# 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 **<u>strengthening the voice of lay people</u>**, 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 **<u>'targeting' diaconia to different realities</u>** (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 **<u>how hybridity should be taken forward</u>**. 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 **<u>quantity-quality dilemma</u>**, 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 **<u>parish professionalisation</u>** 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.

## Reading this Report

The reader can select areas of interest (e.g., vis-à-vis parish work and identity, philosophies, the future of parishes, etc.) and consult that area of interest using the Table of Contents. At times, some notions repeat themselves in different manners across the global, organising and basic themes discussed in the report. Thus, this report is more well-suited to being used as a 'reference text'.

**INTRODUCTION**

The COVID-19 pandemic has altered the way we live, relate to one another, and make sense of our surroundings. It has also altered our perceptions of risk, planning and the future, impacting organisations and various spheres of life. Parishes were not immune to the influences of the pandemic. Nonetheless, the exact manner in which COVID-19 resulted in changes (be they conspicuous or inferred), requires further discernment and study. This report contributes to this field of inquiry, with the hope of aiding the discernment process that the Church in Malta is currently undergoing, vis-à-vis how best to turn the pandemic into an opportunity for more cohesive and inclusive communities.

Accordingly, this research report presents the findings of a qualitative study concerning the effects of COVID-19 on parishes. The study was conducted jointly by *Segretarjat Parroċċi* and *DISCERN*, and involved semi-structured interviews with 18 participants active within the Catholic Church. The interviews spanned matters relating to the pandemic's spiritual, material and social consequences; priests' and parish workers' views on Church culture, preferred Ecclesiologies, overall philosophies and identity; and priests' and parish workers' insights and expectations surrounding the future of Malta's parishes as communities, and parish life as lived experience.

The following sections present the **methodology** behind the present inquiry and the **findings** that emerged from this study. The report then concludes with a brief **discussion** of the findings, in terms of the main patterns that were discernible across the analysed interview data. It is hoped that the findings presented herein contribute toward the amelioration of parish life, and toward (re-)building our parish communities in ways that nourish parishioners and administer to their spiritual and material needs.

**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). Participants generally came from the same parish, except for a minority of cases (i.e., 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. There was a level of subjectivity involved in recruiting participants based on these criteria. Whilst keeping in mind vibrant debates surrounding the role of subjectivity in qualitative research (Dowling, 2015), it is worth noting that the 'insider' perspective afforded by *Segretarjat Parroċċi*'s recruitment procedure contributed toward the gathering of interview data that was more relevant to the aims of this study. The interviews were held online using Zoom or else over the phone, due to the COVID-19 measures in place at the time. Interviews were conducted between 14/12/2020 and 02/02/2021, and analysed throughout 2021.

Following audio-recorded semi-structured interviews with participants (see **Appendix** for the questions asked during the interview), the interview data was transcribed into text. 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 research questions about the effects of COVID-19 on parishes. Specifically, these research questions mirrored the questions present in the interview guide used during the interviews (see **Table 1**; see **Appendix**), and concerned the effects of COVID-19 on the Church, perceptions of people's attitudes toward COVID-19, participants' views on the needs of Christians during the pandemic and on the spiritual effects of the pandemic, and the challenges related to pastoral work, among other matters. Data analysis was informed by Attride-Stirling (2001), with modifications in place to cater for the aims at hand. More specifically, following the transcription of interview data, the data was analysed by three researchers (the authors), who coded each idea in the interview texts using NVIVO 12. Data was coded into (a) *global themes* (general themes encompassing the principal metaphors in the data), (b) *organising themes* (clusters of basic themes that summarise the principal ideas within

relevant basic themes), and (c) *basic themes* (the most basic themes derived from the data, which are generally the closest, content-wise, to the original statements made by participants).

Thus, procedurally, the interview texts were coded on a line-by-line basis, noting each new idea that arose, and categorising this idea (a) under its respective *global theme* (i.e., 1. *Priests'/Parish Work and Identity*; 2. *Philosophies*; or 3. *The Future of Parishes*), and furthermore, (b) under its respective *organising theme* (e.g., *Challenges* under *Priests'/Parish Work and Identity*; *COVID-19 effects on the Church* under *Philosophies*; etc.). In turn, such codes (i.e., the actual labels assigned to relevant segments of the analysed texts) ended up (c) forming the *basic themes* (e.g., *Pastoral presence and diaconia* under *Challenges*; *Torn communities, fear and isolation* under *COVID-19 effects on the Church*; etc.) that provided an axiomatic and substantive basis to the organising themes. When basic themes are presented in the text below, these are underlined. Once the coding procedure was finalised, repeating codes were merged, and descriptions were written for each and every organising theme.

All global themes were the same across both participant groups, except for *Priests' Work and Identity* (Parish Priests) and *Parish Work and Identity* (Parish Workers). Nonetheless, the organising themes within these global themes were also very similar across groups. However, the *actual content* (i.e., basic themes) of participants' views at times converged and at other times diverged. Instances of *convergence* and *divergence* between priests' and parish workers' views are also presented below.

**Table 1**

*Global Themes and Organising Themes among Parish Priests and Parish Workers*

| PARISH PRIESTS | PARISH WORKERS |
|---|---|
| **Priests' Work and Identity** | **Parish Work and Identity** |
| Challenges | Challenges |
| Changes needed in one's/parish pastoral work | Changes needed in parish pastoral work |
| Parishioners' expected pastoral work | Effects of changes on one's work |
| Pastoral work carried out and its reception | Parishioners' expected pastoral work |
|  | Pastoral work carried out and its reception |
| **Philosophies** | **Philosophies** |
| COVID-19 effects on the Church | COVID-19 effects on the Church |
| COVID-19 effects on spiritual life | COVID-19 effects on spiritual life |
|     Positive aspects in Christian life |     Positive aspects in Christian life |
|     Negative aspects in Christian life |     Negative aspects in Christian life |
| Needs of Christians during the pandemic | Needs of Christians during the pandemic |
| Parishioners' attitudes since the start of COVID-19 | Parishioners' attitudes since the start of COVID-19 |
| **The Future of Parishes** | **The Future of Parishes** |
| Immediate parish priorities | Immediate parish priorities |
| Specific parish priorities post-COVID-19 | Specific parish priorities post-COVID-19 |
| General parish priorities post-COVID-19 | General parish priorities post-COVID-19 |
| Post-COVID-19 effects on parish life | Post-COVID-19 effects on parish life |
| How will parish life and work be in 5 years | How will parish life and work be in 5 years |
| How should parish life and work be in 5 years | How should parish life and work be in 5 years |

*Note*. This table presents the global themes (**Priests'/Parish Work and Identity**; **Philosophies**; and **The Future of Parishes**) and the organising themes identified during the analysis, across both Parish Priests and Parish Workers. The labelling/analysis of these themes was guided by *a priori* research questions and the interview guide (see **Appendix**). The content within the themes themselves (descriptions below) was purely data-driven, that is, informed by the in-depth analysis of participants' views.

