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## Responses of Clergy and Lay People to the Covid-19 crisis

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## INTRODUCTION

The Covid-19 pandemic has obviously had a profound effect on the Church. Restrictions on church-going amongst other activities have differed in the two jurisdictions of the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland. In both jurisdictions, however, the lockdowns have severely curtailed regular ministry in areas such as pastoral care, parish group engagement, and serving the community. On the other hand, for those with online access, worship has taken on new and creative forms. Many clergy and ministry teams have risen to the challenge of operating in a virtual environment. In recent times, there has been a great deal of research and reflection in many fields of study in the academic world on the learning gained from the experience of living in a global pandemic, and how it can inform future practice. This is also an opportunity to *assess* how churchgoers have responded to the experience, and what they think the future might hold. How well have people coped with the pandemic? Has it strengthened or weakened their faith? How has it been for clergy and lay people trying to work in this new environment? Will virtual ministry become part of the post-pandemic landscape, and will this be positive for the Church?

## THE CORONAVIRUS, CHURCH & YOU SURVEY

In May / June 2020, the Mater Dei Centre for Catholic Education (MDCCE) conducted an all-island survey to measure the impact

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of COVID-19 restrictions on adult churchgoers. This was the time of the first lockdown when restrictions were at their most severe. The online survey was part of an empirical study initiated at York St. John University investigating the impact for churchgoers in England, Scotland and Wales. The Irish study, led by Dr. Gareth Byrne, Director of the MDCCE and Dr. Bernadette Sweetman, post-doctoral researcher at the Centre, ran over a period of six weeks at the height of the initial lockdown when churches were closed to the public.

The survey gathered information pertaining to the impact of the pandemic on the lives of respondents across a number of themes. Demographic data such as age, gender, religious affiliation, work description, education level and general location were obtained. Pre-COVID practices were identified including average level of church attendance and the types of ministry in which the respondents were involved. Respondents were invited to comment on their engagement with online Church services as well as the forms of pastoral support they administered and/or received during the pandemic. Attitudes to the handling of the pandemic by government, Church and other bodies were also elicited and participants were given the opportunity to comment on how they anticipate the pandemic to impact upon the Church in the long-term. Finally, the emotional impact of Covid-19 also featured in the survey.

In this article, some general insights into the findings of the survey are provided. Variations between answers given by *lay* respondents and *ordained* respondents are highlighted and explored. Members of the research team were interested in seeing if there was a difference in any way between how lay respondents and ordained respondents reacted to the pandemic, and if so, what might this tell us as we move into a potentially new phase of 'being Church'.

### AGE PROFILE OF RESPONDENTS

1,428 people responded to the *Coronavirus, Church & You* survey. 95% identified as Roman Catholic with the majority (84%) living in the Republic of Ireland. Respondents were geographically widespread with 39% living in a suburban location, 29% in an urban setting and 28% in a rural setting. The majority of all respondents (1,241) were laypeople while 124 were ordained priests.

While adults of all ages took part, just over half (53%) were in the age group 50–69. A little more than half of the laypeople (52%) were aged in their fifties or sixties, with 16% aged over 70. It is noteworthy that while less than half (47%) of lay respondents

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attended Church services on a weekly basis pre-COVID-19, 91% indicated that they accessed Church services online during the period in which the survey was conducted.

The ordained cohort was older with two-thirds (66%) aged in their fifties or sixties and 20% aged over 70. The higher proportion of older ordained respondents is important because Government regulations during the period in which the survey was conducted required priests over 70 to cocoon. As a result, these priests would have been prevented from carrying out their usual ministerial duties, including presiding at liturgies.

### IMPACT OF THE PANDEMIC

#### *Response of the Church to the pandemic*

As already mentioned, the survey took place during the time period of the first lockdown with the strictest measures in place. A greater proportion of participants viewed the Government as responding *more* effectively to the pandemic than they did the Church at national level. 72% of ordained and 67% of lay respondents agreed that the Government responded well when the virus threat emerged and that the Government had led the nation well during the lockdown. Less than half (49%) of ordained and 54% of lay respondents agreed with the statement 'My denomination at the national level has responded well to the crisis'. Even fewer (36%) of ordained and 53% of lay respondents agreed that 'My denomination at the national level has done a good job of leading us in prayer'. It was clear, however, that respondents had a more favourable perception of the Church's response at *local* level. Almost two-thirds (65%) of ordained and 59% of lay respondents indicated that the churches in their area have responded well to the crisis.

