

Who goes to Mass in Australia in the 21st Century?

'The Eucharist is the source and apex of the whole work of preaching the gospel. No Christian community can be built up unless it has its basis and centre in the Eucharist. Here all education in the spirit of the community must originate.' (Presbyterorum Ordinis, nn. 5-6)

Three times in the 21st century, Australia's bishops have measured the fidelity of the nation's Catholics to regular Mass attendance. In 2001, 2006 and 2011, coinciding with the Commonwealth Census, the ACBC Pastoral Research Office (PRO) has conducted National Counts of Attendance in every parish of every diocese. The results of the 2011 Count, recently published, reveal a Catholic community with diminished and diminishing fidelity to the Eucharistic celebration.

How many go to Mass?

Mass attendance by Australian Catholics has never been static or predictable.

During the 19th century, just 19 percent of Catholics regularly attended Mass in 1850, 22 percent in 1864, 40 percent in 1870 and 31 percent in 1900. During the 20th century, regular Mass attendance fluctuated even more dramatically, rising to 74 percent in 1954, but declining to 18 percent in 1996.

So far, in the 21st century, the decline has continued. In 2001, regular weekly Mass attendance dropped to 15.3 percent, in 2006 to 13.8 percent, and in 2011 to just 10.6 percent. It is now at an all-time low.

In 2011 just 578,000 Catholics regularly attended weekly Mass. If another 102,000 who attended regularly, but only 1-3 times per month or less often, are included, some 680,000, or one in every eight Catholics (12.5 %) were regular Mass attenders.

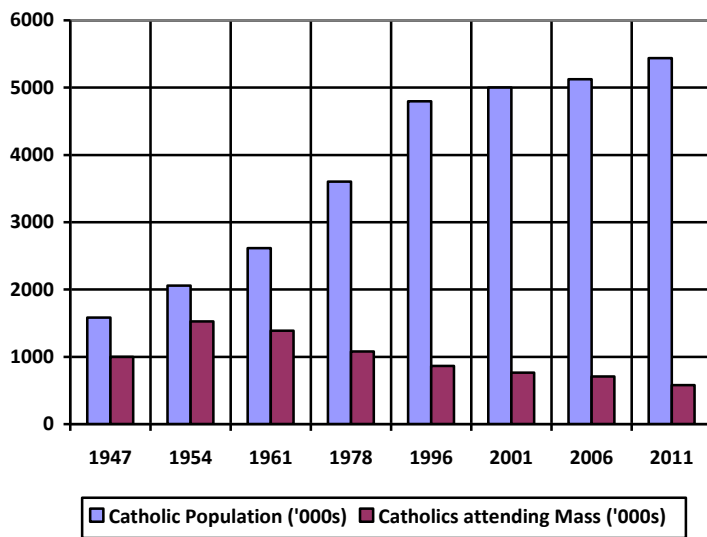
In the 50-year period, 1961-2011, when Australia's Catholic population more than doubled, the number of Catholics who regularly attended Mass more than halved (Table 1 & Figure 1). And in the 5-year period, 2006-2011, more than 130,000 Catholics across Australia, or 18.4 percent of all regular weekly Mass goers, ceased to attend.

Table 1. Australian Catholic population and regular Mass attendance: 1947-2011

Year	Catholic Population	Catholics regularly attending Mass	Percentage attending
1947	1,584,094	998,000	63%
1954	2,060,986	1,525,129	74%
1961	2,616,541	1,386,700	53%
1978	3,605,098	1,081,529	30%
1996	4,799,000	864,000	17.9%
2001	5,001,624	764,310	15.3%
2006	5,126,884	708,618 ¹	13.8% ¹
2011	5,439,268 ³	578,000 ²	10.6% ²

Sources: ABS Census Data (various years); *National Count of Attendance*, 2001, 2006, 2011; *Catholic Church Life Survey*, 1996, 2001; *National Church Life Survey* 2001, 2006, 2011; CROPP, 1978; Mol, 1985, O'Farrell, p. 428; Gallup Polls, 1947, 1960, 1976. Notes: 1. Number and attendance rate is for 'weekly' attendance. 2. Number and attendance rate is for 'weekly' attendance. 3. Catholic population includes Latin Rite (99.2% of all Catholics) and Eastern Rite Catholics.

Figure 1. Australian Catholic population and regular Mass attendance: 1947-2011



Where do Australian Catholics go to Mass?

