonging and 'fitting in' is painfully experienced by some respondents in this research and can lead to a deeply felt experience of isolation and a lamented estrangement from a community which remains an oasis of support in an otherwise barren landscape for many others. Such relational accessibility, that has perhaps gone largely unnoticed by the wider ecclesial community, can serve as a barrier to participation and a movement away from a regular practice of faith.

### **A deficit in accompaniment and support**

The research also suggests that for many parishioners who struggle to access the celebration of Mass and the wider life of the parish due to many of the barriers identified above, an



amplified sense of estrangement arises from experiences of ecclesial abandonment, isolation and invisibility. Respondents identified these experiences as contributing to their movement away from regular attendance. This experience of a deficit in accompaniment and a sense of abandonment, most notably from the clergy, was most deeply felt by many Catholics who were previously highly active in the life of their local Church.

*From catechist and extraordinary minister to not attending - I couldn't reach out, why did the priest not notice I had gone?*

*both my wife and I were very active in our parish and we have both held various senior positions in Catholic school (including Head teacher) - both my wife and I were eucharistic ministers in our parish Church... both of us faced some very difficult personal and work circumstances and the "Church" were nowhere to be seen to support in a time of very great need. We therefore came to the conclusion that although God is there to support us in our lives, the Church offers us nothing extra and we faced some of the most unchristian behaviour from prominent members of the Catholic Church*

*Yes, I was taken to Mass every week & practised into my late 40s. There were always issues, e.g. men telling women (& men what to do), & priests who could have been better (lazy/alcoholic/depressed/snobbish etc), & the parish I ended up in for 25 years as an adult could have been more welcoming (e.g. I was spoken to precisely twice in the first 7 years after I joined; on both occasions I was asked for money), but I persevered. ... Having been there for 25 years we discovered that no one will phone you or write to you if you leave asking whether there is a problem.*

*Since a small baby I have attended Mass weekly as a minimum. I have been shielding due to severe health issues and since that time after attending my current Church for 60 years I have not had a phone call or letter from Parish Priest. Just emails and phone calls from previous parish priests. Feel badly let down.*

This lack of support and solidarity also extended for others to the behaviour of the wider parish community, whose lack of welcome and compassion was especially felt by young parents who lamented

*Things changed again when a few older members of the congregation would tut at my children for not sitting still and would tell them off. My children were 4-5 years old so fidget like most children that age. So I stopped taking them as I again felt judged*

*I felt unwelcome in the Church. An elderly lady complained about my baby crying and I felt like I didn't want to go back. I find my local Church at times unwelcoming to me and my children and the effort of attending weekly on my own with 3 children is very overwhelming. Therefore I have not attended or attended very rarely for the past 3 years*

As noted earlier, when Catholics have an experience of the parish and wider Church in which they do not feel welcome or supported and feel isolated and unnoticed, they are less likely to remain present in such communities and they are more likely to leave. Many Catholics in this research cohort, as the above incidences have demonstrated, have experienced a sense of ecclesial estrangement that was neither sought nor desired, and reported that they have not chosen to leave the Church, but that the Church has left them.

It is noteworthy once again to underline that a deficit in ecclesial support and accompaniment is experienced most acutely by those men and women who have previously been highly active in the life of the parish and have often led the outreach, accompaniment and support of those in need. They are now left pondering whether anyone actually misses or cares for them and are often no longer visibly present in the Church. It suggests a picture of a Church whose parish practices and structures can often unwittingly contribute to ecclesial drift and estrangement – a Church in which not all of its people feel included, valued, or even visible, a Church in which hospitality often appears selective if not absent.

## The Clergy

It is however the clergy, most notably priests, who are most often identified as the central actors in ecclesial parochial life and who have the most significant impact upon the wider ecclesial experience of those estranged and disaffiliated from a regular practice of faith. Indeed it is the clergy, who are often identified as a clear obstacle and barrier to participation in the Church for many Catholic men and women in this research. This is perhaps no more acutely felt by Catholics following the arrival of a new parish priest, the impact of which we shall now examine. In the third section of Part Two I will examine in more detail the specific impact of many respondents' experiences of clericalism as a source of ecclesial discord that contributes to ecclesial drift, estrangement and disaffiliation.

### *New parish priests*

The impact of the arrival of a new priest in a parish upon Catholic men and women and their practice cannot be underestimated, for according to the responses offered in this research it holds a significant influence upon the strength of affiliation and practice for many, perhaps especially when it contrasts with a fruitful and positive experience of the previous priest in a parish,

*I attended Mass regularly up until summer 2019. I had been involved in the music ministry for 27 years and had been running a Folk Group for most of that time. As a group, we had always felt valued by the parish priests and congregation up until the last few years when we were made to feel unwelcome by the newest parish priest. ...I am really struggling with all this. I am just someone who has worked hard, tried my best and tried to serve but I have been rejected.*

*Yes attended weekly for over 25 years all during covid as soon as the Church reopened. We have a new priest the congregation has changed feel I no longer belong which is a great sadness*

*the newly appointed Parish Priest berates those who don't attend Mass and those who don't bring their children to Mass I feel less inclined to attend and will probably only attend at Christmas & perhaps Easter.*

*I did attend regularly along with my family however when a new priest took over the Masses became boring non engaging and my children didn't want to go*

For many respondents the experience of the new priest not only exposed them to an ecclesial outlook and practices with which they were not familiar, but to one with which they were uncomfortable unsympathetic.

*My parish reorganized and we were given a new parish priest. There was no pastoral help during lockdown and limited communications, there were no synodal listening sessions held as the new priest is ultra conservative and just asked us to email any views if we had any to the parish secretary, he continually asked for funds to renovate the Church and living quarters (every week to two weeks) as part of a restoration project whilst the Church was closed.*

*When we reopened the Churches, he changed two of the Sunday Masses I would have attended, one to a Latin Mass at 6pm and one to a formal midday Mass but with the priest facing east. Only males are allowed to serve at these Masses. He also wrote in the newsletter that Holy Communion by mouth is now encouraged. I didn't like the new set up and find the new priest very authoritarian, so I have never returned, as it seemed things had now gone from bad to worse after lockdown. But I still like to hear the gospel readings each day, so I do listen to online Masses at other Churches.*

It was notably more than an initial resistance to change, for it was often an experience that strongly jarred with the ecclesial vision of respondents that had been formed and shaped over many years and led for many to the sense that their parish had changed into a Church that they no longer recognised and in which they no longer felt as though they belonged,

*I didn't like the new set up and find the new priest very authoritarian so I have never returned, as it seemed things had now gone from bad to worse after lockdown. But I still like to hear the gospel readings each day, so I do listen to online Masses at other Churches.*

*Moved to Essex over 30 years ago from a parish in London. Found new parish priest very unwelcoming and similarly the local Catholic school. Very disappointed with attitudes as had been a very active parishioner previously.*

*I attended Mass at least weekly until approximately 5 years ago. I was a very active parishioner, involved in many aspects of parish life. A change of priest in 2016 brought a new dimension to the parish. I tried to adjust but unfortunately I struggled to connect with the new priest's style*

The impact of the arrival of a new priest for many often led to a gradual withdrawal from parish life or to a movement towards alternative parish communities, for when people no longer felt at home in their parish or recognised the 'Church' that they had helped to build and develop, they often drifted away.

It is noteworthy at this stage to further observe that the people of God are aware that the outlook, shape and priorities of the parish community is often determined according to the personal preference of the parish priest. Catholic parishioners are also aware that they have no voice in the process of clergy appointments that leads to the arrival of new parish priests, and that the appointment of priests has a significant impact upon patterns of affiliation and the practice of faith in the life of the Church.

The reflections of participants concerning the arrival of a new priest therefore serve to underline three fundamental insights: the resilience of the faith of many Catholics despite such clerical experiences, the priest-centric nature of our prevailing ecclesiology in parish life and the importance of the appointments process that determines which priest is invited by the bishop to serve in which parish.

### ***Parishioners' expectations of the Clergy***

It is important however to underline as this section draws to a close that within the research there exists a sense of a widening divergence between the parishioners' expectations of the clergy and the awareness and capacity of the clergy to meet such expectations. Indeed the clergy are often overwhelmed not only by the structures and administrative pressures of parish life and the wider Church, but also by the sheer volume and diversity of expectations that seek satisfaction through just one person.

An expectation and assumption that the priest can meet all the needs of parishioners and the wider ecclesial constituency, which are often framed through the lens of the Church as simply one 'service provider' amongst many that participants have to deal with on a daily basis, was a starkly recurring theme throughout the data. This arose especially with regards to the lack of care, outreach, concern and enquiry received from the priest by parishioners who had been

very active and had now become frail, unwell, bereaved or housebound, but also to the general well-being and mental health of a wider constituency of Catholics.

This is not however to apportion blame to Catholics who no longer practise their faith regularly, for it is perhaps but a fruit of a priest-centred Church and a transactional ecclesial imaginary that has been developed and fostered over recent decades by the Church.<sup>28</sup> It is an imaginary in which the baptised people of God have been reduced and tutored, through ecclesial structures and practices highlighted by this research, to become consumers of a commodified faith, and in which the priest has been reduced and formed to become the producer and dispenser of such a product, the demand for which he cannot meet.

Such an ecclesial framework, with the priest as the fulcrum, has perhaps rendered people and priest alike as unsatisfied and diminished, and contributed as this research suggests, to a growing dissatisfaction amongst Catholics that can never be assuaged and has thus led to much ecclesial confusion, drift, and estrangement. It is such an ecclesial framework that these research respondents observe as deficient in the depth of relationships essential for a flourishing and growing ecclesial communion that is attentive to both the summons of the gospel and human fragility.

I shall return to the implications of this emerging research theme in the later section that focuses upon the impact of Catholics' experiences of clericalism, and in the final part of the report that exposes the seeds of a different Church envisaged by participants as a foil not only to a transactional ecclesiology, but also to the most striking and recurring theme to emerge from this data with regards to the clergy - namely that participants experience a priest-centred model of Church, that is noticed by many as contrasting with a Christ-centred Church. Indeed as the narrative responses so cogently remind us, the practices, relationships and structures that shape our ecclesial communities are significantly dependent upon the character, disposition and ecclesial outlook of the presbyter who leads such communities.

---

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Matthew T. Eggemeier, *A Sacramental-Prophetic Vision: Christian Spirituality in a Suffering World*, (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2014)

## *Conclusion*

As we draw this first section of Part Two to a close, a portrait begins to emerge from this research of a separated people of God for whom faith remains precious, but participation in the life of the Church has become more difficult to undertake and access, or has been overtaken by other competing commitments, or become irrelevant and discordant with their life, beliefs and values. It reveals a picture of a Church in which not all of its people feel included, valued, or even visible, a Church in which hospitality appears absent for many. It unveils a people longing for the Church to 'become more tolerant and welcoming', in which perhaps each will know the name of the other, appreciate something of their joys and hopes, griefs and anxieties, and feel as though they are at home in belief and belonging.

It affords the Church embarked upon a journey of renewal, with the opportunity to imagine and inhabit a palette of ecclesial relationships and practices that expand and enrich ecclesial hospitality and accompaniment through an upholding of inclusion, recognition and appreciation, for as one respondent pertinently reminds us, *'my faith has not waived, my relationship with God will always be strong, but it is the judgment from the Diocese and the Church which needs to change to become more inclusive of everyone. Churches must open their doors to all, not just to those defined specifically as 'practising' Catholics.'*

As we have begun to see therefore, this research amongst Catholics in the diocese of Brentwood reveals a broad and complex palette of reasons that begin to explain the movements away from a regular practice of faith for many Catholics who participated in this research. They are reasons that have often quietly percolated and grown over a period of time before they have finally surfaced through disruptive experiences or periods of transition and re-appraisal that have led to ecclesial drift and estrangement for many Catholics in this research.

It is however the experiences of ethical, ecclesial and liturgical discord, alongside the impact of the covid-19 pandemic that attracts the greatest attention of participants in the narrative responses to explain their ecclesial drift, estrangement and disaffiliation - it is to these more complex experiences that we now turn, beginning with an examination and analysis of the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic.

## SECTION 2

### THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

*Many people want to return to normality...but the pandemic is a crisis, and we do not emerge from a crisis the same as before: either we come out of it better, or we come out of it worse. We must come out of it better...Today we have an opportunity to build something different.<sup>29</sup>*

The influence of Covid-19 upon the practice of faith for Catholic men and women has been far reaching since the outbreak of the pandemic in the Spring of 2020. According to this research the ubiquitous experience of Covid led not only to a change in the pattern of Mass attendance and the wider practice of faith for some Catholics in the diocese of Brentwood, but to a fundamental recalibration of their relationship with the wider Church through a time of deep reflection, discernment and reappraisal of priorities.

The experience of Covid not only amplified much existing ecclesial dissatisfaction and disillusionment that we have examined in the previous sections, but for many Covid served as a catalyst for ecclesial drift, estrangement or disaffiliation. Half of all respondents reflected that Covid 'sped up my drifting away from the Church', whilst just over one quarter observed that they couldn't go to Mass during Covid and they haven't returned since.

*Honestly, I got out of the habit during covid and now with a busy family life ...I rarely attend weekly Mass; The pandemic also plays a role. I think humans are creatures of habit and when you get out of the habit of what had been a lifelong habit it can be very difficult to return; I used to attend every week pretty much all my life before Covid. Since Covid I have fallen out of the habit of regularly attending Mass; I have just become lazy since covid and find it difficult to get back into a routine.*

For many respondents in this research, the covid pandemic seemingly fractured a habit to which people have not returned, even after public liturgy was once again permitted by the government. Covid led for many to an unintentional break in their habitual attendance at Mass, during and after which a new alternative pattern of life was experienced and preferred - indeed 38% of respondents joyfully discovered other meaningful activities to do on a Sunday morning, that often afforded them the priorities which the Church no longer did - welcome,

---

<sup>29</sup> Pope Francis, *General Audience*, 19.08.20, [http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/audiences/2020/documents/papa-francesco\\_20200819\\_udienza-generale.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/audiences/2020/documents/papa-francesco_20200819_udienza-generale.html), [accessed 16.03.21]



appreciation, and recognition. Meanwhile for others a self-identified laziness enjoyed a renaissance.

The lockdown and closure of Churches, that entrenched this rupture in ecclesial habits, is also cited not infrequently by respondents as a failure by the leaders of the Church to defend the essential role that faith and religion occupies in the life of many people.

*I feel that the Church and clergy let people down over covid . It would take a lot to convince me to enter a Church.*

Many felt abandoned by the Church during this critical generational moment of crisis, an experience which appears to have longevity in the memories of many, *‘Before the pandemic my family and I attended virtually every week. The reaction of the Church and our schools let down our communities.’*

*Before Covid and the closing of the Churches during the pandemic I attended Church every week. My youngest daughter was born soon after lockdown and I was unable to get her baptised until she was 18 months old due to Church closures and other reasons due to the pandemic. This upset me greatly and I lost faith in the Church I feel they should have remained open and not closed.*

For some in this cohort the teaching and message received by the Bishops’ closure of Churches, is that the ecclesial obligation to attend weekly Mass is not essential for a flourishing life of faith, nor does it lead to a fractured relationship with God. Despite the Bishops’ teaching response that appealed for Catholics to return to Mass from Pentecost 2022, the research suggests that the experience of lockdown and closure appears to carry greater weight for people in this cohort than the Bishops’ letter.<sup>30</sup> It is both the absence of habitual practice from the rhythm of life and the absence of ecclesial presence from the rhyme of life that is identified by participants as significantly influential in the time of Covid.

When the Churches re-opened with many covid restrictions in place, the Covid-19 continued to have an impact upon the health of participants and their wider families, an impact that mirrored the influence that general ill-health had upon a regular practice of faith that we examined earlier - sickness prevents attendance at Mass for those directly concerned and for

---

<sup>30</sup> Cf. Catholic Bishops’ Conference of England and Wales, *Spring Plenary 2022 Resolution: Returning to Mass at Pentecost*, <https://www.cbcew.org.uk/spring-plenary-2022-resolution-returning-to-mass-at-pentecost/>, [accessed 23.12.23]

those responsible for their care, and often entrenches and extends the break in habitual participation.

With Covid however the extended demographic that it affected, notably by age, is significant - Covid restricted the capacity of many younger people, and whole families to attend Mass due to illness. Covid also significantly affected the mental health of many who might otherwise have continued to attend Church, not least through a residual covid anxiety that left people acutely wary of enclosed spaces beyond the lifting of restrictions.

*Unfortunately covid then happened, and has left me very wary of being shut in a building with other people. I feel completely isolated from the Church*

For many others however the experience of the pandemic and its associated lockdowns was more complex. For many Catholics in this research the lockdown periods during the pandemic led to an extended time of reflection and discernment, through which both personally and collectively people were reassessing the purpose and meaning of life, and the priorities that they had previously determined for themselves and their families. It was for many a 'time of choosing', a time that Pope Francis reminded the world was 'not a time of God's judgement, but a time of 'our judgement: a time to choose what matters and what passes away, a time to separate what is necessary from what is not.'<sup>31</sup>

This research suggests that many baptised Catholics engaged in precisely such a process of 'covid discernment' to reflect upon the significance that faith and Church occupied in their lives. So whilst for many Catholics a deepened appreciation and enriched understanding of connectedness, presence, people and relationships emerged from the pandemic as precious priorities, it appears that many of the participants in this research concluded that the Church is no longer the body that can bring about the priorities that they discern for their lives, and thus Church attendance might no longer occupy a prioritised place,<sup>32</sup>

*since Covid I am thinking differently about my faith. I know that I will always be a Catholic and that Christ will always be at the centre of my thinking, but Church is not a comfort or a place of hope as it once was.*

---

<sup>31</sup> Pope Francis, *Urbi et Orbi: Extraordinary Moment of Prayer*, 27.03.20, [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2020/documents/papa-francesco\\_20200327\\_omelia-epidemia.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2020/documents/papa-francesco_20200327_omelia-epidemia.html), [accessed 23.11.20]

<sup>32</sup> See the report on the three-fold seminar series of the *Centre for Ecclesial Ethics* in 2021, 'Our Church emerging from Covid: preparing the future'.

