

Secular Societal Trends

Census data showing trends in identification with religion in Australia over the past 50 years are shown in the following table:

	1966	1991	2016
Religion			
Christian	88.2	74.0	52.1
Other Religions	0.7	2.6	8.2
No religion	0.8	12.9	30.1

In 2016, Catholicism was the largest Christian grouping in Australia, accounting for 22.6% of the Australian population, down from 25.8% in 2011. For the first time in 105 years of the Australian Census, the actual Catholic population declined compared to the previous Census, from 5.44m to 5.29m - a 2.8% decline.

In the 2016 Census, young adults (aged 18-34 years) were more likely to report not having a religion (39%) and more likely than other adults to be affiliated with religions other than Christianity (12%). Older people, particularly those aged 65 years and over, were most likely to report Christianity (70%).

Rates of Engagement/involvement in the Church

There is no simple measure of engagement or participation in the Catholic Church. Given the centrality of the Mass and parish life to the Church, regular participation in the Eucharist, at Mass in a parish church, has been a measure traditionally used. Current estimates are that less than 10% of Catholics are regular Mass attendees. Credible predictions are that Mass attendance will decline to 5% or 6% by 2030, with Australian born participation rates falling faster than those for overseas born Catholics. The even lower mass attendance rates of those under 35 are predicted to endure.

Although there are no useful statistics, observation shows that rates of active participation in pastoral and other activities in parishes, beyond attendance at mass, are historically low and declining. Rates of participation in sacraments (e.g. Confession, Marriage) beside the Eucharist are also much lower than in previous years and declining further.

Enrolment levels in Catholic schools have remained strong, but are questionable as indicators of connection with the Church, let alone engagement in it.

Sustainability of Church Human Resources

The number of clergy in Australia has continued to decline over the past 50 years, and to age. As at 31 December 2017:

- there were 1861 diocesan priests, down from 2,389 in 1967 (22% decline);
- there were 1039 religious order priests, down from 1,397 in 1967 (26% decline).¹

¹ *Official Directory of the Catholic Church in Australia 2018 - 2019*

There are no comprehensive figures of the age profiles of priests in Australia, but such studies and diocesan figures that do exist show an increasing median age of Australian priests – mainly in their 60s or older. Of the 1861 diocesan priests ‘on the books’ at 31 December 2017, over 500 were retired, indicating both that the decline in numbers is greater than the raw figures suggest, and that the age profile of priests is decidedly skewed towards the end of active ministry.

The outputs of Australian seminaries continue to be insufficient to replace the numbers of priests ceasing active ministry each year. The numbers of Australian-born priests will therefore continue to fall. The current ‘strategy’ of the Australian Bishops, of offsetting priestly numerical shortfalls by increasing numbers of priests from places like India, Vietnam, Philippines, Africa and elsewhere, may slow the decline in overall numbers, albeit with other consequences and costs (eg, visa, turnover, ‘acclimatisation’, reunion and overhead/supervision costs), which in turn will affect sustainability.

In 2011, Peter J Wilkinson² wrote:

Less than 50 new parishes have been established since 1990. But more significantly, since 1994, 184 existing parishes in 16 dioceses have been merged to form just 84. These include 22 parishes in Brisbane merged to form 7, 20 parishes in Broken Bay merged to 10, 25 parishes in Hobart merged to 12, 15 parishes in Maitland-Newcastle merged to 6, 20 parishes in Melbourne merged to 13, and 36 parishes in Sydney merged to 18.

Since then, the pattern of mergers has continued apace.

Over the past 50 years, the numbers of religious sisters and brothers have declined to the point of irrelevance in Church life. For example, the number of religious sisters (4,161 as at 31 December 2017) currently stands at less than a third of the 13,720 religious sisters in ministry in 1967 - and the current median age is around 80. This has meant the almost complete withdrawal of religious from teaching, pastoral and leadership roles in education and health and their replacement (mainly in new, often incorporated, government funded and comprehensively regulated Catholic organisations) by non-religious professionals, who may or may not be Catholic.

Assessment of available Church resources must include the laity. This resource has historically been underutilised and marginalised, mainly for reasons evident in the paper on canon law issues. The ageing and declining numbers of the active Catholic population will increasingly be factors in the capability of the laity to sustain Church pastoral and social welfare efforts. Rates of Church lay volunteering in Church activities have also shown declines since the establishment of contestable businesses to provide Church services (eg, CatholicCare), predominantly government-funded, professionalised and with predominantly public responsibilities and accountabilities.

² ‘Catholic Parish Ministry: Facing Disaster?’