While the National Count of Attendance gathers data for every diocese and parish, only national numbers and attendance rates have been published; diocesan data has been considered ‘confidential’ and withheld. For this article a direct request was made to each of Australia’s 28 territorial dioceses for their 2006 and 2011 Mass attendance data. Twenty-three dioceses supplied their information, three preferred secrecy, and two did not respond. To supplement the missing data for 2006, recourse was made to information published in the 2011 PRO/CRA report, *See, I am doing a new thing!*

Table 2 presents the 2006 and 2011 data, including the Catholic population of each diocese, Mass attendance numbers and rates, and change in attendance over the 5-year period. The data clearly show that Mass attendance is not uniform across dioceses.

In 2006 only 7 territorial dioceses – Ballarat, Broken Bay, Melbourne, Parramatta, Perth, Sydney, and Wagga Wagga – had regular weekly attendance rates at or above the national average of 13.8 percent; while 6 dioceses - Broome, Bunbury, Cairns, Geraldton, Hobart, and Townsville - had attendance rates below 10 percent

In 2011, of those dioceses which provided their data, just 8 - Adelaide, Ballarat, Broken Bay, Melbourne, Parramatta, Perth, Sydney and Wagga Wagga – had regular weekly attendance rates above the national average of 10.6 percent; while 11 - Brisbane, Cairns, Canberra & Goulburn, Darwin, Geraldton, Hobart, Lismore, Maitland-Newcastle, Rockhampton, Townsville, and Wilcannia-Forbes - had attendance rates below 10 percent.

Though the Catholic population of every diocese - except Armidale (-44), Sandhurst (-9818) and Wilcannia-Forbes (-869) – increased between 2006 and 2011, Mass attendance numbers increased in only four dioceses - Darwin, Geraldton, Perth and Parramatta. Moreover, the rate of regular weekly attendance declined in all dioceses except Parramatta, with 13 dioceses recording a decline exceeding 15 percent.

Across the nation, the average attendance numbers per parish remained similar - 527 in 2006 and 524 in 2011 – due to the number of territorial parishes being reduced by 46 from 1344 to 1298.

Table 2. Mass attendance in Australia's 28 Territorial Dioceses, 2006 and 2011

Diocese	Catholic Population 2006	Weekly Mass attendance numbers, 2006	% weekly attendance rate, 2006	Catholic Population 2011	Weekly Mass attendance numbers, 2011	% weekly attendance rate, 2011	% increase/decrease in numerical attendance
Adelaide	278,024	34,091	12.3%	289,245	31,984	11.1%	-6.2%
Armidale	44,266	5,391	12.2%	44,222	4,551	10.3%	-15.6%
Ballarat	98,954	13,690	13.8%	102,006	11,199	11.0%	-18.2%
Bathurst	66,392	7,794*	11.7%	67,844	Data not supplied		
Brisbane	645,435	70,923	11.0%	715,893	65,952	9.2%	-7.0%
Broken Bay	212,346	29,761	14.0%	222,416	25,000	11.2%	-16.0%
Broome	8,291	708*	8.5%	9,790	No response		
Bunbury	53,622	4,960*	9.2%	63,107	Data not supplied		
Cairns	57,144	4,938	8.7%	62,260	4,131	6.6%	-16.3%
Canberra & Goulburn	160,082	19,379	12.1%	163,052	15,956	9.8%	-17.7%
Darwin	40,783	4,251*	10.4%	45,546	4,326	9.7%	+1.8%
Geraldton	23,004	2,150	9.2%	29,317	2,248	7.7%	+4.6%
Hobart	87,755	7,175	8.2%	88,792	6,283	7.1%	-12.4%
Lismore	108,173	13,375	12.4%	111,429	11,056	9.9%	-17.3%
Maitland-Newcastle	153,744	15,642	10.2%	159,045	12,730	8.0%	-18.6%
Melbourne	1,057,058	162,270*	15.4%	1,106,008	154,562**	14.0%	-4.8%
Parramatta	307,685	49,007	15.9%	319,381	51,441	16.1%	+5.0%
Perth	378,974	54,449	14.4%	426,595	56,616	13.3%	+3.8%
Port Pirie	27,174	3,543*	13.0%	28,041	2,851	10.2%	-19.5%
Rockhampton	97,846	10,382	10.6%	107,724	8,759	8.1%	-15.6%
Sale	90,199	12,046*	13.4%	120,233	No response		
Sandhurst	103,617	11,438	11.0%	93,799	9,388	10.0%	-17.9%
Sydney	576,606	103,310	17.9%	593,319	98,308	16.6%	-4.8%
Toowoomba	62,861	8,615	13.7%	66,286	6,977	10.5%	-19.0%
Townsville	72,952	5,900	8.1%	80,243	5,888	7.3%	no change
Wagga Wagga	63,218	9,390	14.9%	63,572	7,817	12.3%	-16.8%
Wilcannia-Forbes	33,423	3,519	10.5%	32,554	2,666	8.2%	-24.2%
Wollongong	178,892	22,675*	12.7%	186,347	Data not supplied		
TOTAL	5,126,885	708,618	13.8% (average)	5,398,066	578,000	10.6% (average)	-18.4%

Sources: ABS, 2006 and 2011 Census; *National Count of Attendance 2006 and 2011*; *Official Directory of the Catholic Church in Australia 2011-2012 and 2013-2014*. * estimated number derived from data in Table 13 of PRO/CRA publication, *See, I am doing a new thing!*; ** includes 16,750 attending Mass in languages other than English and not included in the parish count.