*Prior to Covid, I attended Mass every week, as I had done since I was born. During Covid I occasionally followed Mass online. Covid made me stop and think why I went to Mass and question whether I missed it. I decided I was in the habit of going. I regularly helped with welcoming and the collection, that became a 'job' and I felt I was 'contributing'. I attended a 6pm Sunday Mass, which felt as if it was being attended by people, out of duty, for whom it was the last chance to get to Mass that week*

*After Covid I decided I didn't miss going to Mass. I suspected I was going because I always had and it was a habit, Catholic guilt kicked in if I didn't. I went a few times after Covid and decided I wasn't getting much out of it, although a priest friend of mine pointed out that I should be thinking about what I can contribute rather than what I can get out. However, I think I have contributed a lot over the years. ... I have always enjoyed sitting in an empty Church, having a chat (in my head) and thinking my thoughts, I still do so. My relationship with God hasn't changed. Covid hasn't made a change to my relationship with the Church, but the enforced break from attending Mass has. I no longer feel guilty about not attending.'*

This extended time of reflection also led to a reassessment for some of their fundamental relationship with God, and to consider 'whether I still believe there is a God,' whereas the focus of this time for others was a reappraisal of their relationship with the clergy and Church praxis that notably related to a lack of pastoral care experienced during the pandemic, and the opportunity to reflect more generally on the way that the Church organises itself and behaves.

This reflection on the wider praxis of the Church extended to an amplified awareness of many dysfunctional practices at the heart of Church life that appear to have previously gone unnoticed, tolerated or ignored. In a time of Covid when people in the general population were more sensitive and attentive to the prejudice and discrimination experienced by both women and people of colour, this research suggests that a similar growth in an awareness of ecclesial dysfunction was experienced by many Catholics and contributed to an ecclesial estrangement and a movement away from a regular practice of faith,

*Covid made me think more and more about how I and others were treated like lepers within the Church. Priests and nuns who had committed far greater sins (in my opinion) than being divorced by their husband continued to participate fully within the Church.*

*I would attend every week with my family and we very much felt part of the community. The pandemic allowed us to pause and think about our faith. Whilst we all still consider ourselves Catholics we found that we weren't getting anything from Mass. Our parish priest delivers long, extremely repetitive and sometimes shouty sermons that would make us feel chastised even if it wasn't aimed at us. When a visiting priest came to*

*parish it would always draw incredible contrast. The break allowed us to see what was important and what we didn't want to suffer any more. We miss our community.*

For these and other Catholics, such a period of reflection also led to a rejection of their previous toleration of clerical misbehaviour and a reassessment of any collusion with such expressions of clericalism.

*I attended Mass at least weekly throughout my whole life until the start of the covid pandemic. I was then classified as extremely clinically vulnerable and had to shield...I was becoming increasingly upset and disenchanted in local parishes where ad-orientum and receiving communion on the tongue while kneeling at the altar rail was rigorously enforced. It was said from the altar that to receive communion on the hand was wrong and sinful. This was criticising the way I had received communion for most of my life and it made me feel unwelcome and like a naughty schoolgirl.*

Such a period of 'covid conscientisation' with regards to the prevailing model of Church extended to the heightened awareness of specific ecclesial deficiencies that notably included the absence of women in positions of leadership, governance and ministry, in contrast to the role that many women took on voluntarily in parish life during the acute phase of the pandemic.

*I was a daily Mass goer. Over time being lorded over my male priests, seeing no women in auth, noticing the absence of a female voice in liturgy, I just could not tolerate it any more.*

For many in this research Covid had given rise to a reflective period of heightened attunement to both the barriers and the pathways to a flourishing life both within and beyond the Church, that for some now contributed to ecclesial drift and estrangement.

It is not possible to conclude this section without reference to the online experience of Church liturgy during the pandemic, which carried a mixed impact upon ecclesial affiliation and practice. For many the experience of 'Church online' was a revelation, a positive experience and development that once again afforded an opportunity to reconnect with familiar parish faces and with new voices of faith from much further afield with whom they might never have otherwise met. For others however it provided them with a richer alternative ecclesial experience from parish communities other than their own, and exposed for them not only the inadequacy of Church life in their own community, but the contrasting ecclesial possibilities that were operant elsewhere,

*going to Mass via an online system allowed me the opportunity to see other parishes and their community links and made me realise what my parish is lacking.'*

*I was a fully practicing Catholic until the Covid pandemic. As a family we attended Mass together every week. We attended online Masses during Covid. When I returned in person to Mass I felt frustrated with my home parish and couldn't relate to it as much as I had with Fr's style of preaching. I have lived in my current parish for 25 years, 19 of which have been the same priest.*

This was indeed a confirmation for some that their needs could be met in communities other than their own, whether virtually or physically, and resulted for some in a movement away from a regular physical practice of faith in their local parish community in favour of communities either within their diocese or further afield across the UK or overseas.

The Covid-19 pandemic, through its array of complex experiences and unforeseen consequences, has clearly exerted a significant impact according to this research upon the practice of faith of many Catholic men and women, not least through the 'enforced' break in the habit of a regular practice of faith, but also through the time of reflection and reappraisal that it brought about for many respondents concerning the role that Church and faith enjoyed in their lives. Indeed for many it served as a catalyst that perhaps hastened their ecclesial drift, estrangement and disaffiliation, for the global pandemic also afforded a sharper focus and deeper significance to many of the existing expressions of ethical, ecclesial and liturgical discord experienced by many Catholics in this research. It is to an examination and analysis of such complex experiences of discord that we now turn our attention.

## SECTION 3

### ETHICAL, ECCLESIAL AND LITURGICAL DISCORD

In this third section of Part Two we will examine the three areas of discord and dissonance that emerge from this research as significant identifiable factors that have contributed to ecclesial drift, estrangement and disaffiliation for baptised Catholics, namely: ethical, ecclesial and liturgical. Whilst the impact of liturgical discord attracted the smallest number of participant responses concerning factors that contributed to ecclesial separation, the emergence of the non-satisfaction of the spiritual needs of both non-practising and weekly-practising Catholics within this area of discord is not insignificant for the Church, and it is a research theme to which we shall return.

Whereas the extent of the ecclesial discord experienced by participants, often manifest in judgement, condemnation and exclusion, was highly significant in the influence it had upon ecclesial practice, most notably through a widely damaging experience of clericalism, a ‘disease that causes us to lose the memory of the Baptism we have received’<sup>33</sup>, the ecclesial dysfunction regarding the recognition and role of women in the Church, and the experience of the clerical child abuse scandal. Individually and together each of these revealed a divergence in the anthropologies and ecclesial imaginaries that different groups of baptised Catholics believe might best serve the mission of the Church.

It was however the impact of the ecclesial ethical discord that arises through an encounter with ethical Church teaching that constituted one of the most significant reasons to emerge from this research as contributing to a movement away from a regular practice of faith, with specific reference to the Church’s teaching concerning homosexuality.

Whilst such broader ethical discord is not significantly novel in the recent life of the universal Church - indeed such honest divergence and open disagreement is often a pathway to the development of ecclesial doctrine, practice and understanding amongst people and bishops across the Church – it is significant that the resulting dissonance, especially as shall be seen in terms of sexual ethics, is now an identifiable and growing causal factor in the drift, estrangement and disaffiliation of Catholics today in their movement away from a regular practice of their faith. It is to

---

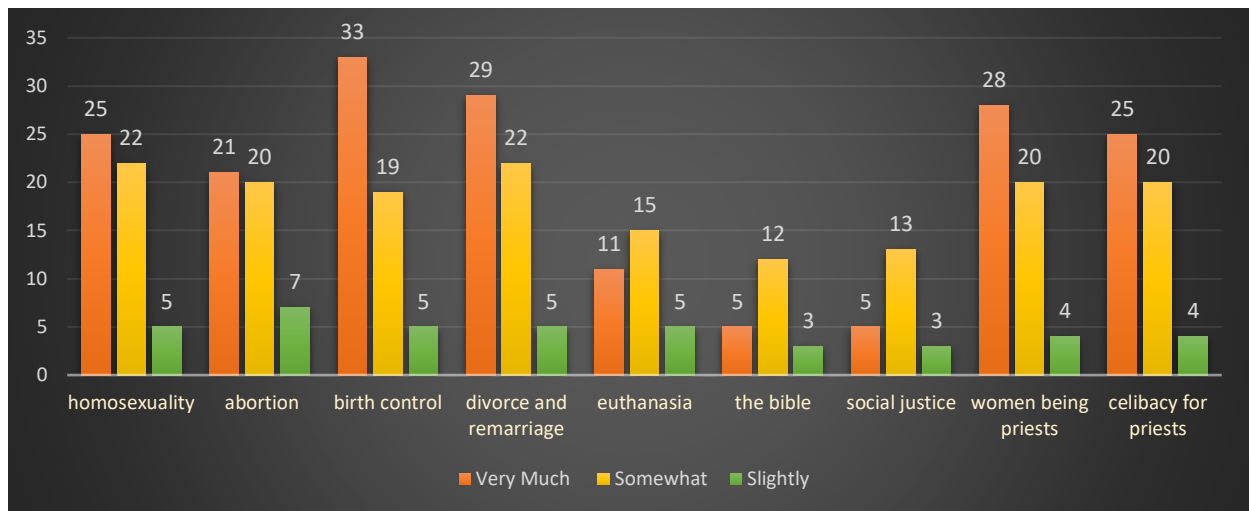
<sup>33</sup> Pope Francis, *Letter of Pope Francis to the priests of the diocese of Rome*, 2023, <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/letters/2023/documents/20230805-lettera-sacerdoti.html>, [accessed 06.01.24]

understand more deeply the complexity of such journeys, that we first turn our attention to these specific areas of ethical discord that significantly emerge from this research.

## ECCLESIAL ETHICAL DISCORD

### Church teaching concerning homosexuality

Whilst the Church's teaching on birth control was cited by 52% as a reason for distancing themselves from the Church, alongside 51% for divorce and remarriage, and 42% for abortion, it was the Church's teaching on homosexuality that was cited by 47% of Catholics as a reason for distancing themselves from the Church that drew the most significant attention in the expanded narrative responses.



These were responses that revealed a painful dissonance between the personal experience of Catholics and their understanding of faith, and the Church's teaching in this area. The research reveals a picture of men and women struggling to remain in the practice of their faith in light of ecclesial ethical teaching on homosexuality, and it gives rise to a cry from these Catholics for a broader experience of sexuality to be reflected and appreciated in the development of the praxis and teaching of their Church.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Such responses have found a coherence with a variety of sources reported in the secular British press in response to *Fiducia Supplicans* towards the end of 2023, 'I'm Catholic. My son is gay and is now engaged to a wonderful man whom I also call "son" because he is. When my son came out, I realised that it was the hardest thing he would ever do in his life, and I was so proud of him. The pope has taken one very small step towards recognising gays and lesbians. Is it enough? No it is not. The Church is a mess. Unless drastic action is taken, it will continue to lose members and will eventually collapse. I find that I must believe in something bigger than me. Call it a holy higher power. We all need something bigger to get through lonely or miserable periods in our lives. Perhaps nature is your god? Or Gaia, the ancestral mother of all life? Matt Cain's words will make many others think about what gay men have suffered by being raised as Catholics in years gone by, and even nowadays.' Cf 'Letters: The pope's small step on gay couples isn't enough', *The Guardian*, 25.12.23, Tom Richards, *Beara, County Cork, Ireland*, [https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/dec/25/the-popes-small-step-on-gay-couples-isnt-enough?CMP=Share\\_iOSApp\\_Other](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/dec/25/the-popes-small-step-on-gay-couples-isnt-enough?CMP=Share_iOSApp_Other), [accessed 27.12.23]



For many Catholics in this research the Church's teaching regarding sexual ethics is often experienced as 'a cold bureaucratic morality'<sup>35</sup> that is strikingly discordant with their own lived experience of sexuality and sexual expression as human beings, and fosters a 'cognitive ethical dissonance' that for many is resolved in ecclesial separation,<sup>36</sup>

*I came out as bisexual and didn't agree with the Church's standpoint on homosexuality. I wanted to distance myself from this way of thinking as I didn't feel welcome in the Church anymore.*

*I struggle to align a loving and forgiving God with the teachings of the Catholic Church...I hope that Jesus wouldn't cast out homosexuals, unmarried couples, divorcees...I struggle to consider myself a Catholic. I want my children to grow up tolerant and able to live and thrive in the modern world and the teachings of the Catholic Church sadly don't allow that.*

Such narrative responses were often stark and present uncomfortable reading for a Church that espouses compassion, tenderness and hospitality. Indeed, in response to 'how has it come about that you no longer consider yourself Catholic', one person simply replied 'I am a gay man', with no further qualification necessary. Other more extensive responses revealed further seeds of discord and dissonance that were equally troubling,

*I grew up in a very active family within the Brentwood Diocese. We attended Mass weekly, were heavily involved... I loved the community and the sense of belonging. I moved away from home and on my journey away was able to work out who I was and my place in the world.*

*Unfortunately who I choose to love does not follow the teachings of the Catholic faith and as to protect my family I feel that to distance myself is a better option than to be who I am openly,...I would love to return to the Church, the community, the faith but it doesn't feel like a place where I would be welcome and I don't want to let my family down so it's better to stay away.*

Whether being gay was a concern of the respondent themselves or of their children, the replies were often equally moving, yet confidently unapologetic in their reflection upon how it had influenced a movement away from Church,

---

<sup>35</sup> *Amoris Laetitia*, 312, [https://www.vatican.va/content/dam/francesco/pdf/apost\\_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco\\_esortazione-ap\\_20160319\\_amoris-laetitia\\_en.pdf](https://www.vatican.va/content/dam/francesco/pdf/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20160319_amoris-laetitia_en.pdf), [accessed 19.12.23]

<sup>36</sup> Of concern here is the dissonance that arises between the integrated personal faith and lived experience of Catholics and their families, and the ethical teaching of the Church that concerns sexuality.

*My eldest daughter has since come out as gay and the official Catholic view that sees this as wrong sticks in my throat. She is a wonderful young lady who I am immensely proud of - caring and good - why should she be made to feel wrong in some way?*

*When my children were younger I attended Mass more as wanted to bring them up in the Catholic faith the same as I had when I was a child. My 21-year-old daughter is gay and has shunned the Church since her confirmation and the Church's teaching and beliefs about gay marriage has made me question my religion. Even though I still think of myself as Catholic I'm not a practicing Catholic anymore.*

The love and acceptance received by gay Catholics from parents and friends often sharply contrasted with their experience of Church teaching and encounters with clergy,

*I was brought up as a Catholic and practised the religion until I left school, partly out of respect to my parents. I was fortunate to have parents who I came out to at 16 and they were surprised but loved me and have continued to do so. I was an altar boy for a number of years but when I left school I no longer went to Church. The Church does not welcome people like myself and my husband.*

For many respondents such discord with the Church's teaching concerning homosexuality is cited as a major causative factor in their movement away from a regular practice of faith. Significantly according to this research the impact of this discord is no longer limited to the estrangement of those who are themselves gay, but extends to the parents, siblings, and friends of gay men and women,

*Some family and friends of mine are homosexual. Their morals and daily acts are examples of what a Christian should be like. However they no longer attend Mass as they feel they are not welcome.*

*A close family member is gay and whilst he is not religious, he feels judged and unwelcomed by the Catholic Church.*

Such experiences of ethical discord that find expression in the narrative responses of this research and shed light on the emerging contradictory and conflicting sources of wisdom for Catholics in their moral lives, often gives rise to an 'ethical cognitive dissonance' that manifests in both personal stress and internal conflict alongside an unsustainable tension in ecclesial association and belonging. For whilst Catholic men and women in this research are familiar with the Church's teaching concerning homosexuality echoing in one ear, they are also increasingly familiar with the

voices and witness of those family and friends in good gay relationships whom they know and love, echoing in the other ear.

*I cannot accept any religions rejection of a person because of their sex, gender or sexuality. God made us all, and we are made this way. Who is the Church to try to limit God to only making one type of human being?'; 'I feel that in my adult life the Catholic Church has shifted into hugely negative territory, with open bigotry including homophobic, transphobic, misogynistic hate speech included in sermons...It makes me feel alienated and that I don't want my children to attend Church with these values at the backdrop. Religion should be about love and being your best self, not casting judgement and spreading hate. I want to teach my children that they can be whoever they want to be without judgement.*

Thus amidst this conflictual experience of pain and discord, that causes deep hurt and trauma to many, the research suggests that many baptised Catholics can no longer afford to endure the ethical cognitive dissonance that such teaching imposes and so they begin a journey of estrangement and disaffiliation from the Church.<sup>37</sup>

*I abhor the Church's teaching on homosexuality, and all ways in which they reject people, as those were people were made by God. This more than anything stopped me walking into a Church for the best part of 30 years.*

The ethical cognitive dissonance experienced by numerous Catholics in this research is 'resolved' no longer through a nominal submission of will and intellect, nor through an unsatisfactory acquiescence that often preserved the dissonance, leaving it faintly subdued or often undimmed, but rather it is resolved through ecclesial estrangement and disaffiliation that maintains personal integrity. The research reveals a group of estranged Catholic men and women who still yearn for a more authentic and accurate anthropology and an enriched ecclesial sexual ethics through an attentiveness to the lived experience of all the baptised, that can lead to the reform, albeit gradual, of ecclesial practice.<sup>38</sup>

---

<sup>37</sup> Such a cognitive dissonance in previous decades may have been superficially resolved by either a nominal submission by parents to the Church's teaching, an admonishment of those subject to the teaching, or a quiet ignoring of any family behaviours, relationships and decisions that are discordant with such teaching.

<sup>38</sup> The recent example of such an attempted 'specific and innovative' resolution to address such dissonance and alleviate the discord between the teaching of the Church and the lived experience of the people of God is the recent Declaration of Pope Francis *Fiducia Supplicans* that offers a specific and innovative contribution to a deficit in ecclesial care and ministry that is imbued with the compassion and mercy of Jesus, and attentive to both the summons of the gospel and human fragility. See 'Joy and alarm in bishops' responses to *Fiducia Supplicans*' in *The Tablet*, 23.12.23, <https://www.thetablet.co.uk/news/18081/joy-and-alarm-in-bishops-responses-to-fiducia-supplicans>, [accessed 27.12.23]

Indeed numerous respondents make a plea for the Church to move away from what they describe as 'old fashioned' ethical teaching, to adapt it and refine it in light of the world of today, to 'get with the times' - a plea which appears to call for a movement away from teaching which is developed with little or no appeal to lived experience, to one which is stretched and enriched through a deep attentive listening to the experience of all.

