

Research Project on

CATHOLICS WHO HAVE STOPPED ATTENDING MASS



Pastoral Strategies



Pastoral Projects Office
AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC BISHOPS CONFERENCE

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	3
Research	3
The challenge confirmed	3
a. National Count of Attendance and the Australian Census	3
b. The NCLS	3
Consultation process	4
Communio as foundation	5
Response to the research	6
Pastoral recommendations	7
Pastoral strategies	
Pastoral Strategies for Developing Community Identity	8
Pastoral Strategies for Developing Personal Identity	8
Pastoral Strategies for Developing Leadership	9
Pastoral Strategies for Developing Mission and Outreach	9
Further research	10
Conclusion	10
Appendix 1 Written response to the Research Report	11
Appendix 2 Decisions and Proposals of the ACBC in response to <i>Woman and Man: One in Christ Jesus. Report on the Participation of Women in the Catholic Church in Australia</i>	12



INTRODUCTION

Catholics who are drifting away from the Church have been an increasing concern of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference. Over the last three years the Bishops have been exploring the reasons why people who have been active in Church life are ceasing Mass attendance and parish involvement. This document and the decisions the bishops make as a result of it will conclude a project of research, consultation and dialogue. The document aims to offer bishops and the whole Australian Church practical pastoral strategies of outreach and renewal that will encourage inactive Catholics to rekindle their participation in Church life and active Catholics to sustain and revitalise their participation. The document returns the initiative to the bishops, where it began, so that they may take the necessary pastoral action.

RESEARCH

In 2004, after considerable discussion among themselves, the bishops commissioned their Pastoral Projects Office to study why people who had been active Catholics had stopped going to Mass. Given that there had already been significant quantitative studies related to this issue, the design chosen for the research was an in-depth qualitative methodology which explored the interpersonal, cultural and societal factors which led people to cease their participation in the liturgy and communal life of the Church. The data from 41 interviews with now inactive Catholics showed that it was often difficult for participants to identify a single, clear reason why they had stopped going to Mass. Usually there was a combination of factors, often made up of one or more Church-related factors together with one or more personal factors. Of the Church related factors, the main concerns of participants were:

- a perception of the irrelevance of the Church to life today
- the misuse of power and authority in the Church
- problems with the leadership or moral behaviour of a parish priest
- a loss of a sense of belonging in their parish
- a sense of being excluded by Church rules.

The personal factors were:

- family or household related issues
- crisis of faith
- going to Mass simply not a priority.

The research indicated that, because a number of factors are involved which gradually accumulate in significance, people do drift away from Church life rather than suddenly cease their participation. An outcome of this gradual process is that most of the participants still identify themselves as Catholics and are open to returning to active participation if they can see that the issues for them are being addressed. The research report concluded that very few of the reasons given by participants in the project refer to matters that the Church can do nothing about.

THE CHALLENGE CONFIRMED

Since the report was released in early 2007, the challenges facing the Church have been confirmed by the results of the National Count of Attendance, the Australian Census and the National Church Life Survey.

A) National Count of Attendance and the Australian Census

According to the 2006 National Count of Attendance, the number of people attending Mass on a typical weekend was about 708,600. This figure is almost 56,000 lower than the corresponding figure for 2001. In other words, attendances have dropped by over 7 per cent in that five-year period, or by more than 11,000 people per year.

The 2006 Census shows that the Catholic population of Australia increased by over 125,000 to 5,126,884 between 2001 and 2006. This means that the percentage of the Catholic population to be found at Mass on a typical weekend has fallen from 15.3 per cent in 2001 to 13.8 per cent in 2006.

B) The NCLS

The National Church Life Survey is a nation-wide survey of the demographics and attitudes of Christians. It is undertaken every five years. In 2006, 400,000 church attenders from over 7,000 churches took part. The survey results for the Catholic Church were released in June and revealed that:

- From across the Churches, Catholics have the lowest score [38%] for a sense of belonging that is strong and growing
- 30% of Catholic attenders feel an absence or weakening of belonging



Research Report on CATHOLICS WHO HAVE STOPPED ATTENDING MASS

Pastoral Strategies

- Only 8% are certain to follow up someone who is drifting away from the Church
- 10% are involved in welcoming new people
- 47% of attenders' children who are 15+ do not attend church
- 27% invited someone to church in the last 12 months
- 16% are involved regularly in community service through their parish
- 40% have difficulty accepting the teaching authority of the Church.