**FINDINGS**

This section reports the findings of the study. ***The findings converged around the nature of the arguments expressed by participants, and not around the frequency with which such arguments were made.[1]*** The three global themes are presented in order, and organising themes are presented for each global theme, together with visual depictions of the basic themes supplying the content, that is, the actual views of parish priests and parish workers. Basic themes in **purple** signify parish priests' views and basic themes in **blue** signify parish workers' views. As stated above, the various organising themes also tapped different issues/concepts, which were more or less salient in participants' arguments per any given theme. These can be summarised as: (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, the issue/concept (1) *Lay Identities & Ecclesiologies (Visions for the Church)* tapped ideas on: (1a) desired ecclesiological shifts, (1b) representational tensions between the lay as 'helpers' versus the lay as 'active in initiatives', (1c) the retention of good initiatives, and (1d) investment in active future laity.

Secondly, (2) *Diaconia* tapped: (2a) different construals of Diaconia (e.g., diaconia as pastoral presence, or as evangelisation, etc.), (2b) the perceived need for targeted diaconia (e.g., to cater to specific social classes, migrants, etc.), (2c) the relationship between material and psychological needs, and (2d) proposed shifts that build on the good work being done.

Third, (3) *Spiritual Needs & Effects* tapped: (3a) perceived formation needs, (3b) views on technology (e.g., 'necessary, but how?'), and (3c) the positive and negative spiritual effects of COVID-19.

Fourth, (4) *Mass & Sacraments* tapped: (4a) a dilemma between focusing on 'quantity' versus 'quality' (vis-à-vis church attendants, the number of Christians, etc.), (4b) different attributions

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[1] There are different forms of qualitative research that can be conducted. Using thematic analysis, the focus of this report is on the substantive content of the arguments themselves – that is, of the arguments circulating in the public sphere. The focus is not on how many participants expressed a particular view as opposed to another (nonetheless, when arguments were made by only one participant, or by a small minority, this is noted in the report for purposes of transparency). The latter focus would generally be the subject of quantitative studies, rather than qualitative ones.

made to explain people's lack of participation in the Church, (4c) conflicting reactions (e.g., thirst for the Eucharist vs. spiritual dryness), and (4d) views on the interplay between religious functions and local customs (e.g., feasts).

Fifth, (5) *Parish Professionalisation* tapped: (5a) views on engaging professionals with parishes, (5b) the perceived need for organising volunteers, (5c) views on how to attract professionals to parishes, and (5d) other miscellaneous views (e.g., on the need for research, on parish financing, etc.).

Having charted a basic overview of common patterns across the organising themes, the following sections now discuss the findings in more detail. From the themes below, it is evident that whilst the participants were asked about COVID-19, their arguments went beyond this topic (the interviewing style, being semi-structured, allowed for this). Nonetheless, the data was analysed in such a way as to take these views (beyond COVID-19) into consideration, given the forward-looking nature of many of the participants' arguments (which discussed a post-COVID-19 Malta).

# 1.    Priests'/Parish Work and Identity

The organising theme *Priests'/Parish Work and Identity* tapped aspects related to participants' challenges (both personal and professional), the changes that participants perceived as being needed (in the parish and/or in the pastoral work carried out), participants' perceptions of parishioners' expectations vis-à-vis pastoral work, and participants' views on the pastoral work carried out during COVID-19 and its reception.

## 1.1    Challenges



Figure 1. Challenges faced by both parish priests (purple) and parish workers (blue).

### 1.1.1   Parish Priests: Challenges

Being a crisis, the pandemic challenged the priest to get to know, and to address, the new needs of his parish, and to rethink old methods. In fact, a number of Covid-specific challenges were noted by the clergymen, mostly highlighting the need to study the needs of their different parishes. Among the Covid-specific challenges and insights, one can find various notions. A common view among parish priests was that they were caught between two extremes: between the technophiles who tried to digitalise all the pastoral work, and the technophobes or the

digitally illiterate who resisted change. One parish priest (PP7)[2] discussed the notion that, at times, some helpers could not understand the true needs of the parish and kept looking at past traditions to answer current challenges. Amongst the priests, a sense of helplessness was also felt due to the pandemic. This was expressed as a feeling of powerlessness, brought about by the limitations faced. Perhaps PP2 best summarised the shared feeling:

> *It's not that you feel you want to lazy around. I don't know how to say it, it's as if you conform, given the situation, you recognise your own limitations, and accept that you cannot do anything.*

Despite this apparent sense of helplessness, priests were hopeful. The basic theme <u>pastoral presence and diaconia</u> is evidence of this. A majority argument noted that the greatest challenge is to win people's trust and show them that priests care for them and empathise with them. PP4 notes that "our first challenge concerns *how* we approach them [people]".

In fact, in their comments, the priests noted that they have migrated to digital platforms so as to remain close to their people. The fact that they could not be as close to their people, especially during funerals, was perceived as a major setback in their pastoral activities.

Evident in the priests' responses was their resoluteness to be pastorally present and to evangelise regardless. Thus, participants dedicated quite some time to describe how they discerned the different ways of doing so. In fact, the basic theme <u>how to evangelise better</u> was centred around how Catechism should be done, conveying the real meaning of the Eucharist, and reaching out to new realities in parishes (e.g., new generations, families, financial burdens, diversity, etc.). Moreover, priests discussed the need to explore new ways of entering homes, since the latest changes to the social fabric (in particular, COVID-19) have left families disinterested. Having said that, priests seemed to approach a post-COVID-19 Church with hope, arguing that this period provided time for reflection. As expounded by PP1: "it was a time of delving deeper" into one's own mission and identity, in turn sprouting new ways of evangelisation. Similarly, PP8 stated:

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[2] When specific participants are quoted or paraphrased, numbers (e.g., PP1 for the first parish priest interviewed, or PW1 for the first parish worker interviewed, etc.) are used instead of names. All quotes were translated from the original (Maltese, or a mix of Maltese and English) to English.