*I haven't left, just not going at the moment (I like to call it a spell in the wilderness where I can question whether the values of organised religion that can't adapt to meet societies modern needs has a place in my life). Relax more and adapt to the 21 century (current pope is trying harder than his predecessor), adapt the teachings on contraception, homosexuality to reflect life as it now. You need to modernise your thinking. Don't get dragged back to 1950s. Welcome the change. Ordain women. Marry divorcees. Be more concerned about social justice. Ask yourself, "What would Jesus do?"*

These are heartfelt pleas, that are an appeal from the ecclesial peripheries to be attentive to the least breath of the Spirit that dwells and echoes in the experience of all the baptised, so as to draw it anew into deep conversation with scripture, tradition and reason as ethical epistemological loci. It is perhaps a deep-seated call for the Church to recalibrate the relationship between truth and mercy that is found to be unbalanced for many in both its teaching and praxis.

The impact of this ethical discord and dissonance that finds a resolution in estrangement and disaffiliation is not limited however to a non-reception of specific teachings or ecclesial absence, for it has led to a growing indifference for many participants to the Church's teaching in the domain of sexual ethics *per se*, most notably in the formation of personal conscience and the way in which baptised Catholics make moral choices in their lives.<sup>39</sup> The Church is no longer necessarily recognised as an accompanying interlocutor to whom baptised Catholics preferentially turn in their moral decision making.

The implications of the impact of such ecclesial ethical discord with such teaching finds further influence in terms of the received authenticity and credibility of the Church, because for many respondents the disjunction between an understanding of a compassionate and merciful Jesus of Nazareth as portrayed in the gospels, and the Church's praxis and teaching in this realm of sexual ethics is often stark. It renders for many respondents the Church's claim to embody a compassionate merciful Christ as less authentic, credible and compelling across many areas of

---

<sup>39</sup> As noted earlier 38% of Catholics who no longer regularly practise their faith hold that Church teaching no longer influences their thinking on moral issues.

Church life - an experience that finds deeper resonance with respondents' reflections regarding the impact of the clerical child abuse scandal upon ecclesial practice.

It is also however the accompanying pedagogical practices to communicate such teaching, notably by clergy, that compound this painful disjunction for those who no longer regularly practise, and thus constitutes a contributory accompanying factor underpinning disaffiliation. The negative, judgemental and condemnatory praxis and language often used to share this teaching, as reported by participants, further amplifies the evident dissonance, such that 63% of participants cited their experience of the Church as 'judgemental' as a factor in their estrangement from the Church.

*It is more how specific teachings are being conveyed that troubles me. Whether we are talking about homosexuality, divorce or abortion there is no compassion or love in what I am hearing. Only shame based judgement.*

Church teaching that is received without compassion or empathy, as imposed and judgemental, non-negotiable and disconnected from the reality and experience of men and women who bear the image of Christ, contributes significantly to the estrangement of Catholics in the diocese of Brentwood. The communication of such teaching, as well as its substance, matters.

The extensive impact of such discordant ethical teaching upon ecclesial practice finds further expression in an associated and somewhat unexpected set of responses that merit serious ecclesial attention, for some Catholics no longer see ecclesial teaching in sexual ethics as necessarily good or even benign. Catholics who no longer regularly practise their faith, but are still present to some degree, consider such Church teaching on sexuality as negative and harmful not only for themselves, but especially for their children, such that they are no longer prepared to expose their children to such ecclesial teaching that they now describe as harmful rhetoric,

*I don't feel I can call myself Catholic when I am so against much of the associated belief system...I am really struggling with whether I can raise my children as Catholic when the teachings remain as they are.*

*The Churches teaching on homosexuality. I also work in a Catholic school and the number of children that are struggling to accept their own sexual identity find it difficult being within a community that is taught that it [sexuality] is wrong. This is having a huge impact on their mental health.*

*I believe religion should be positive and community based, and I don't feel this is what the Catholic Church has been aiming for. The Church needs to quickly move into the 21st century and stopping mandating what people can and can't do, stop telling women what to do with*

*their bodies, who people can love, who they should be.’ I struggle to consider myself a Catholic. I want my children to grow up tolerant and able to live and thrive in the modern world and the teachings of the Catholic Church sadly don’t allow that.*

This research has revealed that the Church’s teaching on homosexuality, and its accompanying pedagogy, were important causative and contributory reasons for disaffiliation, estrangement and a movement away from a regular practice of faith for many Catholics in this cohort, especially with regards to the substance of the teaching, and the language and mode used to engage baptised Catholics.

## Church teaching concerning divorce and remarriage and birth control

The research also demonstrates that such an ecclesial ethical discord extends for some to the Church's teaching regarding divorce and remarriage and birth control, which remain a source of pain and discord for Catholic men and women. Whilst neither set of narrative responses for these two ethical issues is as voluminous as those given for homosexuality, the experience conveyed remains acutely painful for many Catholics,

*I married (2nd marriage) to a man who was the definition of a Christian 100%. He worked hard within his parish, both physically in Church and grounds. Also in organisations, i.e. Hospices, Group raising money to take disadvantage children go Lourdes, also accompanying them for a week at Easter (HCPT) .A hard working member of KSC. This is but a small insight the character of Jim...His reward by the Catholic Church, banned from the Sacraments, his crime! wishing to marry again after years of devotion to his three sons, their mother having decided she had found a better life away from the family.*

*He died suddenly still broken hearted at being barred from the Sacraments which were part of his whole existence. To the day he died he never missed Mass on Sundays and Holy Days and never once did I hear him criticise the Church. I am the person he married and therefore bear a lot of the anguish which he suffered in silence with the belief the decision was his,, therefore, he had no right to complain!!! I do not attend Mass regularly but do work with organisations attached to the Church. I love the Mass but find it difficult to reconcile this lovely Christian Service with the punishment it passed on one of God's golden members.*

*It is also lonely when Communion Time comes and you have to sit isolated in your bench or make it more obvious that you are an outsider, by going up for a blessing. I also find that over the years I have received so many different answers from various priests re this subject that making a decision as to where I go from here re my forward journey in the Church. I will always be a Catholic but a practising one?*

This direct and indirect pain experienced by those affected by the Church's teaching on divorce and re-marriage is well documented<sup>40</sup> and finds further expression in this research as an identifiable causative factor for ecclesial estrangement and a movement away from regular practice. With regards to birth control, it is often cited in the extended narrative responses as one of a set of connected sexual ethical issues that contribute to their journey away from regular practice. It appears that the conflict experienced by many amongst the people of God concerning birth control

---

<sup>40</sup> See for example Timothy Buckley Csr, *What Binds Marriage: Roman Catholic Theology in Practice*, (London: Continuum, 1997).

has diminished significantly, not as a result of acceptance of such teaching, but perhaps as a recognition of the growing irrelevance and insignificance of the teaching to Catholics in their moral lives.

*With teenage daughters in the house it is increasingly hard to justify many of the Churches teaching on issues such as contraception, male only priests and altar servers, and abortion*

Moreover having noticed and resolved the ecclesial 'ethical' dissonance in their own lives this estranged people of God is more attuned to identify a prevailing hypocrisy in the teaching and praxis of the wider body of the Church.

*I don't practise my faith in Church as I would feel hypocritical to describe myself as a Catholic but I do have a deep and personal faith*

*I no longer regard myself as Catholic because I don't agree with many parts of the Catholic way of life/the views of the Church. As mentioned above I disagree with the Church's stance on abortion and gay marriage and other aspects of being a Catholic. Therefore I wouldn't be comfortable saying I am a Catholic whilst disagreeing with some of the main views of the Church.*

They notice an ecclesial hypocrisy and a deficit in ecclesial integrity reflected in the disjunction between an espoused and operant ecclesiology of compassion, mercy, and truth, and yearn for the Church to resolve this broader ecclesial disjunction through an ecclesial renewal that is closely attentive and reflective once again to the person and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth, for as one respondent pertinently concludes, *'the Church is a mess. Unless drastic action is taken, it will continue to lose members and will eventually collapse.'*

*However, the Church needs to change as the world has changed. Female clergy, openly gay clergy - we need to embrace not discriminate. Young people, and I'm especially thinking of my children, embrace diversity in a way my generation should have done. They are leading the way. The Church talks about inclusion and diversity but doesn't seem to practise it. Attracting young people to Church will be difficult until the Church modernises.*

*The Church has not moved with the times and alienates certain groups from LGBTQ Community, those wishing to practise safe sex. Lots of hypocrisy especially given the amount of historic child abuse that has gone on. Good Christian values of tolerance & acceptance are not shown by the Catholic Church, particularly in our own parish.*

This research reveals a wide-reaching impact from ecclesial ethical discord that has given rise to a painful ecclesial estrangement and disaffiliation for too many Catholics today, most notably with regards to the Church's teaching on homosexuality, but also in other areas of the domain of sexual



ethics. In each of these areas of sexual ethics that respondents identify as contributory factors in their movement away from a regular practice of the faith, a withdrawal from affiliation with the Church's teaching and Mass attendance appears to be the pathway sought in order to resolve the ethical cognitive dissonance that arises from such ecclesial teaching. For Catholic men and women in this research it is the pathway upon which they embark to maintain the dignity and integrity of their faith and personal conscience. The research also rather profoundly reveals a deep longing for the Church to be deeply attentive and caring of *all* the joys and hopes, griefs and anxieties of *all* the people of today, so that each and all may now see their face and recognise their story in our ecclesial ethical teaching.

## ECCLESIAL DISCORD

The second key area of discord that emerges from this research as a contributory factor to ecclesial drift, estrangement and disaffiliation, can broadly be grouped under the umbrella of *ecclesial discord*. In the language of Pope Francis, this might refer to the discord between the ecclesial dreams and aspirations of those who no longer feel that they belong in the Church and those who continue to feel at home.

The breadth and extent of this ecclesial discord experienced by participants, was often manifest through ecclesial experiences of judgement, condemnation and exclusion, and was highly significant in the influence it had upon ecclesial practice according to this research, most notably as will be seen through a widely damaging experience of clericalism, the ecclesial deficit regarding the recognition and role of women in the Church, and the clerical child abuse scandal. Each of these has contributed to an ecclesial experience that conflicted strongly for those who no longer practise their faith with their understanding and vision of an ecclesial imaginary that most faithfully reflected the Church's professed ecclesiology, or their understanding of the gospel, or their experience of Church in a previous period in their lives - a conflict that resulted in an estranged movement away from Church and practice.

Catholic men and women invariably have some experience of the clergy, and the research suggests that it is a multi-layered and complex experience that can be both personal and institutional, transactional or sacramental, or spiritual and liturgical. It is an experience that invariably for respondents in this research refers to priests, rather than bishops or deacons.<sup>41</sup> It is notably a relationship that is for some often positive and warm, evoking memories of a *'welcoming priest that wants to drive a happy community, not one that lives in fear of his opinions and decisions. A priest that looks to understand his parishioners' difficulties and works to help them in any way that he can.'* Such reflections are cited in the research as precious ecclesial memories that reflect the genuine commitment of the many men across the generations who have faithfully served the people of God in the Church and the wider world in the image of a servant Christ. These are ecclesial memories of this estranged part of the Body of Christ, memories that they long for God to make a present reality once more.

There is however a counter experience which the narrative of this research tells, and it is a narrative that is both uncomfortable and challenging, a narrative that is perhaps too familiar to ignore and disregard. It is a narrative that is not often shared in the Church with such candour, or listened to with such attentiveness; it is a narrative of the many quietened, even structurally silenced voices who have drifted away following encounters with clergy, assuming that their experience is no longer valued or worthy of attention. It is a striking mosaic of the ecclesial experience of Catholic men and women, for whom the operant central character of parish life is not Christ, but their priest.

According to this research, and as suggested earlier in this report, it is the presence, actions and behaviours of the priest, that continue to have a significant impact upon the affiliation and ecclesial presence of Catholic men and women today, who simply *'want to feel worthy, welcome, valued, known and recognised by my parish priest'* and to have a *'parish priest who is approachable.'* The significance of this sacerdotal impact upon the pattern and frequency of practice most immediately presents itself through the personal relationship that people enjoy, or conversely suffer, with their priest. The very basic human ecclesial interactions at significant moments of life

---

<sup>41</sup> Whilst there are some references made by participants to bishops and the impact that they have upon practice, there are no explicit references made by respondents in this research to deacons, either transient or permanent.

that include experiences of birth, sickness, health, marriage and death leave an indelible ecclesial imprint upon the memory of many respondents, both positive and negative.

As we delve more forensically into the narrative responses however, it becomes clear that the impact of such negative ecclesial encounters experienced by more than half of respondents is not reducible to experiences of withheld presbyteral consent to particular funeral hymns, or access to baptism, schools or the sacraments – widely cited though these are in the research responses. The impact of the wider underlying demeanour, behaviours and outlook of the priest – his *ecclesial modus operandi* - is not unnoticed by many Catholics, nor is it negligible in its impact

*I attend when I think I am strong enough to withstand the negativity in Church, sometimes I cannot face it, to be truthful. The priest is very negative at times and I often feel unwelcome. There are few of my age group in Church. The Priest ignores me...I am most upset at the way that lifelong Catholics like myself are made to feel that we do not matter. My age group and younger are the Catholics of the future. Parishes like mine will die out if we are not made to feel that we are wanted and have a place.*

*I no longer have the strength to keep fighting to be accepted only to be rejected again by another priest and his interpretations of the faith.*

The manner of his relating with others, both as a human being and as a priest, his exercise of leadership and his ecclesial self-understanding of role and function, are all cited in the research as having an impact upon parishioners with whom the priest is in relationship.

*Parish priest is an unpleasant and rude individual who does not make the parish welcoming.*

*Attitude of clergy as self-sufficient and distant, and lack of simple thank you.*

Indeed for many who no longer regularly practise their faith, an experience of priests who are condemnatory and judgemental, authoritarian and disconnected, dismissive and abusive gives rise to a disturbing experience of ecclesial discord that contributes significantly to their ecclesial estrangement and disaffiliation. It is perhaps such experiences of clericalism as encountered by men and women in this research, that damage and suffocate the flourishing of both people and priest and painfully fracture the body of Christ.

## *An experience of clericalism - 'losing the memory of the baptism we have received'*

The ecclesial disease of clericalism finds a significant place in the narrative responses of participants in this research concerning contributory factors to their ecclesial estrangement and disaffiliation. Whilst the word clericalism is rarely used, the numerous examples of abusive and inappropriate clergy behaviour and praxis that are cited by Catholic men and women resonate strongly with many of the definitions and references to clericalism in the wider literature.<sup>42</sup>

*The Current Parish Priest has driven members away since his arrival in the parish rather than bring more flock into the house of God, through his pride, pomposity, lack of reasoning, unwillingness to understand/listen to people's points of views, his unforgiveness of people when they voice their opinion, and his general demeanour.*

This 'ecclesial sickness and perversion' of clericalism has been repeatedly exposed by Pope Francis as a 'symptom of a priestly and lay life tempted to live out the role and not the real bond with God and brethren. In short, it denotes a 'disease that causes us to lose the memory of the Baptism we have received, leaving in the background our belonging to the same Holy People and leading us to live authority in the various forms of power, without realising the duplicity, without humility but with detached and haughty attitudes.'<sup>43</sup>

This clerical amnesia with regards to a shared memory of baptism found symptomatic expression in a variety of forms across the many narrative reasons offered for estrangement and disaffiliation in

---

<sup>42</sup> Professor Jim Keenan defines clericalism as 'the unconscious, twin temptations the clergy face to see themselves as superior to the laity and use their clerical status to pursue power and personal gain over Christian service.' Cf James F Keenan SJ, 'Hierarchicalism', *Theological Studies*, Vol 83:1 (2022), pp. 84-108. Donald Cozzens observes that 'clericalism is an attitude that puts their status as priests and bishops above their status as baptized disciples of Jesus Christ. In doing so, a sense of privilege and entitlement emerges in their individual and collective psyches' that impedes their capacity of 'seeing and freezes their humanity—their ability to simply connect on a human level with the various sorts of God's holy people. Of all the sour fruits of clericalism, this inability to connect with others might be the most damaging', Donald Cozzens, 'Let's end Clericalism in the Church', July 25 2015, <https://associationofCatholicpriests.ie/lets-end-clericalism-in-the-Church-donald-cozzens/> [accessed 06.01.24]. The recent *Synthesis Report* of the XVI General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops states that 'One obstacle to ministry and mission is clericalism. Clericalism stems from a misunderstanding of the divine call, viewing it more as a privilege than a service, and manifesting itself in the exercise of power in a worldly manner that refuses to allow itself to be accountable. This distortion of the priestly vocation needs to be challenged from the earliest stages of formation by ensuring close contact with the People of God and through concrete service-learning experiences among those most in need. The exercise of priestly ministry today cannot be conceived of except in harmony with the bishop and the presbyterate, and in profound communion with other ministries and charisms. Unfortunately, clericalism is a disposition that can manifest itself not only among ministers but also among the laity.' *Synthesis Report*, XVI General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, 2023, Part II, 11 (c), <https://www.cbcew.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2023/11/vatican-synthesis-report-eng-oct23.pdf>, [accessed 01.01.24]. See also the work of Sr Gemma Simmonds, Richard Gaillardetz and Pope Francis as cited below.

<sup>43</sup> Pope Francis, *Letter of His Holiness Pope Francis to the Priests of the Diocese of Rome*, 2023, <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/letters/2023/documents/20230805-lettera-sacerdoti.html>, [accessed 06.01.24]

this research, expressions that were often manifest through an emphasis of ecclesial alterity in status and privilege that points to a clericalism that is not uniquely reducible to individuals but is also definitive of a culture and institution in which many un-Christ like behaviours and practices fester, not least in judgement and condemnation.