CONSULTATION PROCESS

When the research report was issued in March, leadership bodies in the Church and interested others were invited to reflect on the research and to generate ideas for action. They were asked to think of practical pastoral responses that could be taken at three levels:

- local parishes
- dioceses
- the Catholic Bishops Conference

At the same time, talks and discussions began to be held in various parts of the country to consider the implications of the research. Staff of the Pastoral Projects Office directly participated in such fora with the Ukrainian Eparchial Pastoral Council, in a public seminar at Yarra Theological Union, in workshops (2) with the priests of the Diocese of Wagga Wagga, and through a seminar for catechists in the Archdiocese of Melbourne.

Particularly significant among these events was the evening session in Melbourne called *Missing from the Table*. Hosted by the Yarra Theological Union it drew over 250 people to hear addresses on the sociological, theological and pastoral dimensions of the research. The passionate engagement of the issues by speakers and participants on that evening typified the response of Catholics to the report.

Overall, reaction to the report has been extremely positive. Both its methodology and content have been widely commended in the academic and research

communities, both in Australia and overseas, and many commentators have congratulated the Bishops Conference for initiating and publishing the research. At least two overseas dioceses, Wellington in New Zealand and Providence in the United States, are making use of the report in their own work in relation to declining Mass attendances.

As a result of the interest in the research, a number of formal written responses were offered by dioceses, Church agencies and individuals. These are listed in Appendix 1. The responses present a wide range of reflections and recommendations. Some common elements across them are:

- a resonance with the research – the stories of the research participants resonated with stories that many Catholics had heard from people they knew who had ceased participation in Church life.
- a strong desire to ensure outreach to those who have gone or who are on that path and to engage the issues that are affecting them. This outreach should flow from some soul-searching about what sort of community the Church has to offer.
- recommendations that involve a broader establishment of consultative structures in the Church so that people's wisdom and concerns are reflected in decision-making.
- recommendations that involve a closer engagement with priests by diocesan authorities and parishioners in assisting the performance and professional development of priests.

In each of these areas, the tenor of the responses was that the seriousness of these issues for the Church is such that we ought be courageous in pastoral action and push the boundaries of what we have been doing to date.

At the invitation of the Pastoral Projects Office, in September 2007, a group of twenty people - bishops, theologians, pastoral workers and leaders of Church agencies - came together in a *pastoral workshop* to process this information and discern the strategies that offered most in terms of practically addressing the issues. The outcomes of that workshop form the substance of the pastoral strategies to be presented here.



COMMUNIO AS FOUNDATION

In discussions among the bishops, in responses to the research and at the pastoral workshop, it was clear that whatever steps we take must flow from our understanding of who we are as Church and what we aspire to be.

At the pastoral workshop, the theology of *communio* was proposed as the foundation we should stand on and draw from as we attempt to engage people in these sensitive areas. At their 1985 Synod in Rome the Bishops declared that the understanding of Church as communion is “the central and fundamental idea” emerging from the documents of Vatican II. As is well known by now, *communio* is an understanding that the nature of the Church is constituted by relationships: that the infinite love which binds Father, Son and Spirit as one God overflows to us and draws us into relationships with others as one body. As Pope Benedict says: “Communion draws me out of myself towards him (Jesus) and thus also towards unity with all Christians. We become ‘one body’, completely joined in a single existence. Love of God and love of neighbour are now truly united: God incarnate draws us all to himself” (*Deus Caritas Est* 14).

Communio was also a recurring theme in the writings of Pope John Paul II who urged us “To make the Church *the home and the school of communion*: that is the great challenge facing us in the millennium which is now beginning, if we wish to be faithful to God’s plan and respond to the world’s deepest yearnings.” (*Novo Millennio Ineunte* 43). The Pope saw *communio* intimately bound up with the Church’s call to *missio*: “Communion and Mission are profoundly connected with each other, they interpenetrate and mutually imply each other, to the point that communion represents both the source and the fruit of mission: communion gives rise to mission and mission is accomplished in communion” (*Christifideles Laici* 32).