#### *The church building*

The closure of church buildings is something that none of us probably ever imagined could happen in our lifetime. The effect of the inability to gather in the church was likely amplified because the lockdown occurred during a time of year in which particular Church celebrations would normally take place. Lent, Holy Week and Easter liturgies all took place behind closed doors, with online or other media sources being the only alternative to physical participation. The months of Spring and early Summer would usually see many First Holy Communion and Confirmation services as well as weddings taking place across the country. With little or no warning, Irish churchgoers had to reassess what it actually meant 'to go to Church'.

Roughly half (52%) of lay respondents to the survey agreed that

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closing churches was the right thing to do even though almost four-fifths (79%) felt that church buildings are central to their witness in the community. While just over half (53%) agreed that the local church building was crucial for their identity as Christians, only just over one quarter (26%) felt that many people will lose faith without church buildings in which to gather for worship. The majority of lay respondents to the survey (83%) agreed that they were ‘celebrating communion spiritually from home’ during the online services. Clearly, the provision of online services was beneficial to people during this difficult period. When churches would reopen, however, just over one-third (34%) indicated that they would still only avail of online Church services, with almost two-thirds (63%) stating that they would return to normal Church services in the church building itself. In his pastoral letter, entitled *Missing each other, missing the Lord*<sup>1</sup>, written in May 2020 at the time of the first lockdown, Bishop Dermot Farrell stated:

‘People have come to the realisation that “watching Mass” is very different from being physically present and participating in the celebration with other members of their family and the community. For all its advantages and immediacy, the virtual is no substitute for physical presence with the assembled community’.

### ATTITUDES TO THE FUTURE OF THE CHURCH

#### *Financial implications of lockdown*

Questions regarding the financial implications of the pandemic on the Church also featured in the survey and elicited *different* responses from lay and ordained participants. Over half (55%) of lay respondents indicated that their financial giving to the Church had decreased during lockdown. Just 9% of lay respondents said that their financial giving would decline after the pandemic. 18% of lay respondents stated that the church building would not be financially viable in the future. On the latter point, greater concern was expressed about financing church buildings into the future amongst ordained participants where the corresponding figure was 30%.

#### *What will Church be like?*

There was a stark contrast between lay and ordained respondents’ confidence in Church returning to normal. Just over a quarter of lay respondents (26%) agreed with the statement ‘Church life

1 *Missing each other, missing the Lord: Pastoral letter by Bishop Dermot Farrell.* Available at: <https://www.catholicbishops.ie/2020/05/24/missing-each-other-missing-the-lord-pastoral-letter-by-bishop-dermot-farrell/>

will soon return to normal’ whereas a very low 2% of ordained respondents agreed. A higher proportion of ordained participants (46%) in comparison to lay participants (35%) agreed with the statement ‘We will finally learn how to be Church appropriately in the digital age’. The anticipated increase in online Church activity was indicated by both groups with 46% of ordained and 49% of lay respondents agreeing with the statement: ‘More pastoral work will be done online’. It seems the pandemic may have encouraged greater reflection on what has been normal Church life and how we might think creatively about being Church in the future. As sociologist Hazel O’Brien of Waterford Institute of Technology has put it:

‘A significant question might be to ask if online religious engagement throughout Covid-19 will have been enough to sustain individual and collective belonging to religion? Or, will our time in isolation have irrevocably weakened the tradition that religion rests upon?’<sup>2</sup>

#### PERSONAL RESPONSE TO THE PANDEMIC

The survey also contained a substantial section about the impact of the pandemic at a *personal* level, for example, on one’s energy levels, sense of happiness or security, and attitudes to others. For each question, there were three options: more, less or no change. It is interesting to see *where* respondents clearly indicated an impact, be it positive or negative, as opposed to no change. Furthermore, insight can be gained in noting the differences in the responses between the lay and ordained participants.