### ***Judgement and condemnation***

It is such a widely shared and received experience by research participants of judgement and condemnation by priests that emerges as a troubling theme from the research and is perhaps the first major indication of a clericalism that is festering, indeed as we saw earlier just under two-thirds of non-practising respondents agreed or strongly agreed that their experience of a judgemental Church is a contributory reason for their movement away from a regular practice of their faith, an experience that included *'Condemnation of others, including young people, often not directly 'in line' with Church teaching'*

It was however a judgement and condemnation personified in the interactions with priests, who were considered by some as *'way too judgemental and angry'*, that had the greatest impact upon respondents,

*I have found the Church to be run in a hierarchical, judgemental manner. Fr was an excellent orator but was judgemental, cruel and spiteful to so many people. There are many in the community who have been scarred by his treatment. Masses have ever diminishing numbers with few children in attendance.*

*The Church stopped being love and started being judgemental. I carried guilt for years because of it and I partly feel the judgement of the Church has led to my poor mental health as an adult.*

It was this experience of judgement by priests, that was often accompanied by arrogance, nastiness and a lack of compassion, that participants specifically identified as clerical behaviours that were unacceptable and incoherent with priestly life and a wider witness to the gospel. Many participants were often *'horrified by the arrogance and lack of compassion displayed by some clergy and religious sisters'* and found *'priests very strange and odd – and feel uncomfortable in their presence'* – indeed for some the behaviour of priests often did not meet the basic levels of civilised and dignified human behaviour,

*I had the misfortune of becoming too close to how the Church operates. I realised that women have no position of authority within the structure of the Church. A Parish Priest called*

*who disagreed with a view I held told me that the trouble starts when the women get involved he called me a liar and swore at me...His language was disgusting and in one meeting he hit the table with his fists so hard that glasses of water went over, this meeting was attended by another female who he was unhappy about.*

Whilst for others their experience was sadly similar

*Yes all of my life until Covid, I have struggled to return [due] to the lack of compassion of my parish priest and behaviours that I do not believe should be demonstrated by a priest*

*I find the priest rude, non inclusive, unfriendly and unkind. When I attend I feel like I am an inconvenience to him, being a woman. I have tried to participate by offering to do the readings, and the priest continues to ignore me and my children.*

*I attended weekday Mass daily. It was truly the best ever start to my day. I attended Saturday Vigil Mass weekly, which I loved. I now have a chapel in my loft and pray and worship there. I was treated appallingly by the diocesan clergy.*

*Up until this year I went weekly ... but I dislike the rules for young families and the pressure this causes them. And our priest uses scare tactics in his preaching. The god I love, loves everyone*

*My love of Church was ruined as it became about priest stamp cards and banning buggies. I've often been so angered by how parents are treated (particularly solo parents or those struggling with a crying child) I haven't been able to hear Gods message in his house. I now view myself as meeting God where he met me - on the side of a sports field I try to live Gods values and inspire them in my children. We read bible stories and talk about God but I wouldn't be saddened if my children never went to Church - I found it judgemental and damaging to me in the end and that makes me very sad*

Such experiences of clerical behaviour encountered by many found expression not only through personal interaction but also in the liturgical assembly, in which such behaviour appeared to carry a greater potency for lasting harm.<sup>44</sup> For many others these expressions of clerical judgement and condemnation were contextualised and associated with a Church that had allowed the clerical sexual abuse scandal to fester,

*The priest was very intimidating and had strong beliefs and could not see past them. I also have had experience of two priests in my time being arrested for sexual offenses back in the 80's and one parish priest falling in love with a parishioner and having to leave the Church*

---

<sup>44</sup> The related insight of Sr. Gemma Simmonds is noteworthy in her observation that 'clericalism flourishes, alongside the infantilisation of the laity, where agency within the faith community is largely limited to those whose voice is heard within its public assembly and who are perceived as the controllers of grace.' Cf. Gemma Simmonds CJ, 'Mothering Sundays: Pope Francis and the Challenge of Women's Role within the Church', *The Way*, October 2020, Vol 59: 4

*because it was deemed as unacceptable. All along the way, I was continuously judged by these people for the attendance at Church or life choice.*

For many this both compounded the incredulity with which such behaviour was received and deepened its impact

*Religion should be about love and being your best self, not casting judgement and spreading hate. I want to teach my children that they can be whoever they want to be without judgement. Not to mention the horrific behaviour of priests and officials that has been exposed. How dare the Church cast judgement on anyone when this has been happening and covered up for so long.*

Clerical expressions of judgement and condemnation have contributed significantly to ecclesial estrangement and disaffiliation for many in this research. Yet in the midst of such a widespread and damaging experience of clerical condemnation and judgement there emerged a considered appeal by baptised men and women for something better to be forged in the heat of such pain and distrust that might foster and lead to a better experience of Church for both people and priests alike that authentically reflects the mercy and love of God,

*Please try to be all encompassing to all people, there is nothing worse than feeling alienated by the people who are supposed to be leading us. Please let people know that God is a loving, forgiving God and only he can judge us.*

### ***Clerical disconnect***

The second significant manifestation of clericalism that emerged from the research responses is that of a clerical disconnection of priests from the wider people of God, a disconnection that for some contributes to ecclesial separation. This clerical disconnect finds a significant expression with regards to the person of the priest himself who for some was experienced as a man who showed no empathy with the lives of ordinary parishioners, nor a desire or capacity to connect with their lives.

*Distance between priest and laity. The priest should be much more proactive in the lives of parishioners e.g. helping to run lunch clubs, actively encourage Distance between priest and congregation, appears to be on a superior level*

This inability or desire to connect and relate with parishioners, to become a shepherd who 'smells of his sheep' is acutely felt by respondents and 'of all the sour fruits of clericalism, this inability to



connect with others might be the most damaging.’<sup>45</sup>

*The parish priest seems to lack any empathy for the real life that his parishioners lead. There is a passive aggressive tone to the reminders about our obligation that makes any Mass missed an anxious event in the build up to the next attendance*

*The sense of being made to feel welcome and important. Unfortunately Fr ‘now’ speaks only about himself and appears to care very little about his parishioners. Fr ‘previous’ would remember if someone was ill or something was going on in your life. Fr ‘now’ makes it clear that he really couldn’t care less and I am hearing this from more and more parishioners who feel they don’t matter to him. He is interested in professional people but not the general working class. He appears to have no idea how the recession has affected ordinary folk.*

It is a disconnected clerical indifference that is painful for many respondents and is far from nurturing of ecclesial affiliation and affective ecclesial relationships.

This disconnection finds a further expression in the dissemination and preaching by priests of a normative magisterial teaching that is clinically disconnected in tone, empathy and experience from the complexity of human relationships and lived experience of many Catholic men and women, a theme tangential to the ethical discord examined in the previous section. It is received by many as teaching that is detached and disconnected from the lives of ordinary Catholic men and women and preached by priests who no longer walk similar paths, live similar lives, nor enjoy experiences familiar to the wider people of God. It is received as teaching from a clergy and Church who are disconnected and detached and who do not understand the complexity of the lives led by ordinary Catholics,

*Having children outside of marriage - judgement is made automatically without the full understanding of the situation*

*I am a divorcee and keep this secret in my Catholic workplace for fear of judgement.*

*The Church teaches from afar and is not down among us supporting us at times of difficulty or just every day. The clergy are too far removed. it reminds me of a feudal system with people like me being the serfs of old.*

The cumulative effect of these experiences has served to underline for many in this research a serious disjunction between the lives of the clergy and the rest of the people of God, such that

---

<sup>45</sup> Donald Cozzens, ‘Let’s end Clericalism in the Church’, July 25 2015, <https://associationofCatholicpriests.ie/lets-end-clericalism-in-the-Church-donald-cozzens/>, [accessed 06.01.24]

those in the pews appear to inhabit one world whilst those who lead the parish communities are perceived to inhabit another. It is an experience of their clergy which is far from the vision of Pope Francis in which the priest is recognisable by the 'smell of the sheep'.<sup>46</sup> It is such a Church whose leadership is experienced by 65% of Catholics in this cohort as one that is not interested in what they think or believe.

*I feel there is a power issue when new priests come into a parish they change the processes. For me the Church belongs to the followers and parishioners it is a privilege for a priest to be welcomed into the parish - it does not belong to them. The needs of the parishioners don't appear to be of significant importance.*

It is from such experiences that Catholics in this research simply walk away. Such a clerical disconnect is significantly identified as a barrier and an obstacle for flourishing communities that are built upon the trusting, empathic and close relationships of all within a community, especially between priest and people within the prevailing ecclesiology that currently defines parish life

*Before covid I and my family attend Mass weekly. We had been part of the parish for 30+ years. At that time we didn't really enjoy the Mass. A Sunday family service sometimes lasted 90mins, too long for the children. The Mass was getting more High CofE rather than Catholic. The priest in would often lecture the congregation. He would sometimes stop the Mass if someone arrived late. He once stopped the Mass and asked someone to leave. The congregation were told, on more than one occasion, not to cross him. Girls and women were no longer allowed to serve at Mass. The priest would threaten to revoke Catholic school places if people stopped attending. This is not what I wanted my own daughters to grow up with. All of the choir groups were disbanded. CD music is now used. After covid we did attend a few times but decided to move parish... We were surprised to see so many parishioners from our old parish there. It was a Massive decision for us to move from this parish. It's been a part of my life for such a long time. I myself was baptised, did my first holy communion, confirmation, I got married there and both my children were baptised there. It holds such a special place for me but if we hadn't have moved parish then we would have stopped attending altogether*

Such experiences of clericalism, expressed in judgement and disconnection, disinterest and ecclesial aloofness lamentably lead for some to an experience in which the Church is a barrier to God rather than a gateway,

---

<sup>46</sup> Cf. Fr. Antonio Spadaro S.J., 'A Big Heart Open to God', *America* (30 September 2015), <http://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2013/09/30/big-heart-open-god-interview-pope-francis>, [accessed 24.11.23], *Evangelii Gaudium*, 24, 169-173, and Pope Francis, *Chrism Mass: Homily of Pope Francis*, 2013, [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2013/documents/papa-francesco\\_20130328\\_messa-crismale.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2013/documents/papa-francesco_20130328_messa-crismale.html), [accessed 24.11.23]

*I'm afraid that my lived experience of the Church up to this point, is that for most of my life it got in the way of my relationship with God, and became a barrier and challenge that I had to overcome, rather than a helpful way to know God. I believe that this is the experience of many people, and that is why I wanted to respond to this survey*

It is noteworthy that such reflections were often remarkably accompanied by positive pleas for a different Church, whose pattern and design would be 'open, non-judgemental' and offer 'more acceptance of all people.' Indeed such an ecclesial renewal might for some participants lead to a possible return to Church practice, but only if the Church was 'ever was a community of the heart and non-judgement.'

### ***An absence of clerical accountability***

The lack of accountability of priests as leaders of parish communities and ministers of the gospel constitutes a further expression of clericalism for many participants, and extends throughout the research to nearly all areas of parish life that includes governance, finance, liturgy, sacraments, parish structures and the behaviour of clergy themselves. For many the phrase 'what Father says goes' or - 'the present parish priest runs the parish as if it is in the 1950s. It is 'my way or the highway' - is a common refrain that describes their experience of the limits of current ecclesial governance and oversight,

*I asked for an apology and was told that as a priest he only had to answer to God. This incident made me wake up to the fact that I have no say with most of the clergy, more importantly how can I ever take communion from an individual who has treated me with contempt.*

For participants in this research there is little or no experience of an open and transparent process of complaint or due process with regards to the inappropriate behaviour of clergy that they endure. Indeed according to respondents the complaints that were made were invariably met with the silence of either the priest or the bishop, or both. This experience of gravely limited and opaque ecclesial governance and accountability is strikingly discordant with the participants' experience of many other institutions in their lives and cited by some as a contributory factor towards a movement away from a regular practice of faith.

The experience of priests by Catholic men and women as we observed at the beginning of this section is often positive, encouraging and highly valued in the local Church. The experiences of clericalism that have been unearthed in the narrative responses of this research however narrate a contrasting story which is equally valid and authentic. It is a disturbing narrative for the Church in

which judgement and condemnation, arrogance and impunity, infantilisation and belittling has defined the experience of the clergy by too many people. It shines a spotlight on some ministers of the Church who are neither connected with or interested in the joys and hopes, griefs and anxieties of their people. It portrays a Church that is led by some priests who speak a different language, walk a different path and inhabit a different world to the wider people of God whom they are called to serve, a Church who for many in this research is now no longer an automatic companion with whom they look to *walk* along the journey of life.

For many of the Catholics who have participated in this research, the cumulative impact of their experiences and encounters with the ecclesial illness of clericalism that 'gradually extinguishes the prophetic flame to which the entire Church is called to bear witness'<sup>47</sup> has slowly but significantly contributed to an ecclesial estrangement or disaffiliation that has resulted in their movement away from a regular practice of faith.

---

<sup>47</sup> Pope Francis, *Meeting with the bishops of Chile during apostolic trip to Chile*, 16 January 2018, [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2018/january/documents/papa-francesco\\_20180116\\_cile-santiago-vescovi.html#\\_ftn2](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2018/january/documents/papa-francesco_20180116_cile-santiago-vescovi.html#_ftn2), [accessed 06.01.24]

## *Ecclesial discord, women and the Church*

The role, participation and engagement of women within all areas of the Church, or more accurately the deficit in the inclusion of women across Church life, leadership and ministry finds extensive expression in the responses of participants and is identified as a causal reason for ecclesial estrangement. It is difficult to over emphasise the importance that is given to this issue by the respondents in the research, for the frequency with which the narrative responses of participants referred to the ecclesial participation and exclusion of women is impossible to ignore.

Indeed many respondents no longer receive nor assent to the Church's wide ranging teaching concerning the ecclesial role and moral life of women in its varying complexity. Many see the Church through this prism as lacking any credibility and relevance with the experience of twenty first century society.

*I was a daily Mass goer. Over time being lorded over by male priests, seeing no women in authority, noticing the absence of a female voice in liturgy, I just could not tolerate it any more.*

*Failure to accept role of women in modern Church, made much worse by arrival of Ordinariate.*

*I realised that women have no position of authority within the structure of the Church.*

*The belief especially from the clergy that women do not matter as much as men and have no role unless it is minor and of little importance.*

*Women are not second-class citizens.*

This systemic exclusionary deficit in the ecclesial appreciation of the dignity and vocation of all baptised Catholics, that includes both individual and structural expressions, was identified as a troubling ecclesial practice for those no longer regularly practising their faith. It was experienced by some as a manifestation of ecclesial ignorance or even an ecclesial dismissal of the competence, expertise, professionalism and experience that women exercised across all other areas of society, and considered by many as an untenable and unsustainable position.

*Lack of women, respect for women, positive role for women (they can do more than clean the Church and run the office).*

*Found the Catholic Church totally irrelevant for single women unless you were either an unmarried mother or a nun - mercifully neither.*

The respondents' reflections on the specific role and contribution of women in the Church extended far beyond a concern for the exclusion of women from the ordained ministry, yet this did find a notable and specific mention by many participants

*whether a priest is a man or woman does not impact on their ability. St Paul says we are all one in Christ. Unless you want to be a priest apparently. This is pure and blatant sexism that the Church just allows.*

*As we are all supposed to be created in God's image - allow women priests.*

*I despair at the Church continuing to close its eyes mind & heart to women priests, married priesthood, and the realities of 21st century life for so many of us.*

*I abhor the exclusion of women from the priesthood and take this personally too (I am trying to move out of the anger and hurt about this and celebrate instead my own personal journey with God).*

*I believe that the Church is misogynistic from this perspective.*

*women can be priests and priests can get married - to think they can't is quite frankly old fashioned and appalling to modern thinkers and the youth. The youth are the future and without them the Church dies.*

Indeed just under half of those who are no longer practising Catholics agreed that the Church's teaching concerning women and ordained priesthood was a reason for distancing themselves from the Catholic Church. It is noteworthy that just under 30% of weekly practising Catholics also agree that this was a reason for possible estrangement from the Church.

There were a very small number of participants who explicitly stated that they were 'against' the inclusion of women in the priesthood, an exclusion that also extended to altar servers and readers. This found expression in some of those who moved from the Church of England in response to women's ordination

*As a family we moved from the C of E when the C of E decided to ordain women. We were part of a big group led by our C of E priest to make the switch*

Whilst conversely the exclusion of women from ministry has led to the movement of a small number in the opposite direction who have found a home in neighbouring Anglican parishes,

*I have strong faith, I regularly go to a Church but less than previously in my life. I have attended some C of E services and I am drawn to the role of women being included.*

The lack of presence of women in roles of ecclesial governance and leadership was also cited as a contributory factor for estrangement and sometimes connected to female agency with regards to sexual ethics

*If the Church would like help I think involving lay women in a professional manner to help run the parishes is key.*

*Women's rights - equality of women to hold office and women to have control over their reproductive rights.*

*the rejection that women may need an abortion to protect current family from extreme poverty, due to rape, lack of being mentally ready etc. It removes an important component of Freewill from them. I also have issues with men being the people to say that abortion is not allowed or immoral, especially when men do not need to carry and give birth to the child!*

This deficit in an engagement with the experience of women as a source of moral wisdom in the development of ecclesial sexual ethics attracted criticism by many – ‘women’s opinions should be listened to more’ - and led once again to an outline of the imagined positive enrichment that women’s’ participation might make for ecclesial and ethical renewal.