*We need to find new ways to enter into peoples' homes.*

Various priests highlighted different ways of evangelising, such as "supermarket ministry" (PP1), where the priest walks around the parish just to meet people in their daily life. In contrast, PP7 noted, perhaps with a touch of grief, that he feels he needs to 'start' the community afresh:

*I feel that I am starting a new community, because even to start with helpers, simply asking those who help with checking the temperature, and the sanitiser. Asking everyone: 'will you resume?' Even to see who will read and sing: 'will you resume?' We started afresh.*

Moreover, the priests claimed they returned to Christ as the source of their hope. PP8 summarises these ideas:

*I believe that, during this period, we ought to refer to the words of consolation of Jesus. Both the people and the shepherds need this hope and consolation. Obviously even with actions.*
*(PP8)*

As noted above, a sense of helplessness was noted, and this was perhaps highlighted because of several <u>motivation and identity challenges</u>. Whilst deepening their prayer life, some priests stated that they felt an invitation by God to do better and to live a stronger faith, and a feeling that their work is not indispensable at present (without added effort). Others commented on how hard it is to keep imagining new ways to be creative, especially when faced with one's own limitations. These limitations ranged from finding it hard to prepare the pastoral plan for the next year, technical (in)abilities, and the need to continually tap one's imaginative and creative aspects. Others commented on the shared sense of fear they witnessed in their parish.

### 1.1.2 Parish Workers: Challenges

The above feelings are not too far off from what the parishioners themselves felt. Amongst the <u>personal challenges</u> they faced, a common view stated that this pandemic heightened past struggles such as self-confidence, studying and related work duties, and the need to juggle one's priorities. Interestingly, a minority of parish workers found the pandemic itself as a space for self-discovery.

Perhaps, the most salient basic theme was that concerning <u>who the parish worker is</u>. This question can be further understood in terms of its ecclesiological dimensions, and the distance

between the lay and the priest. A strong voice echoed the questions, 'who are the lay?' and 'what are their needs?'. Data suggested that, sometimes, the lay perceive themselves as being seen as 'helpers only', while strongly demanding to be heard and acknowledged by the priest. Moreover, participants demanded a Church that understands the people and their needs more. Perhaps, PW2 summarised these needs best:

*To come out of it* [COVID-19]*, we need to truly understand what people need. What do they need from the parish? Why aren't you coming* [to mass]*? What do you need to come? What do you want? Which services do you want? Which activities do you wish for? Then, a plan should be drafted depending on the availabilities and the human resources that you have in the parish.*

This theme came out very strongly in a number of responses. Parish workers demanded a Church that understands and addresses their needs. PW2 also summed up the common feeling that, while mass attendance is indeed important, what is ultimately important is to research people's needs. This argument stated that only when careful research on the parish's true needs is conducted can the pastoral plan be drafted, and can parish workers be "moulded" (PW2) into pastoral agents. In fact, at times, parish workers argued either that some priests may not be reading the signs of the times, or that others might be distanced from people. Moreover, the possibility was also entertained that some priests embrace an understanding of authority that implicitly excludes the lay.

The perceived distance between the priests and the lay was expressed in terms of its many facets. PW2 strongly captured this by asking a number of rhetorical questions concerning whether priests and the Curia are keeping abreast with sociological change (both vis-à-vis COVID-19 and beyond): "how much are the priests feeling the pulse of the people?" (PW2).

Expressing their concern to address the true needs of the parish, the parish workers noted that a number of re-adaptations by the parish should be made for better evangelisation. In fact, parishioners perceived online Catechism as being a success: it was argued that, because of increased attendance, parents are more engaged and older siblings can join in the formation activities. Another well-received adaptation, implemented by older catechists, concerned their learning of new technologies in order to continue forming their pupils.

Turning their attention to how the parishes adapted to COVID-19 measures, parish workers noted that it was difficult to keep people physically distant from each other, and their constant struggle was to keep everyone safe. They highlighted that their priority was not that people meet each other, but that everyone remains safe. A running notion in their responses concerned the implementation of the mitigation measures required by the Curia and the Health Authorities. They noted that while such measures were restrictive, they were needed. Thus, participants generally stated that they followed the guidelines wholeheartedly. These measures increased the workload for some of the respondents; whereas others saw themselves being transferred from their usual roles (which were suspended due to COVID-19) into new roles aimed at fulfilling new duties related to the measures in place.

Other participants noted that their parish ministry adapted itself and migrated online. They appreciated that most meetings could continue to be held despite restrictions. Any activities that were suspended, were commented upon with a sense of nostalgia and a hope that they would return. PW10 also noted that it is becoming a challenge to find new volunteers.

Perhaps at a tangent from the rest of the themes, parishioners noted a sense of longing when speaking of their <u>liturgical life</u>. Holy Week was mentioned by PW4 as a particularly missed event. Others commented that, as a Church, one ought to monitor attendance while acknowledging the role of the symbolic and communitarian aspects of the mass. The fact that one belongs to a community is much greater than the quality of a homily, stated PW4.

Parish workers also noted that COVID-19 challenged them to <u>foster spiritual communion</u>, both on a personal level through prayer, and also through communal prayer. Such an appreciation unfolded both on a socio-psychological level and also spiritually, with one participant stating: "I really missed the communitarian celebrations of the parish" (PW4). A sense of yearning for the parish community life and the importance of parish assemblies, were highlighted as challenges felt by the parishioners. Hence, it may seem that the same worry is shared by both parish workers and priests. Likewise, parishioners too discussed ways of reaching out to the community, given the resources at hand – together with the importance of being there for others. For example, PW2 argued that this is the main challenge of the Church – that of venturing outside its doors and re-establishing contact.

Despite the various challenges outlined in the foregoing paragraphs, a minority view among the parish workers was that that they <u>did not have any challenges</u>. This line of argument emphasised parishioners' activity in the parish despite hard times. Moreover, PW3 also noted that these times presented themselves as an opportunity for their child to participate in parish life more than ever.

### *1.1.3   Convergences: Challenges*

Perhaps the strongest convergence was that both groups were **challenged to find ways of coping with the pandemic**. As one can note, especially in the basic theme <u>Covid-specific challenges and insights</u>, and more specifically when discussing <u>motivation and identity challenges</u> (priests) and <u>personal challenges</u> (parish workers): at the root of these challenges, one could find **personal issues** with differences varying from psychological issues to a lack of creativity, and technical limitations when faced with new digital realities. **Fear was mentioned frequently** by both parties as well.