One of the areas that Pope John Paul emphasised was that the Church needs to be continually developing participatory structures, “instruments of communion”. He said that “Communion must be cultivated and extended day by day and at every level in the structures of each Church’s life thereby supplying “institutional reality with a soul” (*NMI* 45).

Some of the practical implications of the *Communio-Missio* dialectic in the current context are that we need to foster:

Communio

- Activity that sustains, guides and heals members of the community
- Structures that allow for a deeper possibility of inter-relationship
- Emphases that speak of mutuality, acceptance, forgiveness, reconciliation
- Celebrations of the bonds that unite us one to another

Missio

- An openness to yet further inclusion
 - The quality of our welcome to newcomers
 - Reaching out to others in their isolation
 - Changing exclusion into embrace
- Going out beyond our own ‘circle’
 - Creating relationships beyond our community
 - Being of service in our community, with particular sensitivity to those who experience isolation

These brief observations guided the discernment at the pastoral workshop. It was recognised that they need to be developed and owned in further reflection by the bishops.



RESPONSE TO THE RESEARCH

The engagement of a cycle of pastoral review at the *pastoral workshop* resulted in a number of recommendations which emerged from:

- attending to the material of the research and feedback to the report
- analysing the material further in light of wider sources of research
- situating the analysis within a theological framework of the ecclesiology of communion and
- discerning pastoral implications.

In attending to the research and feedback, four areas were discerned as key to learning from the issues of the research and moving forward - they are **Community identity, Personal identity, Leadership and Mission**.

1. **Community identity** relates to issues of:
 - a. the research factors relating to a loss of a sense of belonging in parish
 - b. the complexity of defining who is 'in' and who is 'out'
 - c. the existence of the Church's 'competitors' in the provision of the experience of community in the Australian context
 - d. the significance of developing suitable (architectural) spaces for people to gather
 - e. the inter-relationship between parish and school.
2. **Personal identity** relates to issues of:
 - a. the research factors relating to the personal areas of family or household, crisis of faith and going to Mass simply not being a priority
 - b. the importance of nurturing the personal faith, prayer life and Christian spirituality of individuals
 - c. the significance of understanding that faith development is a process for persons over time
 - d. the challenges associated with people identifying with Church through service rather than by attendance at Eucharist and participation in community life.
3. **Leadership** relates to issues of:
 - a. the research factors relating to the misuse of power and authority in the Church and problems with the leadership or behaviour of a parish priest
 - b. the importance of effective communication to address concerns about 'relevance to life today'
 - c. the problems associated with providing suitable ongoing formation and training for priests and other leaders that is adapted to the specific social situation in Australia today
 - d. the need to continue to develop structures of ecclesial participation and consultation at all levels.
4. **Mission** relates to issues of:
 - a. the research factors relating to a sense of being excluded by some aspect or other of Church teaching
 - b. the importance of forging connection between Church and culture
 - c. the significance of the research report as a catalyst for Australian ecclesial renewal
 - d. the possibilities inherent in the report's findings for the project of evangelisation being developed by the National Office for Evangelisation.

Each of these areas is an integral strand in the life of the national, diocesan and parish Church community. The shape and character of Australian local Catholic communities are multifaceted yet there are fundamental elements which must direct pastoral strategy and action. Any pastoral strategies and recommendations require a context within which to engage and provide a direction for the future, much as "Ecclesia in Oceania" provided a direction for the Church in Oceania.

As well as the present research, some of this context has already been investigated through the *Participation of Women in the Catholic Church in Australia* research project and more is being identified through the *Imagining Church Leadership* process. The data from these and other diocesan sources, like Brisbane's *Hearts on Fire* process, could profitably be considered together¹. At the same time, greater theological reflection by the bishops as a body would deepen insights into the contemporary call of the gospel and ground practical pastoral response.

Accordingly, while a number of recommendations will be offered below to dioceses and parishes, just one fundamental proposal is presented to the Bishops Conference. This proposal seeks to establish a reference point for all pastoral activity in Australian Church life and provide a framework in which to consider pastoral action.

¹ Some of the recommendations to be offered here have resonances with decisions already made by the ACBC as a response to the *Woman and Man* report. The relevant decisions are included in Appendix 2.



It is recommended that the Bishops of Australia prepare a pastoral letter which presents the nature and purpose of the parish community in a way that provides a vision and blueprint for the renewal of parishes, their leadership and pastoral activity in the 21st century.