Finding new ways to deal with things was clearly a consequence for many, with 43% of lay respondents feeling ‘more creative’. The figure was even higher for ordained respondents, whereby 58% felt ‘more creative’, likely due to having to discover innovative modes of ministry. The majority of respondents said they were ‘more prayerful’ with 56% of lay people and 65% of ordained respondents indicating this. Similar proportions felt ‘closer to God’: 33% of lay respondents and 35% of ordained respondents. The figures dropped somewhat when respondents indicated they felt ‘closer to Church’. 33% of lay respondents stated this in comparison to 44% of ordained respondents.

An examination of the findings highlights a difference in the *optimism* levels between lay and ordained respondents as shown in the table overleaf.

2 Hazel O’Brien, ‘What does the rise of digital religion during Covid-19 tell us about religion’s capacity to adapt?’, *Irish Journal of Sociology* 28 (2): 242-246, 2020

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<b>Statement</b>	<b>% Lay respondents</b>	<b>%Ordained respondents</b>
More Unhappy	20	10
More Stressed	33	20
More Bored	15	27
More Hopeful	41	52
More Trusting	28	47

Though the percentages are sometimes low, it is the *difference* between the lay and ordained respondents that warrants attention. The figures clearly indicate that the same pandemic impacted differently upon lay and ordained respondents at a personal level. The lay respondents tended towards being more unhappy and more stressed, while the ordained respondents, though indicating that they more bored, were also more hopeful and more trusting. In her RTE Brainstorm article, Dr. Amalee Meehan commented that:

‘Covid-19 holds a mirror to the spirit. If we are willing to look in that mirror and not run from what we see, we have a chance to gain self-knowledge and knowing ourselves is crucial in times of complexity and challenge.’<sup>3</sup>

Discussions prompted by studying such findings could contribute to identifying the possible mental health and wellbeing needs of the members of the Church community, laity and clergy, and assisting in potentially addressing their needs moving forward.

### FINAL COMMENTS

During the timeframe of this survey, authorities in the Republic of Ireland imposed different restrictions than were adopted in Northern Ireland. Further research could investigate the diversity of the impact on the faith lives of citizens of the two jurisdictions living under different restrictions.

In a similar vein, as 2020 progressed, it is likely that attitudes of the pandemic and its impact changed. A replication of the survey may discover a longitudinal perspective on how living with COVID-19 has impacted people’s faith and their relationship with the Church community through various lockdowns and restrictive measures.

3 Amalee Meehan, ‘Is there a spiritual side to dealing with the pandemic?’, 3 November 2020. Available at <https://www.rte.ie/brainstorm/2020/1103/1175707-is-there-a-spiritual-side-to-dealing-with-the-covid-19-pandemic/>

## RESPONSES TO THE COVID-19 CRISIS

This research has highlighted notable differences in the responses to certain issues amongst lay and ordained respondents. It is an opportune time therefore to have meaningful discourse on what are the needs of clergy and lay people in the present moment. As people in general reassess their priorities, their working conditions and how they connect with others, it may also be a good time to reflect on new ways to nurture our faith lives, to consider practical ways of building up communities of faith, and to discuss locally how we might work together as Church.<sup>4</sup>

- 4 At the time of going to print, the research team at MDCCE launched COVID-19 & Church-21. This is a follow-up survey to that featured in this article and is currently available at <https://www.dcu.ie/materdei-centre-catholic-education/news/2021/jan/covid-19-church-21-new-survey>. It is an anonymous survey that aims to collect valuable insights on how adult churchgoers in Ireland have been affected by the varying restrictions over the last several months. It is also a means to assess the impact of different online and socially-distanced church services. Please consider completing the survey and sharing the link with your friends / colleagues.

**Pilgrimage.** Going on pilgrimage is an ancient tradition. In medieval Europe, pilgrims would leave the safety of their own homes to travel to Rome, Jerusalem, or Santiago de Compostela in repentance, for an intention, or to fulfill a promise. This meant putting themselves at the mercy of the elements, possibly risking life and limb, and depending on the hospitality of others. The renewed popularity since the 1980s of making a pilgrimage along northern Spain's Camino de Santiago – or the Way of St. James – as well as society's contemporary fascination with pilgrimage in all its forms is perhaps an attempt to recover ancient values, basic humanity, and a hint of the divine. Either way, it is a step into the mystery of the unknown and opening oneself to providence.

- BRENDAN MCMANUS, SJ, *Way to Manresa* (Dublin: Messenger Publications) p. x.