Moreover, **both groups demanded reflection** on the current needs of the parish. Parish workers demanded that the priests take stock of the situation (cf. <u>re-adaptations by the parish</u>), and parish priests opted for a more pragmatic route and answered by specifying methods for addressing needs they perceived in their parishes (cf. <u>how to evangelise better</u> and <u>pastoral presence and diaconia</u>).

### *1.1.4   Divergences: Challenges*

Simply by taking a general glance, one can already note that there are divergences between the way both groups answered. Priests seem to have focused more on **challenges related to *how* pastoral work should be conducted**, whilst parish workers focused more on ***who* should do what**.

By highlighting <u>how to evangelise better</u> and how <u>pastoral presence and diaconia</u> can further result in more pastoral presence within the community, the parish priests seem to have interpreted the interviewers' question on challenges in terms of ***pastoral* challenges** rather than *personal* ones. Even when reflecting on personal challenges, their concerns related to better ways of being of service to their respective parish, rather than to who they are as individuals.

On the other hand, parishioners generally focused their responses on the **who they are**, and on their identity, as can be seen in the basic theme relating to who the parish worker is. In fact, the parish workers' main concern revolved around their role in parish life. They demanded – at times, very strongly – that they should not be valued as mere 'helpers', but rather to have their baptismal identity be celebrated instead. Incidentally, a summary of their call to action is echoed by a parish priest (PP1) himself, in somewhat colourful language:

> *Where are the priests? We don't have enough priests. Even if we had* […]
> *the lay are baptised,* […] *they are consecrated to God through Baptism.*
> *When God thinks of them, the so-called 'lay' – it's as if we're talking about*
> *some type of dog breed, when we call them 'lay' – they are loved by God*
> […] *they are consecrated to God through Baptism! They are part of Christ,*
> *'priest, prophet and king'.*

## 1.2 Changes needed in one's/parish pastoral work
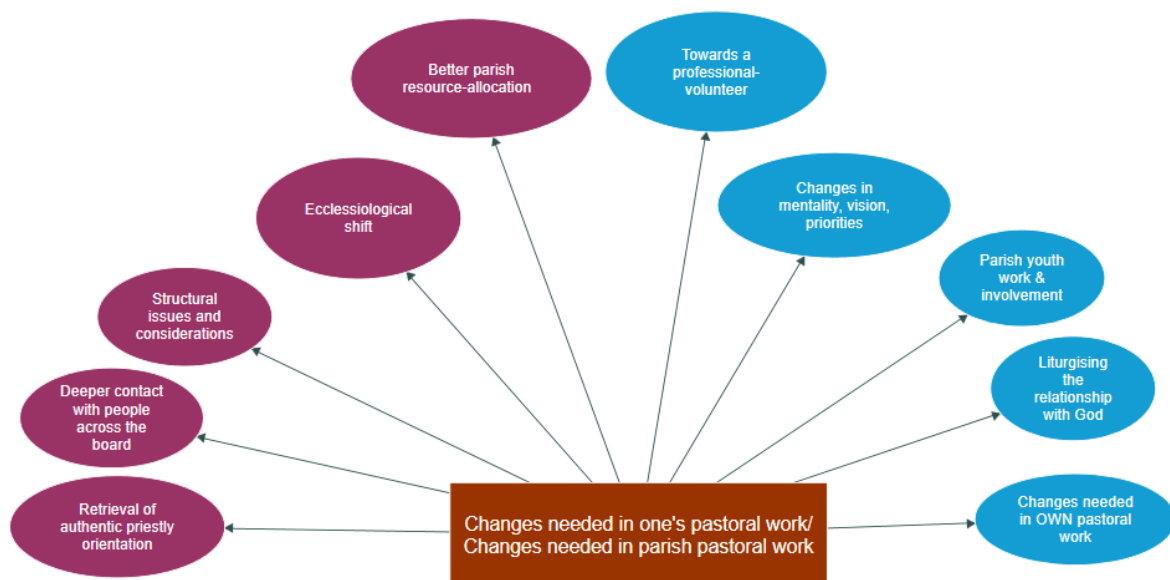


Figure 2. Parish priests were asked about their own pastoral work and about the pastoral work being done in the parish. Parish workers were only asked about the latter. The findings yielded by these questions were merged as per the above figure: views of parish priests are presented in purple, and views of parish workers are presented in blue.

### 1.2.1 Parish Priests: Changes needed in one's/parish pastoral work

In discussing the changes needed in their pastoral work, perhaps the theme that most priests converged strongly upon, concerned the retrieval of an authentic priestly orientation. A strong

voice was shared when discussing ways of communicating themselves better, and three notions were particularly outlined, specifying the need to: (a) be authentic, (b) be persons of dialogue, and (c) resist the temptation to copy other parishes (but be guided by discernment instead). When discussing notions (a) and (b), on the one hand, priests agreed that they are to be authentic to the Gospel even if that implies opposing the prevalent culture, whilst on the other hand, there was a general sentiment that the Church ought to foster persons of dialogue, especially dialogue in the *polis* in a manner that is impartial in terms of political affiliation. Similarly, notion (c) finds its root in notion (a): that is, priests should be persons who discern the true needs of their parish, not persons who do pastoral work "simply to copy the other priest" (PP2).

Another strongly held theme was the need for deeper contact with people across the board. A majority held the view that priests do invest a lot of effort to keep contact both with the people under their care and with other priestly peers. They furthered that often they are called for deep listening, which need was further enhanced during the pandemic. A minority view noted that COVID-19 alerted them to what were perhaps hidden facets in their pastoral work – that were unveiled during the lockdown. Another minority noted that they should invest more time in fostering empathic relationships with their priestly brothers. Perhaps PP8 summarised his peers' discussions best:

*I believe I should be closer to the pain of the people. I need to spend more time attending to their stories. I need to create networks of contact.*

Similarly, parish priests noted that it is important to invest in contact hours with families through family visits. Therefore, during the pandemic, they discerned the need to plan such visits. PP5 stated:

*I see the need to plan, to find more time for family visits, to reach out to them and discern their needs, where we can help, and also their qualities which they can offer to the Parish Community* [sic], *so as to bridge the gap between the parishioners and the parish church.*

Moreover, priests argued they should aim towards spiritual formation, a sense of belonging, and scouting for talent. A minority view held that, given that the parish priest's focus is "to build a community" (PP1), he should be tasked with venturing outside his parish walls and visiting families. PP1 argued that, only by doing so can the disciple be formed into embracing

a deeper relationship with Christ. PP4 stated that during the pandemic, the Church further appreciated how people feel a sense of belonging to the parish, and that this implies that the priest's work should not be limited to Scripture. Rather, as per PP4's argument, the priest should engage in relationship building, which could also lead to having more people play an active role in parish life. More so, parish priests outlined that, given the pandemic, they further discerned the need to start planning family visits.