*encourage a new approach from the Catholic Church, perhaps focusing on open-mindedness, expanding the Church community with more inclusivity, and attempting to redefine Church ethics to protect women’s health instead of having this at a lower priority than upholding tradition.*

*I do not agree that women should be forced into abortions if they have been raped or where there is incest or where they have mental illness. But even if I were to agree with 'no exceptions', I do not think it is right to force a cross on another person without providing any support or help. I would prefer a more loving educational approach to be used, so that a woman chooses life herself, taking into account any help that can be made available to her.*

This lack of a normative ecclesial engagement with the experience and wisdom of women compounded for many the disconnect that the Church and its leaders uphold between its teaching and the ordinary everyday experience, wisdom and faith of a twenty-first century society. It is this ecclesial lack of understanding and integrated engagement with women, their lives and experience that contributes to gravely deficient ecclesial structures, teaching and wider praxis. This is in turn identified by many respondents as a significant contributory factor to both their ecclesial estrangement and disaffiliation and a notable growing sense of ecclesial malaise and decline,

*the Church is dying on its feet because women are excluded. My view is that if I'm not good enough to say Mass, I'm not good enough to arrange flowers or clean the Church. It's a men's game and we are preached to by a man who too often has no adult experience of getting along with children, a partner or living in fear of losing the job. But without the contribution of women very few parishes would survive.*

*I'd love to hear what a woman in the pulpit thought about the Gospel or some moral issue. There is a serious need for change...appoint women at every level, ditch the robes, review the rituals. God really doesn't care about candles and embroidery on clothes, honestly. Make the Church the community centres where all are welcome...really*

It is a decline that many identified could be arrested and healed through a greater and equal engagement of women in the life, ministry and liturgy of the Church. It is the structural and personal inclusion and integration of women across the life of the Church that is envisaged by many as a critical positive response to such ecclesial decline. The deficit in women's ecclesial participation is identified as a significant contributor factor for ecclesial estrangement and disaffiliation in both the statistical and narrative research responses.

It is however also identified as a pathway to renewal for the Church and effective evangelisation, for 'so many women would make wonderful compassionate priests' and 'women and married Catholic priests should be welcomed to enable the Church to grow', for it is the same baptism that all people share, women and men alike. The baptism of women is not inferior to that of men - not at least for many of the participants in this research - and it should they argue be recognised and reflected across all ecclesial relationships, practices and structures.



## *Ecclesial discord and the clerical child abuse scandal*

The scandal of clerical child abuse within the Catholic Church and the subsequent episcopal cover up casts a long shadow over the experience of Church for many of the respondents in this research and constitutes the most grave set of reasons identified by participants as contributing to their ecclesial estrangement and disaffiliation. Indeed, for many the clerical abuse scandal and cover up gives rise to their intentional and deliberate disaffiliation from the Catholic Church.

Clerical sexual abuse was experienced by some of the men and women who responded to this research, and also within the immediate families of other respondents. The incidence of such direct abuse referred to in this research was small, but it is important to explicitly acknowledge the existence of such grave experiences from this group of Catholics within and beyond the diocese of Brentwood, and that such experiences have led to both satisfactory and deeply unsatisfactory ecclesial responses for those concerned.<sup>48</sup>

*as an 18 year I was propositioned by a senior member of the clergy within this Diocese, I was shocked and blamed myself, he grabbed me and I had to struggle to get him off.*

*My father was abused by a priest as a child and I feel that the Church has concentrated its effort on "saving its own" rather than confessing and asking for forgiveness. I appreciate that the Catholic Church is not the only institution which has faced this issue but I am disappointed and angered at the arrogant approach taken to the trauma suffered by many individuals - I also feel let down by the Church on a personal level.*

*one member of the family was abused by a Parish Priest... who used to stay in Parishioners houses during the 80's/90's - in talking to other parishioners, he did this a lot, to many families.*

Such experiences of abuse, both by the individuals concerned and within their immediate families, were acknowledged by respondents as contributing to estrangement and intentional disaffiliation from the Church.

---

<sup>48</sup> The research questionnaire was designed so that participants could complete the survey anonymously to enable respondents to participate uninhibited and with a freedom that might otherwise not have been present. No contact details were collected from participants in this research. The incidents cited above have been referred to the diocesan safeguarding officer who has dealt with them in accordance with the Church's national safeguarding policies.

The secondary and tertiary impact of such abuse occupies the focus of the remaining body of responses and offers a significant insight into its impact upon patterns of ecclesial estrangement and disaffiliation, indeed 47% of non-regularly practising Catholics agree or strongly agree that the incidence of too many scandals in the Church was a factor in their movement away from a regular practice of faith. This figure interestingly rose to 51% for self-identified weekly practising Catholics and underlines the significance of such scandal for the people of God as a whole. The child abuse scandal was cited by many respondents as a practice within the Church that troubles them, and it is identified by many as a practice that remains associated with the Catholic Church. Ecclesial scandal therefore cannot be underestimated with regards to the impact that it has upon the practice of the faith,

*I used to attend Mass weekly. I have stopped attending due to a bad personal experience in what was my local Church and also because of the ongoing sexual abuse scandal. The Church is doing far too little to help survivors in any meaningful way and I do not feel I can in good conscience continue to be a part of the Church.*

*I have been so disappointed and by all the scandals and horrific stories that so called Church members have inflicted on innocent people which have ruined their lives. As I have grown older I hear more and more from people who suffered as children but did not have a voice at the time and are damaged now.*

This impact of such experiences of abuse upon practice for some Catholics has been compounded by the lack of audible contrition and an explicit apology in the Church, specifically within local parish communities and also in the wider life of the diocese,

*there has been no acknowledgement/apology by the Diocese of the abuse of children and mothers.*

*Why can't the Church just say sorry for the appalling acts carried out in the name of religion in the past few years.*

It is also notable that participants in this research were acutely aware of the extent of clerical child abuse from beyond both parish and diocesan boundaries. The negative impact of the clerical sexual abuse scandal and inadequate episcopal and ecclesial responses to such criminal behaviour permeated across regional and ecclesial boundaries for many Catholics and was contrasted with the

greater punitive ecclesial responses experienced by Catholics who have contravened Church law, that is often viewed as unjust.

*Re ongoing abuse scandals, the latest one is from the Hexham and Newcastle diocese where the report states that Fr Timothy Gardner OP was being given 'pastoral help' by Bishop Byrnes when he was attending his upmarket house on a frequent basis. Where is the pastoral help and healing for survivors and families in the Church? It just appears to be ongoing lawsuits, bankruptcies and the Church continuing to protect its priesthood with no accountability for cover ups. I find it unjust, that Holy Communion would be denied to a divorced Catholic who has remarried or to a practising homosexual but there is no accountability/penalty when it comes to the sins of the priesthood.*

### ***Diminished ecclesial authority and credibility***

This widespread awareness and experience of clerical child abuse in the Catholic Church has left what appears to be a permanent imprint of an ecclesial scandal on the memory of many Catholics in this research, an imprint that is reflected and recognised by many in their encounters with individual and structural ecclesial hypocrisy. This finds an influence not only upon a regular practice of faith but also upon a broader relationship with the Church in which there is a fracturing of the fundamental bonds of ecclesial trust and a diminishment of wider Church authority,

*For most of my life I was weekly practising but then I started thinking more for myself and saw the hypocrisy of the Church especially relating to paedophilia within the Church which time and again covered up the crime to 'protect' the 'Church' this had sickened me. The Church should stick to pastoral matters and leave the rest alone. Too much unchallenged power in the hands of the clergy.*

*The Church has not moved with the times and alienates certain groups from LGBTQ Community, those wishing to practise safe sex. Lots of hypocrisy especially given the amount of historic child abuse that has gone on. Good Christian values of tolerance & acceptance are not shown by the Catholic Church, particularly in our own parish*

*Religion should be about love and being your best self, not casting judgement and spreading hate. I want to teach my children that they can be whoever they want to be without judgement. Not to mention the horrific behaviour of priests and officials that has been exposed. How dare the Church cast judgement on anyone when this has been happening and covered up for so long.'*

The authority of such a Church, viewed through this lens of institutional ecclesial hypocrisy, has subsequently clearly diminished for many in this cohort. It is a diminishment that extends not only to the received integrity of the Church, but also to its relevance, credibility and significance in the moral lives of Catholics and the wider world in which it exists.

It is important to observe that the accompanying decline in ecclesial credibility for many participants who no longer regularly practise their faith impedes if not arrests the credible capacity of the Church to preach and teach. Indeed it is increasingly difficult according to the narrative responses of participants to receive ecclesial teaching as credible and 'trustworthy' in light of the exposure of clerical sexual abuse and ecclesial cover up. The credibility of the Church to teach and 'judge' on moral issues is seriously damaged for those who are estranged - indeed this is perhaps both a cause and effect of such estrangement and disaffiliation.

It is notably ecclesial teaching within the specific realm of sexual ethics that bears a significant impact, such that ecclesial sexual ethics occupies a diminished role in participants' moral decision-making in light of the sexual abuse scandal and cover up. It is noteworthy however that a distinction is made by Catholics in this research between the continued influence of faith and the declining influence of Church teaching upon their lives, for just under 40% agree that Catholic teaching no longer influences their thinking on moral issues, contrasting with just one quarter agreeing with respect to the influence of their faith. Indeed, throughout the narrative responses of participants the favourable influence of faith remains relatively high in the lives of estranged Catholic men and women, who still believe but perhaps no longer want to belong to an institution of which many are now simply ashamed.

Many Catholics in this research reflect that they no longer wish to be associated with such a toxic organisation in which these scandals have festered. Perhaps more significantly some Catholics no longer wish to expose their children to an experience of the practices and governance of such an institution now defined by the scandal.

*Growing up and realising that Church authority is meaningless, especially since the scandals that we all knew were happening around us as children finally came to light.*

*It's relevance is appearing less and less so and combined with the scandals it had endured it now feels like a restrictive space to exist. And one that will cause those who don't adhere to its views and teachings to live a life of guilt.*

Whilst some respondents acknowledge that the Church has taken some 'active steps towards safeguarding' the assessment of many in this research persist - the 'scandals continue to cast a shadow and suspicion' over the whole Church.

### ***Ecclesial transparency and accountability***

It is noteworthy that for many Catholics who no longer practise, a broadening of leadership and governance beyond ordained celibate men is a concrete departure point for an effective ecclesial response to the scandals and a wider culture of inappropriate clerical behaviour, that might contribute to the arrest of ecclesial separation. The inclusion of lay professional women and men in positions of leadership and governance across the Church is key for a reform in ecclesial accountability if it is no longer to be opaque.

Transparent processes of accountability across the life of the Church are essential if non practising women and men are to return to a regular practice of faith. At present many respondents in this research reflect that baptised Catholics too often experience an ecclesial silence from both Bishops and priests alike in response to their complaints of non-criminal abuse, or inappropriate and bullying behaviour by the clergy,

*I have been heartbroken by the way that I have been treated, people who are aware my family and a few friends are totally disgusted by the way that I have been treated. Over several months and meetings this Priest called me everything that you can imagine I have never been called these names by anyone including when I was at work. When I asked him to mind his language as it was insulting, he told me that no one would believe me.*

*Priest was spiritual abuser but other factors related to parish life basically like being back at primary school with the childish bullies*

*speaking with number of friends who are Catholic and attended various schools the amount of abuse by priests and teachers (Westminster diocese) that we all are aware of personally that was just swept under the carpet. Children were not protected apart from certain brave individuals who warned people, e.g. my head teacher Sr..., would not allow her boys to serve the 0800 Mass as an adult served who was a convicted child abuser that was a previous*

*head teacher at a local secondary school. Also at my secondary school we were warned to be wary of a chemistry teacher. He is now in jail. The school knew what he was up to and did nothing. This is disgusting. How can we allow children to continue to be abused*

In the absence of any effective credible response that stops and addresses such clerical behaviour experienced by Catholic men and women in this research, they eventually walk away so as to protect themselves, their children and their families from the perceived impunity of those who hold office in the Church.

The clerical abuse scandal in the Catholic Church has gravely damaged many people within and beyond the Church and has directly led to the ecclesial estrangement and intentional disaffiliation of many Catholics in this research. It has contributed to a heightened awareness of ecclesial hypocrisy for many others, a weakened ecclesial authority and a diminished ecclesial credibility to teach and accompany Catholic men and women on their journey of life, a scenario that has given rise to a growing detachment from the Church for Catholics in this research and a decreased ecclesial influence in their lives. It is a systemic scandal that continues to contribute to ecclesial drift, estrangement and disaffiliation.

## *Accumulation of ecclesial discord and disillusionment*

It is perhaps important to observe as this section draws to a close that within the research there emerges a growing sense of unease, disquiet and disillusionment for many concerning the divergence between the Church's espoused and operant ecclesiology, the disjunction between the theory and reality of parish life.

*I attended Mass weekly, as I have done all my life, up until approximately 5 years ago when I became disillusioned with the Church and my attendance gradually declined. My faith remains strong but I am disillusioned with the institution of the Church.*

It is an incremental disillusionment that has perhaps accumulated through a continued exposure to the areas of ecclesial discord that we have examined above – experiences of clericalism, the role of women, the clerical sexual abuse scandal - the discordant experiences that contrast sharply with the familiar vision of the Church which we are summoned to realise through our conciliar teaching,

*I started to [see] more and more hypocrisy in Church life, the gap between what it teaches and what is actually living, intellectual and cultural inability to have a dialogue with science, cultures, be an equal partner in social life, no recognition of women's rights to participate, archaic hierarchical structure, no respect to workers rights and participation of laypeople. Unfortunately the Church is dying and the reasons are various. Attendance at Mass is only one tiny aspect of Church life which does not reflect the reality.*

It is such disillusion that is compounded by the deficit in ecclesial reform and renewal that continues to govern and define the relationships and experience that respondents and their families have with the Church, a renewal and reform for which they continue to yearn and long

*The Church is not led well and does not know its own people, ... A lot is made of the threat to the Catholic faith - in point of fact the biggest threat to the Catholic faith in England is the Catholic Church itself. So overall you ask yourself - why go to Mass? what is there that isn't in my home? surely I can pray there and God will listen to me? what need have I for a priest who has no skills or is clearly not led well? ...*

*Probably the most damning aspect of this is all of my grown children though raised as Catholic, never go near Church now and there is genuinely nothing to say to counter their similar and even more vehement arguments they have for turning their back on the Church.*

*The Church is dying in its own bureaucracy and it needs to change. It should be trying to open its doors, reach out and support its community. People are broken with separations, cost of living, sickness and grief. There has never been a time when we need to be closer to God and to support each other. I have returned to Church but am saddened at the rapid decline..*

It is from such a vacuum of ecclesial renewal and reform, that a much lamented and slow process of estrangement from the Church emerges as a recognisable pattern for those no longer regularly practising their faith. For whilst it is clear to respondents that as disciples of Christ, each and all in their communities are called to inhabit and embrace the principles and values of compassion and care, tenderness and justice, love and solidarity, it is a sharply contrasting ecclesial experience that is often encountered by those who are estranged and separated through the practices, structures and people that they experience in the Church today. It is from such a Church that they walk away and become estranged.



## LITURGICAL DISCORD

The third area of discord that emerges from this research as contributing to ecclesial drift, estrangement and disaffiliation, can be grouped under the umbrella of *liturgical discord*. This notably includes diverse liturgical appreciation, a deficit in liturgical engagement and participation, and importantly the significant issue of the non-satisfaction of the spiritual needs of Catholic men and women. The ecclesial separation that arose for participants from such liturgical discord is, as we shall see, perhaps more aptly described in terms of ecclesial drift rather than ecclesial disaffiliation.

It is noteworthy to observe from the outset that whilst 40% of respondents agreed that Mass was too formal and one third noted that music during the Mass was not enjoyable, and that both were contributory factors underpinning a movement away from Mass attendance, the area of liturgical discord attracted a noticeably smaller comparative attention in the narrative responses than that of ethical and ecclesial discord that we examined earlier. The responses however do paint a picture of liturgical ecclesial life that is increasingly unengaging for many Catholic men and women in this research – a liturgical life in which they feel far from fully and actively participant.

The experience of the Mass for many was described as boring, unengaging and disconnected to everyday life

*When I had my children baptised I would regularly attend Church. But we had a priest who made Mass enjoyable and welcoming unlike now where I see it as boring and a chore. I saw them through holy communion with our current priest but he is not welcoming and often makes me and the children feel like they are an inconvenience and not welcome.*

*I did attend regularly along with my family however when a new priest took over the Masses became boring non-engaging and my children didn't want to go.*

*When I was attending Mass, it was quite dull. I think the priest at the time was old school and didn't make it relevant to today's world.*

With many noting that homilies were often disconnected from everyday life, of little relevance to those to whom they were directed, and frankly dull

*I feel that the clergy now are far too old and do not engage with the congregation & sorry to say their sermons are far too 'boring'*

The contrast with the stimulation and high levels of engagement demanded by the interactions of respondents in ordinary life beyond the liturgy was noteworthy - Catholics are no longer accustomed to passive one dimensional activity in their lives, that many now experienced in the liturgy. For many Catholics, when the liturgy is experienced as boring and non-engaging, they simply move where possible to alternative parishes for a different more engaging liturgical experience. If this is not possible they tend to simply drift away from a regular practice of faith in favour of activities and engagement beyond the Church.

With regards to the differing styles and liturgical rites experienced by respondents, there were infrequent observations that expressed an appreciation for the Mass celebrated in the extraordinary form, the 'traditional latin Mass', alongside some expressions of lament for the recent restrictions to the celebration of that particular liturgical rite issued by Pope Francis in 2023.<sup>49</sup>

*as the years went on, I became more disillusioned with the current form of Mass which has lost its sacred beauty and spiritual connection with people and there should be more Traditional Mass.*

*I used to attend holy Mass whenever I can weekends, holidays never missed a holy Mass I love my Church and very loyal to it but with the time I felt that modernism have got into our Church and it's becoming protestant.*

Whilst conversely others regretted the imposition in parish life of what they saw as a liturgical retrenchment to a previous era, all at the 'whim' of the incumbent priest.

*I was becoming increasingly upset and disenchanted in local parishes where ad-orientum & receiving communion on the tongue while kneeling at the altar rail was rigorously enforced. It was said from the altar that to receive communion on the hand was wrong and sinful.*

*Yes, until a few months ago I was a practising Catholic. I had been questioning this for sometime & the only thing keeping me going, was that my husband is a practising Catholic... The last straw for me was a new priest who seems to want to go back in time adding what I class as a lot of frivolities, making the Masses really long.*

Once again when the style of liturgy was not appreciated, and the accompanying liturgical practices jarred with the broader ecclesial imaginary of the Catholics concerned, the ensuing liturgical discord

---

<sup>49</sup> Cf. *Traditiones custodes*, [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/motu\\_proprio/documents/20210716-motu-proprio-traditionis-custodes.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/motu_proprio/documents/20210716-motu-proprio-traditionis-custodes.html), [accessed 02.02.24]

was resolved either through a satisfactory search for a more congenial liturgical experience that was consonant with their ecclesial vision, or their simply drifted away. Such a notion of liturgical consumerism has evidently been exacerbated by the proliferation of the online streaming of Mass that increased exponentially during the Covid-19 pandemic.<sup>50</sup>

Many respondents were aware that it was the liturgical preference of the parish priest that appeared to determine the style and pattern of liturgy in the parish - a further expression of a priest-centric ecclesiology to which we shall return in the final part of this report. This left some parishioners confused by contradictory liturgical messages and 'teaching' from the Church following the departure and arrival of different priests.