Who attends Mass regularly?

Data from the 2006 and 2011 National Counts and National Church Life Surveys (NCLS) show clearly that Mass attendance varies significantly between the sexes, age groups, and birthplace groups.

By sex, both the 2006 and 2011 National Counts showed that among all regular Mass attenders aged 15 years and over, 61 percent were female.

By age group, between 2001 and 2006, for every group up to 59 years, numbers attending Mass decreased; but in every age group aged 60 years and over, numbers increased. In 2001, Catholics aged 60 years and over constituted just 4.8 percent of all Catholics, but represented 32 percent of all regular Mass attenders. In 2006, the same age group represented just 5.1 percent of all Catholics, but 47.8 percent of all attenders. Catholics aged 70 years and over made up 17 percent of all Mass attenders in 1996; in 2011 they represented 27 percent.

Young Catholics, on the other hand, are under-represented at Mass. In 2006, Catholics aged 15-24 years constituted 13.8 percent of all Catholics, but just 6.4 percent of all regular attenders; those aged 25-34 years made up 12.7 percent of all Catholics, but only 5.4 percent of attenders.

By birth, the Australian-born constituted 75 percent of all Catholics in 2011; yet they made up only 59 percent of all regular Mass attenders. Overseas-born Catholics, who constituted just 24 percent of the Catholic population in 2011, made up 41 percent of all regular Mass attenders, up from 36 percent in 2006. Overseas-born Catholics significantly represented at Mass are those from the Pacific Islands, Great Britain, Ireland, Malta, North & West Europe, South Africa, India, Sri Lanka, Philippines and Vietnam.

The 2011 NCLS also revealed that 34 percent of all Mass attenders had a university degree, 62 percent were in their first marriage, and one in ten were either remarried after a divorce (3.5%), in a *de facto* relationship (1.7%), separated but not divorced (1.8%), or divorced but not remarried (3.8%).

Where to from here?

Since the National Count in 2011, there is nothing to suggest that the decline in Mass attendance has either slowed or reversed. Rather, emerging evidence would suggest that since the substantive causes prompting the decline are still present and remain unaddressed, and in some instances more pronounced than ever, the decline is likely to continue. If there is to be any hope that ordinary Australian Catholics will return to the Eucharistic table, there will have to be credible evidence from church leaders that their commitment to reform and renewal of the Church and its governance is genuine and imminent.

Peter J Wilkinson

August 2013

Sources:

ACBC Pastoral Research Office, *A Profile of the Catholic Community in Australia*, ACU, March 2013.

www.pro.catholic.org.au

ACBC Pastoral Research Office, *Who goes to Mass? – First results from the 2011 NCLS*, E-News Bulletin, Issue No. 18, 6 December 2012

ACBC Pastoral Research Office, *Who goes to Mass? – First results from the 2011 NCLS (Part 2)*, E-News Bulletin, Issue No. 14 December 2012

ACBC Pastoral Research Office, *First Diocesan results from the 2011 National Census*, E-News Bulletin, Issue No. 20, 22 February 2013

ACBC Pastoral Projects Office, *Catholics Who have Stopped Attending Mass: Pastoral Strategies*, ACU, October 2007

Dixon, R., et al., *Catholics Who Have Stopped Attending Mass*, ACBC Pastoral Projects Office, ACU, Final Report, February 2007

Dixon, R., Kunciunas, A., Reid, S., *Mass Attendance in Australia*, ACBC Pastoral Research Office, ACU, September 2008

National Church Life Survey (NCLS), 2001, 2006 and 2011. Joint project of Uniting Church Board of Mission (NSW), Anglicare (NSW) and ACBC.

O'Farrell, Patrick, *The Catholic Church and Community in Australia*, Thomas Nelson, Melbourne, 1977

Reid, Stephen, Dixon, Robert and Connolly, Noel, *See, I am doing a new thing!: A report on the 2009 survey of Catholic Religious Institutes in Australia*, ACBC Pastoral Projects Office & Catholic Religious Australia, ACU, Melbourne, 2010 (see Table 13, p. 17 and Appendix 1)