The theme structural issues and considerations, which was discussed by a minority of the priests, is in congruence with the foregoing notion. Priests discussed the need to be a more diaconal church, thus, echoing a repeating emphasis on reaching out to the marginalised. They outlined the need for diaconia to be given more importance in parish life, because "diaconia is everyone's business" (PP1). PP2 further specified that diaconia should be *targeted* to different strata of society (e.g., based on social class, etc.), and thus, one should tailor the work depending on the needs of the parish.

The rest of the basic themes within this organising theme were made only by a few participants. First, the basic theme ecclesiological shift reiterated the foregoing discussion on who the parish worker is. Here, participants argued that the Church needs to retrieve itself as the home for the baptised, with a vocation towards becoming a living community. Both PP1 and PP2, who discussed this theme at length, noted that the Church's vocation is to foster relationships rooted in the Word of God, with a call to help people deepen their faith by living the Gospel. This, they claimed, should enable families to feel that the parish community is really an extension of their home (PP2). Secondly, another minority argument focused on the need for better parish resource-allocation and management. Here, parish priests demanded that the parishes be more organised, with better access to resources (financial, technical and human), and by employing paid pastoral agents. Whilst being appreciative of the voluntary work done in the parishes, and of the risk of replacing voluntary work with paid personnel, participants recommended a move towards a mixed model of lay and paid personnel.

### 1.2.2 *Parish Workers: Changes needed in parish pastoral work*
In line with the foregoing theme, parish workers demanded a change in mentality, vision and priorities. A strongly held notion was that parishes need to shift their priorities to what really matters. 'What really matters' was qualified differently amongst the interviewees, with some opting towards quality over quantity. These believe that the pastoral – and more specifically,

diaconal work – should neither aim at numbers nor at popularity, but rather at attending to the needs of parishioners.

The role of the KPP was a hot topic too. One parish worker suggested that the KPP should be formed by active pastoral agents, who are close to grassroots issues. Moreover, PW10 suggested that parish formation should start with the core group (and then, it should eventually reach those in need). Some also suggested that parishioners should take parish work more seriously, while others suggested a reduction in the feast budget to allocate resources for more diaconal work. PW4 asked:

*What is most important? Feasts or social workers?*

Respondents explained how the Church should be more open-minded, qualifying their argument by stating that this does not mean that it should change its values or escape reality, but rather that it should be more open to different spiritualities and new theologies. Moreover, they noted a pressing vocation to teach against an all-encompassing materialism.

Similar to the parish priests, parish workers noted a calling towards a professional-volunteer model. This basic theme was the most discussed (within this organising theme) and the parish workers' responses varied. A strongly held opinion was that a more targeted pastoral approach rooted in empirical studies is needed (similar to the point on diaconia mentioned above). Suggestions varied.  PW3 called for the social profiling of the community, while PW10 admonished the parishes not to isolate more people by means of technology, given that online pastoral work ignores the needs of the 'digital aliens'. Others reiterated their call for research to find out the true needs of the parish:

*We want to know: are our perceptions real or not?* (PW3)

Along this line of argumentation, the lay also favoured a parish model that incorporates professional and paid workers. The main argument stated that engaging professional employees (beyond simply relying on a network of volunteers) would allow parishes to help the needy more. The coordination of volunteers (who would support said professional employees), and the reservation of specific areas (e.g., diaconal work involving social or psychological issues) exclusively for professionals, were mentioned as possible ways forward. One suggestion was

to have the sacristan's work be completed by volunteers, and to re-allocate his salary to pay therapists to support the priests, given that priests are not specifically trained to provide psychological and social work (PW4).

At the same time, the lay warned against being seen as 'mere helpers'. This argument emphasised the important role of the volunteer within the parish. For example, while acknowledging the need for a paid model, PW1 noted that no activity can be set up without voluntary help, and that this should not be discarded or fully substituted with a paid model. While discerning the individual aims of each helper, the parish workers proposed a periodical reshuffle of volunteers. PW6 discussed this theme at length, and suggested that every five years, every volunteer should be appointed to a new pastoral role. The idea is that groups and commissions would always be enriched with new talent, while generating new ideas, and fostering new friendships. PW6 suggested that the appointment term should be assigned on an individual level, so that the group could continue working whilst changes are occurring, so as to have better integration and cross-fertilisation of practices over time.

Another strongly held notion was that recruiting new volunteers is a strenuous task. Some participants disclosed their wish that more people involve themselves, while others commented that this can only be attained through personal invitations. Optimistically, PW6 noted that:

*If the church/the parish reaches out to the right people, there are always people ready to help.*

In fact, suggestions converged on the point that the parish priest should get to know potential volunteers/workers and then personally invite them, while also making public invitations during the masses (which are to be followed-up personally).

More specifically, participants discussed parish youth work and involvement at length, and noted that youths are "scared" and "intimidated" to present themselves to help in parish life. Younger participants pointed their fingers at the elderly section of the community who rarely allow space for new blood to replace them, especially when it comes to liturgical functions.

Speaking of liturgy, when discussing the liturgising of the relationship with God, parish workers expressed their wish for there to be changes in liturgy. PW5 noted that one can swap

a second mass with an adoration session, and that people can therefore fulfil different spiritual needs. The majority of participants here commented on the importance of fostering a relationship with Christ and called towards becoming an Evangelic Community. Participants argued that, by highlighting that love should be the priority, and that the important thing is that the Church helps the person attain proximity to Jesus, one is given enough impetus to try and improve their life. Two highlighted ecclesiological notions were *the voyage* and *the sense of welcoming*, with participants stating that the latter should not be reserved exclusively for 'mass goers' but should rather be extended to all.

More personally, participants also discussed <u>changes needed in their own pastoral work</u>. This theme can be seen as summarising the previous arguments, because parish workers self-reflected on the changes they proposed as seen from their point of view. Parish workers reflected on their daily challenges when recruiting new members to their respective groups, whilst arguing that were priests to personally invite more people, the problem would diminish. Finally, participants entertained the possibility of parish adaptation to new circumstances, which would require a rethink of their own pastoral work. These 'new circumstances' were largely left unspecified, and could equally refer to COVID-19 or to ongoing sociological and demographic shifts.