*I have found it difficult to understand the differences in the services now offered at my Church with the change of priests*

*I attended Church regularly until I was 67. I worked for the Church in many countries. My experience of the Church in England is of ill-educated, uncreative men who perform rather than preside. They refer to themselves as the 'main celebrant' when the liturgy is anything but a celebration and preached at parishioners.*

It is sufficient to observe at this stage that most respondents in this research had little or no voice in the style or composition of the various liturgies that were celebrated in the parish that rendered it for them more a celebration of the priest rather than the community celebration of the Eucharist. Ecclesial drift appears to have been less unhindered by liturgical experiences in which there is no sense of contribution or participation – liturgical belonging is important for the participation and retention of Catholic men and women according to this research.

The new translation of the roman missal that was introduced across England and Wales in 2011 attracted unfavourable attention with regards to the negative impact that it had upon the liturgical experience and participation of some Catholics, an experience that negatively impacted upon their sense of belonging in the Church.

*yes [attended Mass] through childhood and up until married and moved, then became disillusioned with things when the Sunday Mass language and approach was suddenly*

---

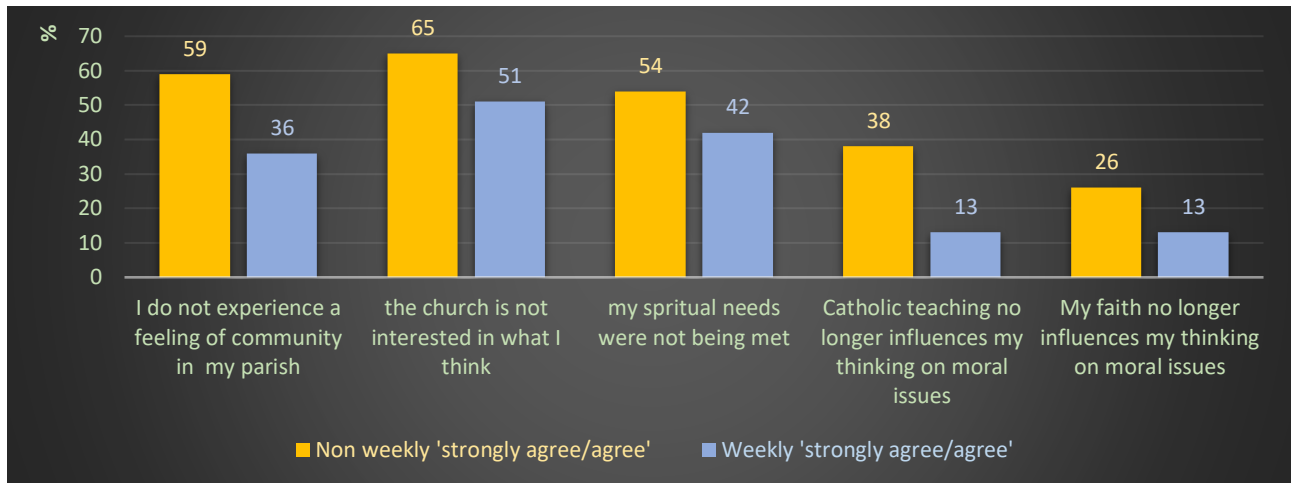
<sup>50</sup> As noted previously the contribution that the online streaming of Mass has made to the spiritual lives of many Catholics who are physically separated by ill-health from the parish community, has become invaluable and now constitutes an integral expression of faith for many Catholics today.

*changed for no real reason other than someone with clearly nothing better to do decided it was better to rephrase all the prayers and context to match something supposedly more ecclesiastically correct thus rendering out of us and unable to join in. Whoever made the decision basically took away the connection and feeling of understanding and belonging. Well done whoever you were - great insight!*

The potential for liturgical discord that arises from the style, composition, language and levels of engagement experienced by Catholics in the liturgy cannot be underestimated for the influence it carries upon the ecclesial presence and affiliation of Catholics within and beyond this cohort. If Catholics cannot relate with the liturgy, or have no voice in its composition, or feel inhibited in their participation, or do not see themselves enjoying an active liturgical role, then they are less likely according to this research to 'liturgically belong'. When Catholics in this research do not feel as though they belong liturgically, they seek alternative liturgical nourishment or they simply drift away from ecclesial life and seek nourishment and sustenance elsewhere. This conclusion finds a coherence with the finding that just under 60% of Catholics in this cohort who no longer regularly practise their faith do not experience a feeling of community in their parish. When the experience of the liturgical assembly in parish life is not one of nourishment nor joy, community nor belonging, Catholics tend to drift.

## Spiritual Needs

Perhaps the most serious issue to emerge however under this umbrella of liturgical discord is the research finding that the spiritual needs of over 54% of non-weekly practising Catholics were not being met, a figure that quite significantly only falls to 42% for weekly practising Catholics.



This non-satisfaction of spiritual needs remains most troubling for the Church, given that this is one of the most significant dimensions of its mission. It leaves many Catholics no longer automatically turning to the Church for such spiritual nourishment,

*Reason tend to avoid Church when not with family or friends is the experience leaves me cold. ..Young people live in a rapidly changing tech world with artificial intelligence on the doorstep so holding their attention cannot depend on a laborious explanation of the gospel - bringing the spiritual element into the homily will! Mature people have a wealth of life experience so we know a thing or two - preaching the obvious therefore can be bemusing! However mature parishioners are still searching for spiritual answers so again, bringing inspired spiritual notions into the homily helps.*

This non-satisfaction of spiritual needs is one of the areas that demands further detailed research to explore the parameters and specifics of this research finding. It does however find particular expression in the current research in relation to the experience of the homily at Sunday Mass for many respondents. As such it is perhaps the renewal of homiletic practice that offers one fruitful response to this research, for this is where people are present face-to-face with their priest and look for some inspiration, spiritual nourishment and guidance each week, as a respondent insightfully observed

*On rare occasions a priest will deliver a truly wonderful homily but so often the homily can be so insulting to the congregation's intelligence. It must be difficult to gauge a congregation's level of understanding of the gospel but unfortunately the level gauged by many priests is too low. This has nothing to do with a person's academic qualifications but life experience. Young people live in a rapidly changing tech world with artificial intelligence on the doorstep so holding their attention cannot depend on a laborious explanation of the gospel - bringing the spiritual element into the homily will!*

*We get that the priest cannot always deliver something that will suit everyone and every priest can have a bad homily writing day but just recognising the congregation as worthy people would be appreciated*

Respondents are critical and turned away by homilies that overly focus upon the life of the priest himself, or those that promote the political or ecclesial agenda of the priest, whilst neglecting equally valid alternative perspectives. The research suggests that a homily that reflects, recognises and appreciates the experience, wisdom and maturity of the gathered people of God in the liturgical assembly as it 'breaks open' the Word of God is an important ecclesial practice of engagement and retention for Catholics in this cohort, a practice that we have seen is critical to nourish ecclesial presence and affiliation.

The research further suggests that Catholics continue to look for support, nourishment and wisdom from the homily to inform, connect with and nurture their daily attempts to 'make sense' of their lives in light of the gospel as they strive to continue on the path of discipleship in witness to the risen Lord. It is a homily through which these Catholics yearn to spot the rhythm and rhyme of the gospel in their own lives, and to discover how to unearth or weave the gospel more deeply into their relationships, actions and decision-making. It is noteworthy that such findings might appear to be in tension with those of the previous section concerning the diminished attentiveness to ecclesial ethical teaching, yet for many Catholics in this research spiritual guidance and accompaniment is often perceived to be less contentious.

Moreover an encounter with an effective homily can also serve as a gateway to a healing of the fractured ecclesial relationships between priests and people that we have encountered in this research. There is the sense in the research that this is an opportunity for the clergy to respond to the much experienced clerical disconnect that we have examined earlier. The homiletic encounter of priest and people in the presence of the Word carries the graced capacity to begin to heal, reconnect and enrich the relationships between priests and people.

The research also notably raises the question of how the Church might engage with the wisdom of all the baptised people of God through the homily so that the spiritual nourishment of the gathered community might be enriched and expanded through the experience of the non-ordained and from the perspective of women, religious and young people to name but a few.

In this section the research has shed important light upon the impact of liturgical discord upon ecclesial practice and affiliation, which has been shown to be less significant than the impact of ecclesial and ethical discord, but still exerting a contributory influence towards the ecclesial drift of a people who no longer 'liturgically belong.' The research however also shines a light upon a people of faith who are still searching for spiritual nourishment on their journey of life – when such nourishment is absent or given little preparatory attention in the practices and liturgy of the Church, the men and women in this research begin to look and turn elsewhere for such nourishment.

## *Conclusion*

In Part Two of this report I have examined the causal factors that have been identified as having contributed to the ecclesial drift, estrangement and disaffiliation of Catholics in the diocese of Brentwood who participated in this research. It has shed light upon the joys and hopes, griefs and anxieties of a group of Catholic men and women for whom faith remains precious, but who no longer feel as though they belong in the Church.

It has chartered a course through the rhythm and rhyme of the complexity of modern Catholic life to understand the patterns of ecclesial separation that have been ignited not only by the pressures of competing daily commitments, but also through the Covid-19 pandemic and the ethical, ecclesial and liturgical discord experienced by so many Catholic men and women in this research.

In the final Part of the report we turn our attention to the shape of ecclesial renewal that tentatively emerges from the responses of baptised Catholics in this research, through an overview of what is missing from the life of the Church for those who leave, and the areas of ecclesial significance that have emerged from this research and carry the potential to contribute to an ecclesial ethical renewal of the Church in Brentwood.



## PART III – LONGING FOR A DIFFERENT CHURCH

### BUILDING SOMETHING BETTER

#### *Seeds of hope for a re-imagined Church*

*'Today we have an opportunity to build something different.'*<sup>51</sup>

The *Believing, not belonging* research at the heart of this report has offered a substantial and evidenced insight into the reasons why so many baptised Catholics in the diocese of Brentwood are no longer regularly practising their faith.<sup>52</sup> It is an insight that is faithfully informed by the experiences of how Catholic men and women inhabiting a complex world in a change of era, have encountered their priests and experienced their Church in its many relationships, practices and structures.

As such it conveys an ecclesial narrative that is both moving and challenging for the wider Church, not least to those in positions of leadership. It is an authentic narrative of an estranged baptised people that might both justifiably disturb those who are at home in the Church, and profoundly disrupt the prevailing assumed understanding of the receptive experience of ecclesial life in the diocese of Brentwood.

Although the narrative that emerges from this research can at first hearing strike a chord of negativity, this is perhaps to be expected given that it tells the stories of ecclesial discord, separation and estrangement of men and women for whom faith remains precious, and for whom the Church used to be a place that they called home. It is perhaps remarkable then that this narrative research contains seeds of hope and opportunity, not only for the resilience of faith in an increasingly fragile and polarised world, but to inform and shape the renewal of a Church whose service of such a world is perhaps more needed than ever.

The final part of this report is concerned with an overview of what is significantly missing from the life of the Church for those who leave, and an analysis of the areas of ecclesial significance that have emerged from this research, from which the people of God in Brentwood might

---

<sup>51</sup> Pope Francis, *General Audience*, 19.08.20, [http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/audiences/2020/documents/papa-francesco\\_20200819\\_udienza-generale.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/audiences/2020/documents/papa-francesco_20200819_udienza-generale.html), [accessed 16.03.21]

<sup>52</sup> It is perhaps important to recall at this stage that in 2019 there were approximately 42,912 people who 'attended' Mass in the Diocese of Brentwood, in which there were approximately 237,000 baptised Catholics.

collaboratively draw some ecclesial seeds of hope, opportunity and renewal, as foundational to building something better for a re-imagined Church.

In this first section of Part Three I will examine the principal responses of participants concerning what is significantly absent from their experience of Church and what they long to recover in their ecclesial community. For those who no longer regularly practise their faith this sheds light upon what these Catholic men and women miss most since leaving the Church and what would need to be present or to change for them to return to a regular practice of faith. Whilst for those who have reduced the frequency of their practice, or who feel somewhat estranged, the responses shed some light upon their previous experiences of Church in which they felt more at home, and thus point towards the current ecclesial change that will be necessary to prevent a more permanent departure from their Church.<sup>53</sup>

Whilst some participants responded that they had missed 'nothing' since their separation from the Church, it is the experience of *community* that clearly emerges for many other Catholics as the principal absence that occurs following a withdrawal from ecclesial life.

*Community. Having a space where people come together to support each other and acknowledge that life is about compassion, service and living the values taught by Jesus.*

*The community. And although I am not a believer, I miss believing. It brought me certainty and comfort once upon a time, but no longer.*

It is this sense of community with God and with others that significantly defines their experience of absence from the Church, an absence through which they miss the key experience of belonging and welcome, of being recognised and valued by others, of being supported and known by their peers and being connected with a community that takes them beyond themselves.

The importance of community for a flourishing Church was underlined by others who expressed regret that such a community experience was no longer present -

*A welcoming atmosphere from the former parish priest who was pragmatic in his interpretation of the scripture and made it relatable. There used to be an inclusive feel which has gone.*

---

<sup>53</sup> Many of the responses that we have examined in the previous sections have implicitly drawn attention to the participants' reflections upon what is critically absent and deficient in their experience of Church. Thus here I will focus upon the principal areas that are most commonly cited in the narrative responses that are explicitly concerned with what is missing for participants.

- a finding that finds a resonance with the 59% of Catholics who no longer practise their faith, who we recall did not experience a feeling of community in their parish. Community is a defining expression of ecclesial life that is acutely missed by Catholics whether they are no longer actively present, or if they tentatively remain in the Church lamenting what has long since disappeared in the experience of Church they now encounter.

The human dimension of belonging with others in community emerges therefore as a constitutive aspect of a flourishing Church for many in this research, and underpins the many other missing elements that participants explicitly identify as integral to sustaining and nourishing such an ecclesial community. It is the kindness, warmth, and companionship of the fellow members of a parish that was underlined frequently by respondents as integral to a flourishing ecclesial community, both in terms of what respondents missed and for what they now long . Such fundamental characteristics for human flourishing, alongside the practices of consideration and acceptance of others in an increasingly polarized world, was also highly prized by Catholics as something they longed for in a renewed Church and which they often experienced as absent in the Church today. It is significantly the universality of the Catholic Church, in which the dignity of difference of persons and perspectives can be gracefully held, that was prized by many as integral to a ecclesial community and wider Church in which they might belong once again.

It is perhaps unsurprising therefore that such characteristics and dispositions were identified by many as absent and painfully missed from their encounters with Church leaders, such that many respondents lamented a bygone era in which they enjoyed an experience of a flourishing ecclesial community through the kindness, warmth and approachability of several good and considerate priests – indeed it is important to observe the not infrequent testimonies that participants share in this regard,

*Having previously been part of a parish with a priest that was accepting of my husband (non Catholic) when it came to our wedding and our child's baptism I miss the humanity shown by this priest (shout out to Father '...'). Every parishioner was made to feel valued and part of the Church. We moved to another parish that was not so accepting and a priest that did not relate the bible to modern, relatable everyday life.*

The impact of the experience of kindness, compassion and approachability - or their absence - with fellow human beings in the life of the Church cannot be underestimated, not least in respect to the leadership and oversight of its priests and bishops.

The celebration of Mass and the reception of Holy Communion was also notably missed by many respondents following separation from the Church, an identified absence that underlined the continued importance of the spiritual life of many who no longer regularly practise. It is perhaps significant to observe that separation from the Mass and the sacraments was a cost accepted by many for their ecclesial estrangement, a cost of separation that was notably high and underlines the comparatively high alternative cost that would be incurred for many from a continued ecclesial presence and affiliation.

The experience of liturgical music and singing was also cited by numerous respondents as something that they significantly missed from their lives following separation from the Church – an acknowledgement perhaps of the importance that the practice of singing carries for people of faith, in its capacity as a practice that can form and sustain both transcendental and communal relationships. A few participants lamented the lack of access to the traditional latin Mass, or a more traditional celebration of the Eucharist, whilst others lamented the absence of a more contemporary liturgy in which ‘modern’ Catholic music enjoyed a prominent role.

Yet just as community defined the experience of Church that respondents perhaps most missed, it was the ecclesial absence of judgement and condemnation for which Catholics most specifically longed. Indeed, as we noticed earlier a judgemental Church was cited by many Catholics as an experience that they never missed following a movement away from the Church and drew mature reflections that the Church is called to be less judgemental in its witness to the life and ministry of Jesus, not least in light of its own sinfulness and imperfection

*Yes, be more open to people who are alone when they attend Church, not just cater for families. Stop judging others as much, emphasise the love. Nobody's perfect and the Church needs to stop acting like it is.*

Indeed for many Catholics who no longer practised their faith a return to Church could only perhaps ever be imagined if the Church was liberated from judgement and condemnation.

*‘If being made to feel guilty or judged was removed, I’d be back in Church.’*

*Get out of my bedroom and get on the streets fighting for a better world for all people and I’ll be back in a pew’*

Catholics in this research clearly missed community and belonging, they craved compassion, inclusion and acceptance, and longed for an ecclesial absence of condemnation and judgement.

Whilst we have seen in this research that the absence of ecclesial relationships, practices and structures that give rise to ethical, ecclesial and liturgical discord can arrest the ecclesial drift, estrangement and disaffiliation of baptised Catholic men and women, it is perhaps the fundamental dispositions and character of their fellow companions, both priests and people, that carry significant potential for the nurture and development of ecclesial affiliation.

For in the absence of kindness and the presence of judgement Catholics leave and move away from a regular practice of faith. In the presence of a community that affectively connects its people with each other and God, people tend to stay. Indeed, in parishes where people are noticed and valued, listened to and appreciated, Catholics want to be present. When communities are welcoming and accepting of all peoples, when they notice the absence of others and reach out to those in need beyond the visible congregation, such Churches tend to flourish.

