



# **Parishes & COVID-19 Research Report – 2021**

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The purpose of this report is to present the findings of a qualitative study concerning the effects of COVID-19 on parishes in Malta. The study was conducted by *Segretarjat Parroċċi* and *DISCERN*. The following executive summary provides key details on methodology, analysis and research findings.

### Methodology

Semi-structured interviews (of approximately 60 minutes each) were conducted with 18 participants active within the Catholic Church (8 parish priests & 10 pastoral workers/parish workers). *Segretarjat Parroċċi* formulated the research aims and research questions, and contacted prospective participants; and *DISCERN* took care of interviewing, data analysis and the reporting of findings. Interview transcriptions were divided among both entities.

Participants generally came from the same parish, except for a minority of cases (whereby 1 parish priest came from a parish for which no corresponding pastoral worker was interviewed; and 2 pastoral workers came from parishes for which no corresponding parish priests were interviewed). Recruitment involved a *maximum variation* sampling scheme, whereby *Segretarjat Parroċċi* contacted prospective participants, varying the selection based on (a) locality, (b) parish size, (c) parish culture, and (d) the parish priest's leadership culture.

Following audio-recorded interviews with participants, the interview data was transcribed. Data analysis involved inductive thematic analysis within *a priori* parameters. That is, the data analytic procedure involved the searching for themes and patterns across the dataset, in such a way as to answer key questions about the effects of COVID-19 on parishes. Specifically, these questions mirrored the questions present in the interview guide used during the interviews, and concerned the effects of COVID-19 on the Church, perceptions of people's attitudes toward COVID-19, the needs of Christians during the pandemic, the spiritual effects of the pandemic, and challenges related to pastoral work, among other matters.

### Findings

The findings of the thematic analysis *converged around the nature of the arguments expressed by participants, and not around the frequency with which such arguments were made*. The findings were the following. Priests' and pastoral workers' views converged around

global themes tapping (a) *Priest/Parish Work and Identity*, (b) *Philosophies* and (c) *The Future of Parishes*. Given the analytical protocol, priests' and parish workers' ideas were organised in similar manners, with the exception of a few minor differences (e.g., in the case of parish priests, the first global theme was labelled *Priest work and identity*, whereas in the case of pastoral workers, this was labelled *Parish work and identity*). *Convergences* and *divergences* were also observed across both groups, tapping the following issues/concepts: (1) *Lay Identities & Ecclesiologies (Visions for the Church)*; (2) *Diaconia*; (3) *Spiritual Needs & Effects*; (4) *Mass & Sacraments*; and (5) *The Professionalisation of Parishes*. In summary, whilst most participants were satisfied with the measures implemented by the Church during COVID-19, many also expressed a desire for change, meant to address the ongoing needs of parishes in Malta.

It would be difficult to foreground some findings over others. Nonetheless, there seemed to be a push toward targeted efforts (that appeal to different demographics), be they in the realm of diaconia, pastoral services or spiritual direction. An increasing awareness of the Other in our parishes was also appreciable. Accordingly, whilst this study focused squarely on the effects of COVID-19 on parishes, participants were particularly forward-looking in their replies, preferring to articulate better ways forward as opposed to dwelling on misfortunes. The Other was construed in various – even unrelated – manners: here, one thinks of migrants, people at-risk-of-poverty, drug-users, the elderly or the lonely. Both parish priests and parish workers converged in their urgency to address people on their own terms, in view of their specific needs and aspirations, the sense being that the pandemic brought the reality of individual differences to light.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, this research study shed light on the effects of COVID-19 on parishes in Malta, and on parish priests' and parish workers' views on the best way forward. In general, participants' views were advanced as part of a broader push toward a renewed ecclesiology that is more bottom-up. The convergences and divergences between priests' and parish workers' views shed light on dynamics that can be explored further to ameliorate parish life. There are five main points to consider when reflecting on the implications of this study:

- (1) Given participants' arguments for **strengthening the voice of lay people**, it is advised that one reflects on the convergences between priests and laity, in order to ensure that the way forward (in terms of greater lay participation) is one that is well-received by parishioners of different backgrounds. At the same time, the shift toward greater lay participation requires cultural change (toward a more 'bottom-up', and a more 'social', church), which should be reflected upon.
- (2) Such cultural change is intimately related to the different ecclesiological views, narratives, images, metaphors and philosophies expressed by participants. A key point—which largely emerged across the various metaphors explored across the text—concerned the idea of **'targeting' diaconia to different realities** (e.g., ensuring that migrants, the elderly, youth, etc., are engaged with on terms that they find meaningful). Participants' consensus around this idea (which was expressed using different terms) is encouraging.
- (3) The point above is intimately linked to **how hybridity should be taken forward**. Be it vis-à-vis mass, group meetings, get-togethers, retreats or any other form of encounter: the challenge remains that of retaining some form of online-offline hybridity post-COVID-19, whilst ensuring the digitally illiterate are not left behind, and whilst ensuring that the sense of community (largely sustained through in-person encounters) is rebuilt.
- (4) The fourth point relates to the **quantity-quality dilemma**, expressed by a large number of participants (usually in relation to mass and parish helpers). Formalising participants' arguments, one ends up with the following typology: (a) a quantitative approach, which prioritises the acquisition of more 'adherents'; and (b) a qualitative approach, which prioritises the spiritual growth of a smaller number of interested people. Participants generally agreed that the qualitative approach is the wiser option.
- (5) Finally, ideas relating to **parish professionalisation** seem to be ideas whose time has come. Parish workers and priests addressed different aspects of parish professionalisation, ranging from the structuring of volunteering roles to the engagement of professionals where these are needed. Taking this dialogue forward would enable future professionalisation initiatives to be well-received by parishioners.