### 1.2.3   Convergences: Changes needed in one's/parish pastoral work

Both the priests and parish workers discussed **the importance of better managing the resources at hand**. The latter group made stronger arguments and demanded a <u>change in mentality, vision and priorities</u>, but the sentiment was mutual. Moreover, both groups highly valued **the importance of diaconal work** as living out the Gospel, and discussed this identity from multiple angles. In line with this, both groups proposed new priorities. Given the limited pool of resources, both groups reflected on **the identity of the volunteer** and the possibility of having **paid employees** lead the diaconal work (cf. <u>better parish resource-allocation and management</u>; <u>change in mentality, vision and priorities</u>; <u>towards a professional-volunteer model</u>). When discussing diaconal work, both groups (but perhaps the parish workers to a greater extent) emphasised that **quality should be preferred over quantity**, and thus, that the services offered by the parish should really **target the needs of different persons**.

*1.2.4   Divergences: Changes needed in one's/parish pastoral work*

One strong divergence concerned **how both groups conceptualised change**. In the responses of most parish priests, change was conceptualised as having its foundation in *their own work* as parish priests. Usage of the first-person singular, and of the first-person plural (referring to priests as a whole), was common among priests. In contrast, parish workers' arguments for a change in mentality, vision and priorities, lamented the perception of the lay as being 'mere helpers'. In the parish workers' response, one could discern a more *centrifugal* **church**, while the priests seemed to prefer a clerically *centripetal* **church**.

Another divergence could be discerned in the **attitude towards the future**. Most parish priests discussed possibilities from a managerial angle, which can be summarised in the question: 'how can we respond to problem X?' Parish workers largely differed. Their starting point was one step earlier, and could be summarised as: 'what is really needed here?' Similar to the organising theme *Challenges*, the priests tended to respond by focusing on **the** *how*, while parishioners emphasised **the** *what* to a greater extent.

**1.3     Parishioners' expected pastoral work**
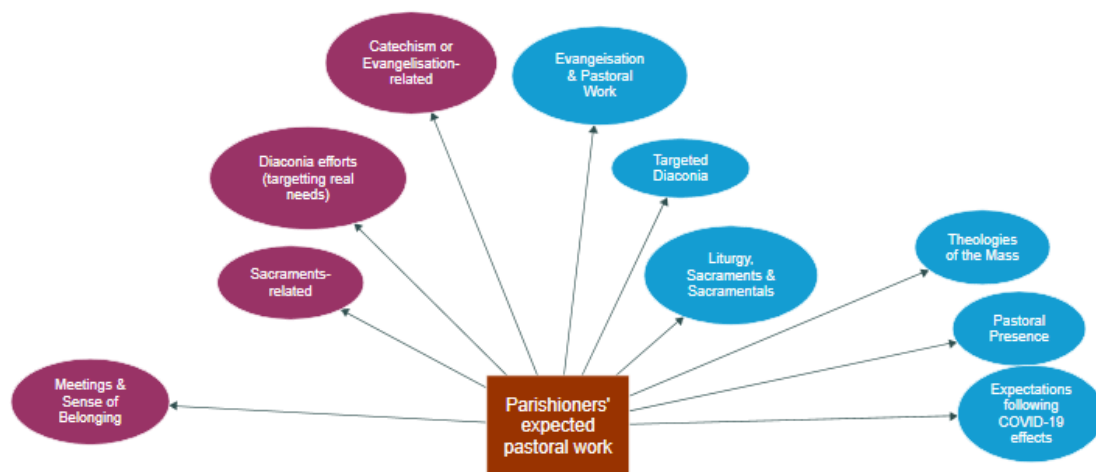


Figure 3. Parishioners' expected pastoral work, according to parish priests (purple) and parish workers (blue).

*1.3.1   Parish Priests: Parishioners' expected pastoral work*

Priests stated that parishioners needed a safe environment where meetings and prayer could be conducted, arguing that what parishioners expect is (a return to) meetings and a sense of belonging. More so, priests appreciated the fact that online catechism proved itself to be well-

attended, apart from being safe. Furthermore, priests commented that social media and other digital means of communications closed certain gaps between the parish priest and his parishioners:

*The use of media is highly appreciated. A simply daily message, even that makes them feel close to the Parish.* (PP5)

Another basic theme was related to the Sacraments. Parish priests noted the backlog of baptisms they were faced with upon reopening, while others argued that most pastoral needs were addressed by the sacraments. Most stated that they held online mass, which in the priests' view, helped parishioners greatly.

Once again, the emphasis on diaconia efforts (targeting real needs) featured repeatedly. When speaking of parishioners' expectations, parish priests felt they were expected to be reachable because people were lonely. Moreover, a number of elderly people also yearned for the comfort of the Eucharist:

*Some really wanted us to be next to them, and to come to Church and find someone, who speaks to them, to speak to them, or else so that they can receive the Eucharist.* (PP6)

Many of the respondents expressed their personal anguish at the fact that they were limited to phone calls, and spoke of online masses as a way of keeping contact, apart from celebrations of the liturgy. Others stated that phone calls were a strong antidote against loneliness. Moreover, others commented that they found it hard that they could not visit parishioners in hospitals, even though hospital chaplains went instead of them. PP4 commented that the Church remained present through hospital chaplains, but that parishioners nonetheless need their pastor. PP3 argued that the church has a duty to discern the *true* needs of its people (as opposed to what different people *think* that they lack); whilst PP6 argued that parish priests are not social workers, even though they do care about their people. The implication here was that the targeting of needs and the engagement of professionals go hand in hand.

Similar notions were argued for, in relation to catechism or evangelisation. For instance, PP1 noted that the church often erroneously strives to be popular as opposed to forming disciples. PP8 noted that many parishioners asked for online meetings, especially for catechism classes. At the same time, it was noted that those who did not attend catechism pre-COVID-19, did not

attend during COVID-19 either – this sentiment, however, was rebuked by other participants when discussing the challenges faced (cf. re-adaptations by the parish).

### 1.3.2   Parish Workers: Parishioners' expected pastoral work

Similarly, among parish workers, the basic theme evangelisation and pastoral work grouped a number of notions. One parishioner spoke about a group they lead, and in hindsight, reflected that not going online was a mistake that they "regret" (PW9). PW4 commented that parishioners needed theological guidance to combat wrong theologies, such as the idea that "God has forgotten us" (PW4) during the pandemic. When discussing parishioners' expectations, the understanding of 'evangelisation' itself was problematised: the tension between evangelisation as the promulgation of 'the word of God' versus/and evangelisation as 'diaconal work'.