It is to the further areas of ecclesial significance that have emerged in this research, from which such seeds of hope and opportunity might sprout, that we now turn our attention in order to identify the foundations upon which the wider people of God across this diocesan Church might *build something better* in a re-imagined Church.

The terms of this report do not extend to specific recommendations for ecclesial renewal in response to the findings of this research, for this rests with the people and priests who are the people of God in the diocese of Brentwood. The report rather concludes with the provisional identification of specific areas of ecclesial significance that emerge from the research and from which the people of God in Brentwood might collaboratively develop the seeds of ecclesial renewal.

### **Ecclesial belonging, welcome and appreciation**

Welcome, appreciation and a sense of belonging are critically important for a flourishing ecclesial community. The research reveals that when men and women feel unwelcome and undervalued, unappreciated and even invisible they are less likely to remain present in the life of the Church.

When Catholics feel judged and condemned through the teaching of the Church and the praxis of her priests they tend to leave and not return. When the baptised people of God feel neglected and unsupported in difficult times of need, that includes illness, loneliness, trauma, death and grief, they drift away, often deeply hurt. When people experience exclusion and feel as though they don't fit in or belong they move on or withdraw from Church life.

### **Responsibilities of Caring**

Many respondents observed an increase in the time and energy that they gave towards the caring of others in their family that often became a barrier to ecclesial participation. Such commitments are familiar in terms of childcare and associated activities, but these commitments and responsibilities have now significantly extended to the caring for elderly parents who are often unwell. The paradox of such a time barrier that essentially arises from an extension in the responsibilities for care, love and attentiveness and hinders participation in the weekly celebration of the Eucharist, whose defining characteristics include care, healing, and love, does not go unnoticed.

## **Navigating the logistics of Church**

For many in this research the logistics that are prescribed as necessary for access to the sacraments, catechetical preparation and the wider life of the Church have become stressful and a disincentive to participation, indeed for many they have become a barrier. The research makes clear that the pattern and shape of contemporary life, alongside the current logistics and timetable of parish life are a barrier to participation for many. This raises the question as to how those in leadership might creatively change our pattern of outreach and worship as a Church of mission and evangelisation to reflect the changing pattern of the lives of many Catholic men and women today.

## **Experiences of transition and re-appraisal**

Significant periods of reappraisal arise in the lives of Catholic men and women during times of transition and crisis. The Church has an opportunity to be present and accompany people during these periods.

## **Covid-19**

A Church that withdraws from the life of a community in times of crisis and acute need is received and remembered as a non-essential part of life for those who are part of such communities. A Church that creatively extends its outreach to the community during times of crisis is received and remembered as integral to a flourishing life and community.

## **Online Liturgy and ministry**

The streaming of liturgical worship continues to engage many Catholics who would otherwise become separated from the life of the Church. Online ministry remains an underdeveloped mode of ecclesial outreach today, in contrast to the significance of an online presence of the many other interlocutors in the lives of Catholic men and women in contemporary society.



### **Spiritual needs unmet**

The spiritual needs of many baptised Catholic men and women remain unmet by the Church. This is a significant and troubling finding for the Church, not least as it also substantially extends into the cohort of weekly practising Catholics. This thus merits further research to establish an understanding of what this specifically means in the lives of Catholics today and for the implications that it carries for the mission of the Church and evangelisation.

### **Wider ecclesial impact of the sexual abuse scandal**

The impact of the clerical abuse scandal was widely, if not directly, felt by many Catholics in this research. There was little experience of an engagement at parish level with the wider ecclesial impact of the sexual abuse scandal upon both Church communities as a whole and individual Catholic men and women within such communities who were not immediately affected.

### **A Church of imposed teaching – a renewed understanding of personal conscience**

Many Catholics in this research experience Catholic ethical teaching as an imposition rather than an invitation to support and guide them in their journey of discipleship. There is an emergent underappreciation from the research of the Church's own teaching with regards to the primacy and dignity of personal conscience in the process of moral decision-making and wider discernment.

Many Catholics no longer consider Catholic sexual ethics as relevant or influential in their moral decision-making and wider lives. The diminished credibility of Church leaders, that arises from both the clerical child abuse scandal and the wider inappropriate behaviour of clergy, reduces the consideration afforded to Church teaching in the lives of many Catholics.

### **An accurate and authentic anthropology**

An accurate and authentic anthropology that is attentive to the diverse experience of all the baptised people of God is important for the ethical teaching of the Church to retain a position of significance and relevance in the moral decision-making of Catholic men and women.

## A priest-centric Church

The research presents a picture of a priest-centric ecclesiology that finds expression across local parish communities and the wider diocesan Church. Indeed the impact and influence of priests features prominently across the many categories of responses given by all Catholics in this research. The research attests to an awareness amongst Catholic men and women that the practices, relationships and structures that shape our ecclesial communities are significantly dependent upon the character, disposition and ecclesial outlook of the priest who leads such communities. It is noticed that such a priest centred Church often serves as a barrier to greater active participation by the wider people of God in the life of the Church through a variety of ministries that includes liturgy, governance and leadership.

It is further noticed that the arrival of a new priest can significantly change the orientation, focus and modus operandi of a parish community with little or no consultation. The appointment of new priests has a significant impact upon patterns of affiliation and the practice of faith in the life of the Church. Catholic men and women are aware that they have no voice or contribution to the episcopal process of clergy appointments that determines which priests are appointed to parishes. This sits in tandem with respondents' experiences of a structural and systemic underappreciation of the dignity and value of the baptised people of God in the life and ministry of the Church, that is perhaps underscored by a deficit in the ecclesial integration of the ministry of baptism.

This emergent research theme raises some important questions that merit further attention across both the academy and the wider Church that are in sympathy with the initial findings of the XVI General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, that include a reform of priestly formation and a deepened understanding of the sacramental theology of ordained ministry, with specific reference to the ordained priesthood.<sup>54</sup>

---

<sup>54</sup> The recent *Synthesis Report* of the XVI General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops commends the following for consideration: '(e) Within the context of the formation of all the baptised for service in a synodal Church, the formation of deacons and priests requires special attention. The request has been widely expressed at this Assembly that seminaries and other programmes of priestly formation remain connected to the daily life of the community. We need to avoid the risks of formalism and ideology that lead to authoritarian attitudes, and impede genuine vocational growth. Revision to programmes of formation requires extensive discussion and consideration; (j) A thorough review of formation for ordained ministry in view of the missionary and synodal dimensions of the Church is called for. This means also reviewing the *Ratio fundamentalis* that determines how formation is structured. We also recommend at the same time ensuring the adoption of a synodal style when it comes to the ongoing formation of priests and deacons.' *Synthesis Report*, XVI General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, 2023, Part II, 11 (e) and (j), <https://www.cbcew.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2023/11/vatican-synthesis-report-eng-oct23.pdf>, [accessed 01.01.24]

## **A transactional Church**

The research paints a picture of a Church in which Catholic men and women are often transacting rather than participating. It reveals a Church in which baptised lay men and women are often consuming rather than belonging, and as such suggests a Church in which the people of God have been reduced to consumers and bystanders rather participants and disciples. This is perhaps but one fruit of a priest centred Church and a transactional ecclesial imaginary that this research suggests has been developed and fostered over recent decades.<sup>55</sup> It is an imaginary in which the baptised people of God have been reduced to consumers of a commodified faith, in which the priest has been reduced to the producer and dispenser of such a product, the demand for which he alone cannot meet, and in which the Church emerges as but one service provider amongst many for Catholics today.

## **Ecclesial Participation: rights and responsibilities**

In the research there appears to be an under appreciation by many respondents of the responsibility of all the baptised to participate in the life and mission of the Church, both within the immediate ecclesial community and the wider society that they inhabit.

This sits in tandem with many structural barriers to full ecclesial integration and participation for the baptised, especially for women, and the reluctance of many clergy to embrace the existing potential breadth and depth of lay collaborative ministry within the Church.

## **Parishioners' expectations of the Clergy**

Within the research there exists a sense of a widening divergence between the parishioners' expectations of the clergy and the awareness and capacity of the clergy to meet such expectations. Indeed the clergy are often overwhelmed not only by the administrative structures of parish life, but also by the volume and diversity of such unrealistic expectations that seek satisfaction through

---

<sup>55</sup> Cf. Matthew T. Eggemeier, *A Sacramental-Prophetic Vision: Christian Spirituality in a Suffering World*, (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2014)

just one person. An expectation and assumption that the priest can meet all the needs of parishioners and the wider ecclesial constituency was a recurring theme throughout the data.

### **Ecclesial strangers**

There is a sense of disconnection for many Catholics in this research with their priests, such that the ordinary rhythm, complexity and pressures of the lives of the laity often appear unknown to some priests. It is conversely true that many Catholics are unaware of the pressures, responsibilities and expectations that their priests carry in their ministry and wider lives. The joys and hopes, griefs and anxieties of fellow pilgrims often remain unknown and mysterious.

### **The behaviour and conduct of clergy**

The research highlights that whilst there is an appreciation for the goodness, kindness and 'servant priesthood' of many priests across the diocese, Catholic men and women in this research have a significant experience of inappropriate and abusive behaviour by the clergy exercised with impunity. Catholic men and women are unaware of any clear and transparent process for complaining about such behaviour within the diocese, and the reporting back of actions taken in response. The most common form of response received by participants to any complaints that are made in the diocese is silence.

Catholics are not aware of any code of conduct for clergy that is operational in the diocese. In sympathy with the recommendations from the recent Synod of Bishops, this research identifies the emergent need to both establish and foster a culture of ecclesial accountability and to develop transparent ecclesial processes of accountability that will uphold such a culture for all who hold specific office and ministry within the Church.<sup>56</sup>

---

<sup>56</sup> The recent *Synthesis Report* of the XVI General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops commends the following for consideration: 'Transparency and a culture of accountability are of crucial importance for us to move forward in building a synodal Church. We ask local Churches to identify processes and structures that allow for a regular audit of how priests and deacons are carrying out roles of responsibility in the exercise of their ministry. Existing institutions, such as participatory bodies or pastoral visits, can be the starting point for this work, taking care to involve the community. Such forms must be adapted to local contexts and diverse cultures, so as not to be a hindrance or a bureaucratic burden. The discernment of the kind of process required could be considered at the regional or continental level.' *Synthesis Report*, XVI General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, 2023, Part II, 11 (k),

## Participative governance

Catholic men and women in this research expect transparent processes of governance and decision-making to oversee and guide the lives of local parish communities. They withdraw from communities whose governance is opaque and unaccountable.

## Some areas for further research

There are specific areas that emerge from this research as demanding further attention and research, that include: the spiritual needs of baptised Catholic men and women in parish communities; the development and renewal of priestly formation; participative ecclesial governance and lay oversight; the impact of societal influences, that include social media and AI upon patterns of faith and religious practice; the impact of specific ecclesial models of ecclesial leadership and practice upon patterns of Catholic affiliation and participation.

## A concluding note

Each of these areas of ecclesial significance that have emerged from this research are notably provisional and are not intended to be exhaustive or comprehensive, but rather to serve as a departure point from which further areas of ecclesial significance might be identified by the reader of this report, areas that might in turn inductively inform the renewal of the Church that it is intended to serve, for *'today we have an opportunity to build something different.'*<sup>57</sup>

---

<https://www.cbcew.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2023/11/vatican-synthesis-report-eng-oct23.pdf>, [accessed 01.01.24]

<sup>57</sup> Pope Francis, *General Audience*, 19.08.20.

## CONCLUSION

*Why are you cast down, O my soul,  
and why are you disquieted within me?*

*Hope in God; for I shall again praise him,  
my help and my God.*

*Psalm 42*

Pope Francis in *Amoris Laetitia* reminds the Church that ‘each crisis has a lesson to teach us’ and that more importantly ‘we need to learn how to listen for it with the ear of the heart.’<sup>58</sup> In this *Believing, not Belonging* research I have attempted to listen attentively to the stories and reflections of Catholic men and women in the diocese of Brentwood who no longer regularly practise their faith, to listen with the ‘ear of the heart’ to their moving and challenging experiences that have been largely unheard in the wider synodal and renewal conversations that have enriched the life of the diocese of Brentwood and the wider Church. It is through such immersive encounters with others, Francis reminds us, that we ‘learn something new about God’, for ‘whenever our eyes are opened to acknowledge the other, we grow in the light of faith and knowledge of God.’<sup>59</sup>

My specific aim in this research has been to understand more deeply the many complex experiences and reasons that have contributed to the ecclesial drift, estrangement and disaffiliation of such large numbers of Catholic men and women, which has led to a scenario in which many Catholics might still believe, yet no longer feel as though they belong in the Church.

The research has uncovered significant experiences of ethical, ecclesial and liturgical discord, that have significantly contributed to the ecclesial drift, estrangement and disaffiliation of baptised Catholics amidst the wider pervasive influence of the global Covid-19 pandemic that afforded many Catholic men and women a period of reflection and re-appraisal with regards to the role that faith and Church occupies in their life. It is such experiences of discord that this research shows often find a resolution in a movement away from the life and practice of the Church. The research has revealed that for many Catholic men and women a movement away from a regular practice of faith is often a gradual journey that is shaped by such accumulative and complex experiences that explain ecclesial separation.

---

<sup>58</sup> *Amoris Laetitia*, 232

<sup>59</sup> *Evangelii Gaudium*, 272

The research constitutes a challenging yet authentic narrative that allows itself to be ‘seriously challenged by reality’<sup>60</sup> and sheds light upon a people who have moved away from a regular practice of faith in response to an experience of Church defined by clericalism, a people who have become estranged from a judgemental Church in whose ethical teaching they no longer see their face or that of Christ, or recognise their story, a people who have disaffiliated from a priest centred Church in which women have no role, in which accountability is a distant dream, from a Church which they no longer believe practises what it preaches.

As such this research provides a living testament to the faith and beliefs of some of the baptised Catholic men and women in the Diocese of Brentwood who still believe, but no longer feel as though they belong. It also affords the Church the opportunity to re-imagine in an evidentially informed manner how it might reform, renew and reshape its praxis to reengage with the rhythm and the rhyme of the lives of such large numbers of baptised Catholics, through a deepened recognition and understanding of the ‘world in which we live, its explanations, its longings, and its often dramatic characteristics.’<sup>61</sup>

Through an attentive ‘ear of the heart’ this research unveils the longing and yearning of many amongst the people of God in Brentwood, who though they might still *believe, feel as though they no longer belong in the Church* - it ultimately reveals the dreams of a forgotten people that chime with the dreams of the Bishop of Rome for a different Church in which there is ‘room for everyone.’

---

<sup>60</sup> Pope Francis, *Ad theologiam promovendam*

<sup>61</sup> *Gaudium et spes*, 4.

**Missing God**

*by Dennis O'Driscoll*

His grace is no longer called for  
before meals: farmed fish multiply  
without His intercession.

Bread production rises through  
disease-resistant grains devised  
scientifically to mitigate His faults.

Yet, though we rebelled against Him  
like adolescents, uplifted to see  
an oppressive father banished—  
a bearded hermit—to the desert,  
we confess to missing Him at times.

Miss Him during the civil wedding  
when, at the blossomy altar  
of the registrar's desk, we wait in vain  
to be fed a line containing words  
like “everlasting” and “divine”.

Miss Him when the TV scientist  
explains the cosmos through equations,  
leaving our planet to revolve on its axis  
aimlessly, a wheel skidding in snow.

Miss Him when the radio catches a snatch  
of plainchant from some echoey priory;  
when the gospel choir raises its collective voice  
to ask *Shall We Gather at the River?*  
or the forces of the oratorio converge  
on I Know That My Redeemer Liveth  
and our contracted hearts lose a beat.



Miss Him when a choked voice  
at the crematorium recites the poem  
about fearing no more the heat of the sun.

Miss Him when we stand in judgment  
on a lank Crucifixion in an art museum,  
its stripe-like ribs testifying to rank.

Miss Him when the gamma-rays  
recorded on the satellite graph  
seem arranged into a celestial score,  
the music of the spheres,  
the Ave Verum Corpus of the observatory lab.

Miss Him when we stumble on the breast lump  
for the first time and an involuntary prayer  
escapes our lips; when a shadow crosses  
our bodies on an x-ray screen; when we receive  
a transfusion of foaming blood  
sacrificed anonymously to save life.

Miss Him when we call out His name  
spontaneously in awe or anger  
as a woman in the birth ward bawls  
her long-dead mother's name.

Miss Him when the linen-covered  
dining table holds warm bread rolls,  
shiny glasses of red wine.

Miss Him when a dove swoops  
from the orange grove in a tourist village  
just as the monastery bell begins to take its toll.

Miss Him when our journey leads us under  
leaves of Gothic tracery, an arch  
of overlapping branches that meet  
like hands in Michelangelo's creation.

Miss Him when, trudging past a Church,  
we catch a residual blast of incense,  
a perfume on par with the fresh-baked loaf  
which Milosz compared to happiness.

Miss Him when our newly-decorated kitchen  
comes in Shaker-style and we order  
a matching set of Mother Ann Lee chairs.

Miss Him when we listen to the prophecy  
of astronomers that the visible galaxies  
will recede as the universe expands.

Miss Him the way an uncoupled glider  
riding the evening thermals misses its tug.

Miss Him, as the lovers shrugging  
shoulders outside the cheap hotel  
ponder what their next move should be.

Even feel nostalgic, odd days,  
for His Second Coming,  
like standing in the brick  
dome of a dovecote  
after the birds have flown.<sup>62</sup>

---

<sup>62</sup> Dennis O'Driscoll, *New and Selected Poems*, (London: Anvil Press, 2023)

## APPENDICES

### APPENDIX 1 – RESEARCH QUESTIONNAIRE



CENTRE FOR ECCLESIAL ETHICS  
*Becoming a good and better Church*  
DIOCESE OF BRENTWOOD



B I S H O P   A L A N   L I S T E N S

Believing, not Belonging  
*Spring 2023*

*'The Church has always had the duty of scrutinizing the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel so that in language intelligible to every generation, she can respond to the perennial questions which people ask about this present life and the life to come, and about the relationship of the one to the other.*

*We must therefore recognize and understand the world in which we live, its explanations, its longings, and its often dramatic characteristics.'*

*Gaudium et spes*

## BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

Across England and Wales today it is estimated that at least two-thirds of baptised Catholics no longer come to Mass, such that there are 'approximately four million' non-Church going Catholics in England and Wales (CBCEW, 2017).