Such a document should be both inspirational and pastoral, developing the “communion-missio” dialectic and calling all to an active living out of Catholicism in their local communities.

This letter would include recommendations and strategies contained here and be accompanied by appropriate pastoral resources, thus assisting and guiding parishes in renewal, formation planning and outreach. Such a letter would also be presented in a variety of printed and electronic formats.

It is suggested that a working group be established from among representatives of the members of the Bishops Commissions for Church Ministry, Mission and Faith Formation, and Pastoral Life, the Commission executive secretaries, a representative of the Pastoral Projects office, co-ordinated by the General Secretary, for the purposes of preparing this pastoral letter.

PASTORAL RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations below are offered for implementation by parishes and dioceses. It is suggested that they be considered as the bishops develop the pastoral letter and guide production of its accompanying resources.

Four overarching *Primary Pastoral Recommendations* are offered first, related to each of the key areas identified above. Then detailed pastoral strategies related to the key areas are offered for both parishes and dioceses.

The four primary recommendations are:

1. Building community

That resources for effective parish reviews be developed, distributed and engaged, such that local communities might better know and plan for their people. Planning processes developed by the National Church Life Survey team based on the NCLS Core Qualities, which themselves have strong links to a *communion* ecclesiology, would be suitable resources for this task.

2. Personal identity

That forums at every level be established for the purpose of greater listening to people, and for pastoral discernment.

3. Leadership

That on both diocesan and parish levels there be enhanced formation of lay and ordained people for collaborative leadership, for the sake of mission.

4. Mission

That there be renewed effort for the proclamation of the Good News, and for the development of faith formation, particularly using the resources of contemporary technology and the resources being developed by the National Office for Evangelisation.



Research Report on CATHOLICS WHO HAVE STOPPED ATTENDING MASS

Pastoral Strategies

PASTORAL STRATEGIES FOR DEVELOPING COMMUNITY IDENTITY

At the Parish level

- Undertake a parish review utilising the resources of the NCLS
- Develop programmes that reach out to newcomers, alert to their needs, which welcome them in rites of hospitality and which follow through with them beyond Eucharistic liturgy
- Visit and learn from 'best practice' parishes: ones that score highly on the NCLS Core qualities and which have substantially higher than average attendance rates.

At the Diocesan level

- Drawing on what is already available from NCLS, provide resources and support for effective parish reviews to be developed, distributed and engaged, such that local communities might better know their people
- Model structures of collaboration, consultation and communication especially through establishment and development of Diocesan Pastoral Councils and Diocesan Synods or other forms of assembly
- Identify and publicise 'best practice' parishes. Provide resources that will support them in offering their experiences and insights to others
- Engage young people through a research project aimed at those young people who are attending their parish Sunday liturgy, listening to what they find of positive value in that experience
- Re-evaluate current practices regarding the trend towards parish amalgamation and twinning and consider the establishment of smaller parishes with qualified religious and lay leaders cooperating with the non-resident parish priests and with structures for greater collaboration between the parish priest and the lay leadership that exists within the communities.

PASTORAL STRATEGIES FOR DEVELOPING PERSONAL IDENTITY

At the Parish level

- Hold regular parish assemblies which promote dialogue and communication between parishioners and parish leaders
- Provide information about, opportunities for, sponsorship of, and support for personal faith development through, e.g., Internet modules, parish conversations and networks on faith issues, and sponsorship of parishioners to attend adult faith courses
- Using the current document as a starting point, ask those who do attend Mass to write down why they do go to Mass, then share the responses at Mass and in other parish forums.

At the Diocesan level

- In parish pastoral visitations by the bishop, give high priority to the opportunity for listening to all the Catholic community, not just Mass attenders
- Enable Bishops to maximise use of local media to reinforce a sense of belonging within the local communities.



PASTORAL STRATEGIES FOR DEVELOPING LEADERSHIP

At the Parish level

- Formally recognise the various roles of leadership within the parish community and provide appropriate structures and on-going formation for and the commissioning/ritualising of that leadership within the community
- Develop a parish pastoral plan which articulates the parish vision, mission and goals derived from parish consultation
- Establish Pastoral Councils in every parish
- Enable Parish Pastoral Councils to give leadership feedback to priests as part of ministerial reviews.