After introducing the Pauline concept of "Christianising culture" when discussing targeted diaconia, PW4 continued to elaborate further. PW4 noted that Christians in general should be sensitive to the needs of people who suffered during the pandemic, and who are expecting some form of help. For instance, a majority argument claimed that different pains were caused by COVID-19: for instance, people died without being able to wave 'goodbye' to their loved ones, others felt guilt for introducing the virus in their homes, and others are still afraid of meeting others in person or going to Church, and so on. Furthermore, much pain could be observed in funerals, especially given the restrictions on the number of attendees; thus, some parted ways with their loved ones without any formalities.

PW4 also applauded the Church's diaconal work (e.g., work by Caritas during the pandemic), noting that this was greatly appreciated by the community. Having said that, other parish workers reiterated their call for pastoral work to be more targeted, given that each and every parish has its own pastoral needs – this was also framed as an expectation shared by parishioners. The suggestion was also made for parishes to draft an updated list of families who have lost a loved one, so as to properly reach out to them.

Turning their attention to liturgy, sacraments and sacramentals, parishioners were of various opinions. In fact, this basic theme grouped a number of singular opinions, vis-à-vis

*parishioners' expected pastoral work.*[3] Noting the dwindling number of priests, one argument claimed that priests' availability is still an expectation of parishioners, especially when it comes to administering the sacraments. A small minority found online mass as distracting, with one of them describing mass as a TV show. Other participants, however, framed online mass as an extension of their community, arguing that this view (and expectation of what mass should achieve) was shared by parishioners. Parishioners were also represented as being hungry for the Eucharist. PW9 explicitly noted that COVID-19 made them more attracted to the church:

*I was keener on going to Church once they reopened.*

The above basic theme introduces us to two other themes. The first concerns <u>pastoral presence</u>. Many parish workers desired the former and wished that their parish priests remain present in their parish. They also argued that the elderly and others suffering from loneliness need to be accompanied, and therefore appreciated when priests went out of their way to be present. In fact, several of the parishioners commented that priests tried their best to be close to their parish, and praised the number of initiatives mushrooming around the island. One participant noted that people needed to hear their pastor's voice, so much so that a community radio station gifted airtime for the mass to be streamed (PW9).

The second concerns <u>theologies of the mass</u>. Parishioners noted that the mass often ends up being a socialisation event, thus highlighting parishioners' expectation and desire for opportunities for socialisation. They noted also that even post-lockdown, people herded to mass, as a safe alternative way to socialise. Others noted that the Sunday mass is often the result of familial traditions, while another participant noted that often one hears people commenting that they would not watch the streamed mass, yet now that masses in person have resumed, these people are still nowhere to be seen. The (lay) theological element here lies in that these understandings of the mass were intrinsically tied to what parishioners were perceived as expecting.

Finally, parish workers also reflected on their, and other parishioners', <u>expectations following COVID-19 effects</u>. Apart from noting that parishioners expected that the Church follows all

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[3] These same notions (liturgy, sacraments, etc.) also featured in other themes in different manners, where more clearly discernible patterns of thought were present.

mitigation procedures issued by the health authorities, participants noted that COVID-19 allowed for spiritual growth; and a minority of participants applauded the digitalisation of prayer, especially when done in a group environment. PW9 noted that:

*I can continue my prayer* [online]*, I can cultivate my relationship with God. So, those who led their own groups transferred to online sessions, they really worked in my view. Those who did not transfer* [online]*, probably lost some members. I would rather pray in a community, personally, and I know many who are like me who love to attend these groups, who love the community.*

### 1.3.3 Convergences: Parishioners' expected pastoral work

An interesting convergence between parish priests and parish workers was that both believed that **the parish priest should be present amongst his parishioners**. This expectation was reflected both vis-à-vis <u>diaconia efforts (targeting real needs)</u> *and* <u>pastoral presence</u> more broadly. While the parish priests in general regretted the fact that they could not be as present as usual, parishioners applauded the efforts of their priests. Considerably strong was the opinion that both camps view **the priest as a beacon of hope**. More so, both also agreed that the role of the pastor is solely that of the parish priest, and his alone. This was evident in that most parishioners almost always spoke in the third-person singular when discussing pastoral presence.

### 1.3.4 Divergences: Parishioners' expected pastoral work

Whilst the idea that **diaconia should be more targeted or specialised** was discussed by both groups, it was addressed more strongly by parish workers.

**1.4    Pastoral work carried out and its reception**
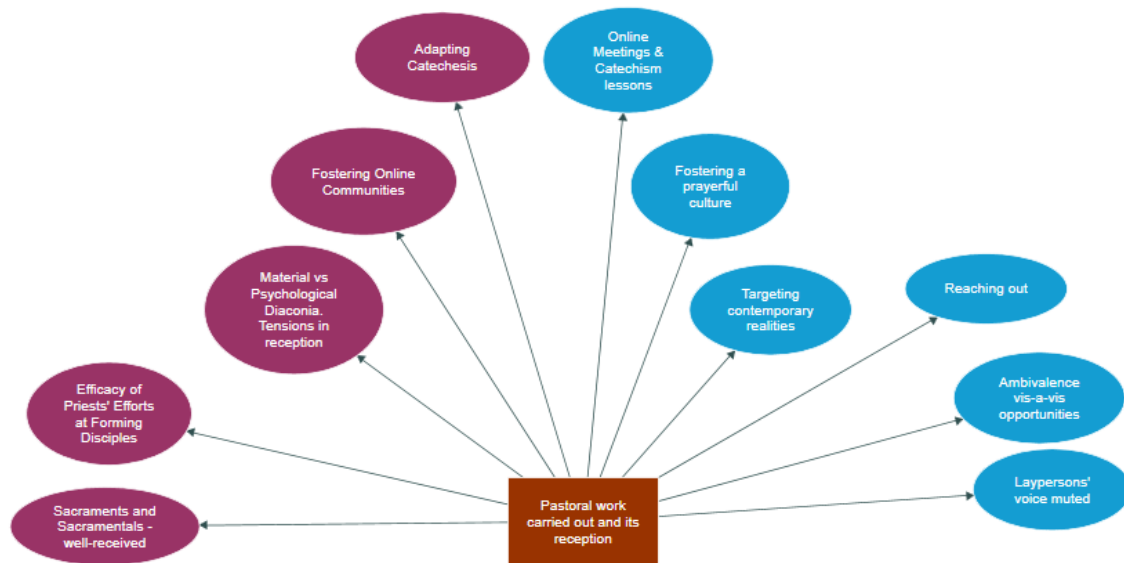


Figure 4. Parish priests' (purple) and parish workers' (blue) views on the pastoral work carried out during the pandemic, and its reception.