As Pope Francis reminds us 'many people feel disillusioned and no longer identify with the Catholic tradition.' (EG, 70)

Since the pandemic many more Catholics have not returned to Church, and the pandemic may have led to a hastening of non-Church going for others, with fluctuating patterns of attendance elsewhere.

Bishop Alan and our diocese of Brentwood want to listen to the men and women who no longer come to Church for whatever reason - from those who make up our Church, but perhaps feel that they no longer belong.

This research survey seeks to create a space for the stories and experience of those who no longer come to Church to be heard, understood and seriously listened to by the Bishop and the wider Church.

## **BELIEVING, NOT BELONGING**

### *Invitation from Bishop Alan*

As Bishop in our diocese of Brentwood, I am so often deeply touched by the moving and faithful witness of ordinary Catholic men and women amidst the complexity of daily life and the challenges of our world of today.

I am aware however that I only really hear but a small slice of the stories, experiences and wisdom of baptised Catholics across and beyond our diocese, and that as a Church we need to listen beyond our current synod journey and our vision process.

Indeed as we emerge from the global pandemic into a rapidly changing world, we need to listen more deeply, more humbly and more widely to the experiences of all Catholics - for that is indeed where the Holy Spirit breathes and speaks.

There are many people in Brentwood and beyond, who were baptised Catholic, but for one reason or another have lost interest in what the Catholic Church has to say. If you feel this way, then as your Bishop, I'd love to hear from you!

On the other hand, you may feel that you are still interested and are attracted to the Church, but you don't have time for Sunday Mass. Or perhaps you find Church boring, or your local parish unfriendly? Or maybe you haven't returned to the Church since the Covid pandemic. If this is you, I would love to hear from you.

Sadly, there are some who feel alienated from the Church because it has harmed or rejected them in some way. Again, if this is you, I would very much like to hear from you.

This survey provides a space for your story and experience to be shared and heard, and seriously listened to by both me as your Bishop and our wider diocesan Church.

Thank you for taking the time to share your thoughts, your stories, and experiences.

Yours in Christ and Mary,

*+ Alan*

Alan Williams sm

**Bishop of Brentwood**

## PARTICIPANT INFORMATION AND CONSENT

Welcome to a confidential online consultation being conducted by researchers at the *Centre for Ecclesial Ethics* at the Margaret Beaufort Institute of Theology in Cambridge in partnership with the Catholic Diocese of Brentwood.

You are ***eligible to participate*** if you are

- e) aged 18 years of age or older;
- f) have been baptised as a Catholic;
- g) either live or have lived within the diocese of Brentwood (that is, the County of Essex, the Unitary Authorities of Southend-on-Sea and Thurrock and the London Boroughs of Barking & Dagenham, Havering, Newham, Redbridge and Waltham Forest) and
- h) no longer practise the Catholic faith (for whatever reason).

This survey provides a space for your story and experience to be shared and heard, and seriously listened to by both the Bishop and the wider diocesan Church

The survey is intended to help Bishop Alan, and the Church in the Diocese of Brentwood, to listen more attentively to the different experiences and stories of all Catholic men and women, and to better understand and learn from the faith journeys of all baptised Catholics.

This will help to inform and enrich the Church's mission and ongoing journey of renewal so that the Church may become more welcoming, accommodating and engaged with all women and men in our community and wider world of today, and to serve and reach out to those who are both missing and missed from our parishes.

The results will also contribute to ongoing academic research into the life and experiences of baptised Catholics in Britain. This survey should take you approximately 10 to 15 minutes to complete.

The survey is anonymous. Responses will be collected and analysed by a team from the *Centre for Ecclesial Ethics* at the Margaret Beaufort Institute of Theology in Cambridge. Any information provided by respondents that could be used to identify them (for example, references to specific people or places) will be kept confidential and will be edited out in any reports or publications arising from the study. Responses received as part of this study may be used to inform future research projects under the direction of the principal investigator.

## PARTICIPANT CONSENT

### 1. I agree to participate in this research (Required)

Yes (continue with survey)

No, I do not wish to participate

## BACKGROUND

### 2. Please state your sex: (Required)

- Male
- Female

### 3. Please state your age (as of your last birthday) (Required)

### 4. What is your connection to the diocese of Brentwood? *Please choose as many or as few that apply:* (Required)

- Currently live in Brentwood Diocese
- Close family connection to Brentwood Diocese
- Used to live in Brentwood Diocese

### 5. Which of these groups best describes the way you think of yourself: *Please choose as many or as few as apply (Optional)*

- White (Any origin)
- Black (African origin)
- Black (Caribbean origin)
- Black (Other origin)
- Asian (Indian origin)
- Asian (Pakistani origin)
- Asian (Bangladeshi origin)
- Asian (Chinese origin)
- Asian (Other origin)
- Mixed origin
- Other
- Prefer not to say
  - i. If you selected "Other", please specify



## FURTHER INFORMATION

### 6. Where you raised in a Catholic family?

- If no, at what age did you become Catholic?

Please feel free to give any further details about how and why this came about.

### 7. Would you say that you now regard yourself to be Catholic? (for example, when asked about your religious affiliation on forms or surveys)

- Yes
- No
- Sometimes but not others
  - If no or sometimes, what would be the most accurate way to describe your religious affiliation? (Optional)
    - No Religion
    - Christian (no denomination)
    - Church of England/Anglican
    - Baptist
    - Methodist
    - Church of Scotland/Presbyterian
    - Other Christian
    - Jewish
    - Hindu
    - Sikh
    - Muslim
    - Buddhist
    - Other
      - If you selected “other” please specify (Optional)
    - If you would like to add any further comments about how you view your religious affiliation and/or identity, please feel free to do so here.

8. Apart from special occasions such as weddings, funerals and baptisms, how often nowadays do you attend Mass?

- Once a week or more
- Less often but at least once in two weeks
- Less often but at least once a month
- Less often but at least twice a year
- Less often but at least once a year
- Less often than once a year
- Never or practically never
- Varies too much to say

## REASONS

These two questions are intended to shed light on the various journeys people take in ceasing to practise the Catholic faith, or-in some cases-no longer regarding themselves as Catholics. There are no right or wrong answers. You are invited simply to narrate your story, in your own words, including anything that you think is relevant.

9. **Was there a time in your life when you attended Mass on a more regular basis? Please explain what has changed between then and now.** *Feel free to give as much details as you would like.*

10. **If you no longer regard yourself as Catholic (or only regard yourself as Catholic some of the time, but not at others), please explain how this has come about.** *Please feel free to give as much details as you would like.*

## SPECIFIC ISSUES

Next, you will have the opportunity to provide your opinion on specific factors that may have contributed to your decision to leave the Church. While some of these statements are similar to questions in the previous section, it is important that you provide us with your honest opinions so that we gain as much information as possible through this survey.

**11. For each of the statements listed below, please mark your level of agreement as a factor in your decision to stop attending Sunday Mass or leave the Catholic Church.**

- **I gradually lost interest in going to Mass.**
  - Strongly agree
  - Agree
  - Neutral/No opinion
  - Disagree
  - Strongly disagree
  
- **My work schedule made it difficult to attend Mass**
  - Strongly agree
  - Agree
  - Neutral/No opinion
  - Disagree
  - Strongly disagree
  
- **My personal schedule made it difficult to attend Mass**
  - Strongly agree
  - Agree
  - Neutral/No opinion
  - Disagree
  - Strongly disagree
  
- **The priest was unfriendly**
  - Strongly agree
  - Agree
  - Neutral/No opinion
  - Disagree
  - Strongly disagree

- **The Church is judgemental**
  - Strongly agree
  - Agree
  - Neutral/No opinion
  - Disagree
  - Strongly disagree
  
- **The parish staff (*for example, administration, lay workers, catechists*) were unfriendly**
  - Strongly agree
  - Agree
  - Neutral/No opinion
  - Disagree
  - Strongly disagree
  
- **There are too many scandals in the Catholic Church**
  - Strongly agree
  - Agree
  - Neutral/No opinion
  - Disagree
  - Strongly disagree
  
- **The parish and diocese make too many requests for money**
  - Strongly agree
  - Agree
  - Neutral/No opinion
  - Disagree
  - Strongly disagree
  
- **The parish lacks adult programmes and services (*for example, specific groups or Masses aimed at adults*)**
  - Strongly agree
  - Agree
  - Neutral/No opinion
  - Disagree
  - Strongly disagree

- **The parish lacks programmes and services for children and families**
  - Strongly agree
  - Agree
  - Neutral/No opinion
  - Disagree
  - Strongly disagree
  
- **The Catholic Mass is too formal**
  - Strongly agree
  - Agree
  - Neutral/No opinion
  - Disagree
  - Strongly disagree
  
- **Music during the Catholic Mass is not enjoyable**
  - Strongly agree
  - Agree
  - Neutral/No opinion
  - Disagree
  - Strongly disagree
  
- **My parish closed and I didn't like the new parish**
  - Strongly agree
  - Agree
  - Neutral/No opinion
  - Disagree
  - Strongly disagree
  
- **The Covid pandemic sped up my drifting way from the Church**
  - Strongly agree
  - Agree
  - Neutral/No opinion
  - Disagree
  - Strongly disagree

- **We couldn't go to Mass during Covid and we haven't returned since**
  - Strongly agree
  - Agree
  - Neutral/No opinion
  - Disagree
  - Strongly disagree
  
- **Many of my friends have left the Church**
  - Strongly agree
  - Agree
  - Neutral/No opinion
  - Disagree
  - Strongly disagree
  
- **During and after Covid I discovered other meaningful things and activities to do on a Sunday morning**
  - Strongly agree
  - Agree
  - Neutral/No opinion
  - Disagree
  - Strongly disagree
  
- **My parish stopped women and girls altar serving, now only men and boys serve**
  - Strongly agree
  - Agree
  - Neutral/No opinion
  - Disagree
  - Strongly disagree
  
- **We watched Mass online during Covid and have continued to watch online ever since**
  - Strongly agree
  - Agree
  - Neutral/No opinion
  - Disagree
  - Strongly disagree

- I feel uncomfortable in a Church that excludes people
  - Strongly agree
  - Agree
  - Neutral/No opinion
  - Disagree
  - Strongly disagree
  
- I do not feel welcome, or as though I belong, in my parish
  - Strongly agree
  - Agree
  - Neutral/No opinion
  - Disagree
  - Strongly disagree
  
- I found a religion/denomination that I like more
  - Strongly agree
  - Agree
  - Neutral/No opinion
  - Disagree
  - Strongly disagree

12. From this list of issues and policies, please select whether one or more of these was a reason for distancing yourself from the Catholic Church.

- Church teaching on homosexuality
  - Very much
  - Somewhat
  - Neutral/no opinion
  - Slightly
  - Not at all
  
- Church teaching on abortion
  - Very much
  - Somewhat
  - Neutral/no opinion
  - Slightly
  - Not at all



- **Church teaching on birth control**
  - Very much
  - Somewhat
  - Neutral/no opinion
  - Slightly
  - Not at all
  
- **Church teaching on fertility treatments**
  - Very much
  - Somewhat
  - Neutral/no opinion
  - Slightly
  - Not at all
  
- **Church teaching on divorce/remarriage**
  - Very much
  - Somewhat
  - Neutral/no opinion
  - Slightly
  - Not at all
  
- **Church teaching on the Bible**
  - Very much
  - Somewhat
  - Neutral/no opinion
  - Slightly
  - Not at all
  
- **Church teaching on women being priests**
  - Very much
  - Somewhat
  - Neutral/no opinion
  - Slightly
  - Not at all

- Church **teaching on celibacy for priests**

- Very much
- Somewhat
- Neutral/no opinion
- Slightly
- Not at all

13. Please tell us if any of the statements below reflect how you feel about the Catholic Church.

- **I do not experience a feeling of community in my parish**

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neutral/No opinion
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

- **The Church is not interested in what I think or believe**

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neutral/No opinion
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

- **My spiritual needs were not being met**

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neutral/No opinion
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

- **Catholic teaching no longer influences my thinking on moral issues**

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neutral/No opinion
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

- **My faith no longer influences my thinking on moral issues**
  - Strongly agree
  - Agree
  - Neutral/No opinion
  - Disagree
  - Strongly disagree

### **ADDITIONAL INFORMATION**

In this final section of the survey you will be asked a series of questions that will allow you to type your own additional comments for many of the questions. We encourage you to take the time to provide your thoughts in the comments section following the questions.

**14. Are there any religious beliefs or practices specific to the Catholic Church that trouble you?**

- Yes
- No

a) If yes, please elaborate on your reasoning. (optional)

**15. What do you miss most about the Church?**

**16. Generally speaking have you had a “bad experience” with any person associated with the Catholic Church?**

- Yes
- No

b) If yes, please elaborate on your reasoning. (optional)

17. Can you imagine yourself returning to the Church? If so, what specific things might the Church do to help toward this?

18. What might be the main obstacle to you returning to the Church?

19. What things do you find attractive about the Catholic Church? These can either be in general, or in the diocese of Brentwood specifically.

20. If you could communicate with Bishop Alan directly, what would you like to say?

#### CONCLUSION

Thank you very much for your participation in this survey.

## APPENDIX 2 – RESEARCH INVITATIONS

## BELIEVING, NOT BELONGING

### *Invitation from Bishop Alan*

As Bishop in our diocese of Brentwood, I am so often deeply touched by the moving and faithful witness of ordinary Catholic men and women amidst the complexity of daily life and the challenges of our world of today.

I am aware however that I only really hear but a small slice of the stories, experiences and wisdom of baptised Catholics across and beyond our diocese, and that as a Church we need to listen beyond our current synod journey and our vision process.

Indeed as we emerge from the global pandemic into a rapidly changing world, we need to listen more deeply, more humbly and more widely to the experiences of all Catholics - for that is indeed where the Holy Spirit breathes and speaks.

There are many people in Brentwood and beyond, who were baptised Catholic, but for one reason or another have lost interest in what the Catholic Church has to say. If you feel this way, then as your Bishop, I'd love to hear from you!

On the other hand, you may feel that you are still interested and are attracted to the Church, but you don't have time for Sunday Mass. Or perhaps you find Church boring, or your local parish unfriendly? Or maybe you haven't returned to the Church since the Covid pandemic. If this is you, I would love to hear from you.

Sadly, there are some who feel alienated from the Church because it has harmed or rejected them in some way. Again, if this is you, I would very much like to hear from you.

This survey provides a space for your story and experience to be shared and heard, and seriously listened to by both me as your Bishop and our wider diocesan Church.

Thank you for taking the time to share your thoughts, your stories, and experiences.

Yours in Christ and Mary,

*+ Alan*

Alan Williams sm

**Bishop of Brentwood**

## Do you know someone who no longer comes to Mass?



*Maybe it's a friend or family, neighbour or colleague,  
or maybe its you?*



As we emerge from the global pandemic into a rapidly changing world, we as Church are ever more aware of our need to listen more deeply, more humbly and more widely to the experiences of all Catholics - for this is indeed where the Holy Spirit breathes and speaks.

- There are many people in Brentwood and beyond, who were baptised Catholic, but for one reason or another have lost interest in what the Catholic Church has to say. ***If you feel this way, then as your Bishop, I'd love to hear from you!***
- On the other hand, you may feel that you are still interested and are attracted to the Church, but you don't have time for Sunday Mass. Or perhaps you find Church boring, or your local parish unfriendly; or maybe you haven't returned to the Church since the Covid pandemic. ***If this is you, I'd love to hear from you.***
- Sadly, there are some who feel alienated from the Church because it has harmed or rejected them in some way. ***Again, if this is you, I would very much like to hear from you.***
- If you, or someone you know, lives in Brentwood and says yes to any of the above...

### + Bishop Alan would love to hear from you +

*This survey provides a space for the story and experience of you, your family and friends to be shared and heard, and seriously listened to by me as your Bishop and our wider diocesan Church.*

Click on the link, or snap the QR code – it should take no more than 10-15 mins to complete



[https://cambridge.eu.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV\\_9Gn08WXvvKfwJts](https://cambridge.eu.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_9Gn08WXvvKfwJts)



**PLEASE ASK your friends or family, your neighbours and colleagues who no longer come to Church to complete the survey so that we might hear from as many people as possible.**

*"Thank you for taking the time to share your story and experience,  
and allowing me the chance to listen once more."* **Bishop Alan**



## Bishop Alan would love to hear from you!

***Do you, or someone you know, no longer go to Mass or feel that you belong in the Church?***

***Bishop Alan would love to hear your story and listen to your experience.***

Scan the QR code – ***share with your family and friends, neighbours and colleagues*** who may no longer come to Mass

[https://cambridge.eu.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV\\_9Gn08WXvvKfwJts](https://cambridge.eu.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_9Gn08WXvvKfwJts)



***“Thank you for taking the time to share your story and experience, and allowing me the chance to listen once more.”***

**Bishop Alan**



## Do you know someone who no longer comes to Mass?



*Maybe it's a friend or family, neighbour or colleague, or maybe its you?*



**+ Bishop Alan from Brentwood would love to hear from you +**

- Many Catholics have for one reason or another lost interest in the Church
- Others may still be interested and attracted to the Church, but don't have time for Sunday Mass
- Many others may not have returned to the Church since the Covid pandemic.
- Others may feel alienated from the Church because it's harmed or rejected them in some way.

***This survey provides a space for the story and experience of you, your family and friends to be shared and heard, and seriously listened to by me as your Bishop and our wider diocesan Church.***

**Click on the link, or snap the QR code – it should take no more than 10-15 mins to complete**



[https://cambridge.eu.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV\\_9Gn08WXvvKfwJts](https://cambridge.eu.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_9Gn08WXvvKfwJts)



**PLEASE ASK your friends or family, your neighbours and colleagues who no longer come to Church to complete the survey so that we might hear from as many people as possible.**

***“Thank you for taking the time to share your story and experience, and allowing me the chance to listen once more.”*** Bishop Alan