At the Diocesan level

- Foster the development of smaller forms of communities, such as house churches or neighbourhood/family groups, within parishes
- Provide workshops for priests to enable them to more effectively use their local media to build a parish profile within local communities [as set out in the ACBC publication on use of media by parishes]
- Develop an interactive website on 'communio' spirituality to generate discussion for faith sharing groups on a parish level
- In appointment contracts require priests and parish ministers to undertake ongoing professional development. Such development would include enhancement of homiletic skills and the use of appropriate technology in the liturgy
- Establish periodic ministerial review processes for role enhancement of all involved in parish ministry
- Establish consultative processes for parishes in the appointment of parish priests which respect the traditions of parishes and acknowledge the giftedness of the newly appointed pastor
- Establish opportunities for listening experiences between bishops, priests, women and men.

PASTORAL STRATEGIES FOR DEVELOPING MISSION AND OUTREACH

At the Parish level

- Utilise programs for inactive Catholics, in particular, the National Office for Evangelisation's *Transform* program for people who have drifted from parish life
- Take the opportunity during sacramental preparation programmes to identify non-practising Catholics, visit them, and welcome them.

At the Diocesan level

- Identify and resource an appropriate diocesan office that can support the *Transform* program.
- Provide assistance in outreach activities, for example in the development of diocesan websites that enable networking across parishes and interest groups, particularly in regard to formation
- Enable 'Called and Gifted' style programs to cultivate the charisms of those who see their mission as inclusive of outreach to those Catholics who do not attend Mass
- Take steps to ensure that parishes do not eliminate Sunday night liturgies and encourage more liturgies at this time.



Research Report on CATHOLICS WHO HAVE STOPPED ATTENDING MASS

Pastoral Strategies

FURTHER RESEARCH

What further research might be carried out in the future to enhance the Church's capacity to understand and respond to the drift away from church attendance? The research report made the following suggestions which continue to be relevant in this context.

Firstly, some parishes are more successful than others at attracting and retaining Mass attenders. What are the characteristics of these more successful parishes, and what can we learn from them that can help other parishes to grow in vitality? Data from the 2001 and 2006 National Church Life Surveys can help us address these questions, and research of this nature is currently underway. A more direct approach to a question like this would be to carry out case studies of particular parishes which have been identified as being particularly vital. This has been recommended to dioceses above, but could also be researched at a national level.

A second avenue of research would be to address the question of Catholic identity, commitment and community as understood by non-attending Catholics who work in Catholic schools, hospitals and other Catholic organisations.

It was noted in Chapter 2 of the research report that the results from the Catholic Church Life Survey of parents of children attending Catholic schools, while informative, were now over ten years old. Another possible research project, then, could entail a similar survey of Catholic parents.

One new area for research mentioned by several people in the feedback phase was to investigate the other side of the picture by asking Catholics why they do go to Mass.

CONCLUSION

Several times in the dialogue since release of the research report there have been references to a call for the Church to abandon behaviour that leads to exclusion and alienation and focus more authentically on embrace. It is a call that echoes from the depth of being *communio* and it is a call into the beauty and grace that the Church as *communio* has to offer.

At the geographical centre of the Church is a powerful symbol that has stood for centuries as an expression and reminder of this reality of who we are as Church. In St Peter's Square, Gian Lorenzo Bernini designed his colonnades as an embrace. Anyone who has stood there surrounded by this elegant structure, capped by statues of the saints who have lived Church most faithfully, knows the grandeur and the comfort of what it is to belong.

We as Church have this profound embrace to offer, flowing out from Father, Son and Spirit through us individually and collectively. In humility before those who have drifted away and in hope before those who are seeking, it is incumbent on us to do all we can to make that offer.



APPENDIX 1

Written Responses to the Research Report

Diocesan Responses

1. Broken Bay Diocese Forum For Laity
2. Maitland-Newcastle Diocesan Pastoral Council and Council Of Priests
3. Brisbane Archdiocese – Consultation Workshop hosted By The Commission For Evangelisation And Pastoral Planning
4. Ballarat Diocese prepared by Pastoral Planning Reference Group
5. Adelaide Archdiocese

Church Agency Responses

1. Australian Catholic Council For Clergy Life And Ministry²
2. National Office For Evangelisation
3. Catholic Mission

Individual Responses

1. Ms Janette Davidson
2. Ms Margaret Devereux
3. Mr Richard Hallett
4. Dr Brian And Mrs Elizabeth Meade
5. Ms Helen Oxenburgh-Lowe
6. Ms Gwenda Rait

² By agreement this substantial submission appears on the website of the Pastoral Projects Office: www.ppo.catholic.org.au



APPENDIX 2

Decisions and Proposals of the ACBC in response to *Woman and Man: One in Christ Jesus. Report on the Participation of Women in the Catholic Church in Australia.*

These decisions and proposals are taken from the 2000 Social Justice Statement *Woman and Man: The Bishops Respond*, September 24, 2000. Decision 2 is not included. The complete document is available at <http://www.socialjustice.catholic.org.au/content/pdf/SJS2000.PDF>

Decisions made by the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference

Decision 1: That the ACBC commit itself to work to establish, where necessary and within the divinely ordained structure and communion of the Church:

- a) a better balance of men and women, clergy, religious and laity on existing councils, organisations and advisory bodies, at the national level.
- b) a better balance of men and women in leadership roles at the national level.
- c) a better balance of men and women in professional roles within the Church at national level.

Decision 3: The ACBC commits itself, through its various committees, to foster research in the following areas:

- a) contemporary ecclesiologies and their theological, catechetical and pastoral implications, especially for the participation of women in the Church.
- b) ministry in the Church and in particular the role of the lay faithful and especially women in ecclesial ministries, from the scriptural, historical, theological, liturgical, sociological and canonical perspectives.
- c) the theology of the human person, sexuality, marriage and family life, especially as it refers to the contemporary life of Catholic women.

Decision 4: The ACBC commits itself through the Bishops Committee for the Liturgy to study the following areas:

- a) the possibility of providing at the national level guidelines and education, as well as appropriate resources, to provide rituals to be used in the absence of a priest in the prison and hospital apostolates.
- b) in collaboration with the Bishops Commission for Relations with Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders, the provision of guidelines, materials and resources directed to integrating elements of indigenous culture into the celebration of the liturgy.
- c) the drawing up of guidelines concerning the use of inclusive language in the liturgy, prayer, pastoral and social life of the Church.
- d) the establishment of guidelines to assist with the understanding and implementation of Canons 766 and 767 concerning lay preaching.

Decision 5: That the ACBC commits itself through its committees to draw up policies of care to respond to the pain of people and groups of people within the Church who are struggling with the implications of Church teaching:

- a) by providing pastoral and spiritual support for those suffering the pain of failed marriage or divorce and those who have entered into another marriage.
- b) by the provision of guidelines to assist in the pastoral care of those who are finding difficulty in understanding and accepting the Church's teaching on the restriction of ordination to males.
- c) by the provision of appropriate pastoral statements concerning Catholic teaching on such areas as sexuality, marriage and family planning.

Decision 6: That the ACBC commits itself to foster, at a national level, educational possibilities to assist in the implementation of the recommendations of this report:

- a) by fostering programs of professional preparation and supervision for women and men involved in ministry.
- b) by the promotion of models of best practice concerning the involvement of women in the life of the Church.
- c) by fostering continued study of the theology and practice of collaborative ministry as a contribution to the training of people involved at all levels in Church leadership.



Proposals

In their response, the Bishops also identified numerous proposals which emerged from the report "Woman and Man: One in Christ Jesus", which bishops might wish to consider for possible action in their diocese. The following are of special relevance to the present study:

- In dioceses where pastoral councils are not established and where the Bishop judges their formation to be appropriate, they be formed, and include a balance of men and women, clergy, religious and laity so that women's participation in decision-making and leadership may be increased.
- A database of Catholic women be developed to help promote the participation of women in the Catholic Church, especially their involvement in decision-making processes and leadership roles.
- Clergy, religious and lay people be encouraged and trained to exercise their ministries in a more collaborative way.
- Clergy and others in leadership positions in the Church be given the opportunity for continuing education in keeping with other professions.
- Greater attention be given to the education of clergy, religious and laity towards attitudinal change in recognising equal value, equal rights of women and men within the lay faithful of the Church.
- The Bishops promote contemporary Catholic female role models, especially for young women.