*1.4.1    Parish Priests: Pastoral work carried out and its reception*

In terms of pastoral work, the parish priests strongly believed that <u>sacraments and sacramentals were well-received</u>. They highlighted that the churches remained opened for prayer despite the restrictions, and thus parishioners could remain close to God. In fact, upon request, Holy Communion kept being administered, as did the Sacrament of Reconciliation. PP3 also noted that his parish even kept visiting the sick to Absolve and give Communion as per usual, with added safeguards due to the pandemic. His was a solitary opinion, since the others stopped the Communion of the sick, as per mitigation directives.

Participants had strong opinions on funerals and baptisms. The moment both were allowed, all parish priests started celebrating these rites:

*If you have a situation like a funeral, you should make the best use of it* [for Catechesis]. *Even Baptisms – I started doing them outside of mass, so they would serve as time of Catechesis on the sacrament itself, of course everything within the limitations we had. (PP3)*

PP3 also mentioned that, in his parish, they held street processions with the Blessed Sacrament and Eucharistic adorations to allow, "Jesus to enter every road and bless every house" (PP3). His aim here was for his parishioners to pray as a community.

Priests also commented on the dwindling numbers they witnessed during the re-opening of churches in July. Although they initially assumed higher numbers of attendees would come back, they subsequently re-interpreted the lack of attendees (following re-opening) as the Church pruning itself from lukewarm participation.

More so, priests commented that even the way they lived their daily pastoral routine was affected by COVID-19:

> *We ended up being burdened by a number of things, even the number of masses; masses that do not help you to pray, should be abolished! […] It is not about the numbers, because people will not flock as they used to; they come because they are convinced.* (PP1)

Online masses were also utilised to bridge the gap between priest and laity, a pastoral effort which was well-received. Parishioners demanded these masses, even though the Archbishop asked all parishes to seize their online masses.

Having said that, when asked about the pastoral work carried out and its reception, some priests questioned the efficacy of their efforts at forming disciples, given that the number of attendees keeps dwindling. Despite their efforts to be pastorally present within their community, and to continue their work with the tools available, priests lamented that the numbers were culled post-COVID-19. For example, PP7 stated that his youth group decreased by half – a fact that he attributed to a sense of indolence sprouting among the parishioners. He argued that even pastoral workers are falling victim to indolence, by feeling that it is more convenient to hear mass from the comfort of one's sofa. Despite the drop in numbers, these priests noted that the efforts made by parish priests were signs of courage and were surely appreciated by parishioners. In discussing the multifaceted pastoral work conducted by the parish priest, PP1 hinted that perhaps the formation of discipleship needs to be rethought:

> *We should not be a 'service station'. We've got to enable people to be disciples.*

Another minority view concerned <u>material and psychological diaconia</u>. Participants noted two main fronts of diaconia: providing food and being close to house-bound parishioners. Phone calling was the preferred option among priests who wanted to keep in touch with their parishioners:

*We've also done phone calls. We phoned all the elderly during the first three months – some once and others even twice as well. (PP3)*

Another theme that emerged concerned the <u>fostering of online communities</u>. Digital technology offered a number of well-received opportunities: it allowed for better reach of the Christian message; deeper formation of adults through seminars, human formation, Bible study and marriage formation; and more involvement in activities by new parish cohorts.

<u>Catechesis was also adapted</u> to an online mode. This was also the most discussed theme among the parish priests, all of whom were univocal vis-à-vis the positive aspects of online catechism classes for children. For instance, they mentioned the fact that children were introduced to several new platforms for prayer (such as BEKIDS.MT), prayer spaces at home, and Bible prayer. With online catechesis, parents need not hassle to bring their children to catechism classes; rather, children could attend Catechism from the comfort of their homes, thus in a safer manner (health-wise) than meeting face-to-face. PP5 concludes with a caveat:

*There are people who feel safer and are eagerly logging in* [catechism classes]. *But there are those who found a difficulty – either no computer or no internet. Thus, those few are physically coming to our catechism centres.*

### 1.4.2   Parish Workers: Pastoral work carried out and its reception

As for parish workers, different participants tackled the theme of <u>online meetings and catechism lessons</u> from different facets. PW2 noted that COVID-19 is enabling the Church to reach out to a larger number of people, by means of its online shift. PW1 maintained that perhaps the numbers of real-time live viewers were not as high as one would have hoped, but nevertheless streamed masses allowed more people to be spiritually nourished.

For participants, in contrast to a teacher-class model that followed a set book and course-plan, the fact that catechism lessons were held virtually allowed for a more bespoke way of being formed—especially since more people were working from home and thus appreciated the

liberty of attending Catechism at their own leisure. Catechetical work was also transferred online for the youth and adult groups. Some participants noted that youths' online behaviour replicated their offline habits, thus, if they used to meet to chat every day, these practices simply migrated online.

The theme of <u>fostering a prayerful culture</u> shared a number of similarities with priests' discussions surrounding the <u>fostering of online communities,</u> described above. However, this theme focused on the community in general, rather than simply its online presence. Arguments drawing on this theme tapped distinct issues. Firstly, (a) parish workers not only appreciated the priest's role among the community, but also demanded the priest's pastoral presence as an assurance of hope. In fact, one parishioner noted how their peers have appreciated and praised the actions done by their parish priest because, in their own words, he did all he could:

*We have a Facebook Group for our* [village/town]. *Everyone praised the efforts of the Parish Priest, and how much he worked… Naturally, he did his utmost.* (PW9)

Secondly, (b) to further enhance a prayerful culture, parish churches were left opened for longer hours; and this was described as "the best service that could have been offered during that period" (PW4).

Third, (c) the fostering of the online milieu as a sacred space was generally appreciated by parish workers (who also attributed this appreciation to parishioners in general). PW1 mentioned the online rosary and the Lectio Divina as ways with which to conclude the day, while appreciatively noting that most talks were recorded and hosted online, and that this allowed for non-stop listening of formative material.

Fourth, (d) online community-building demands that the parishioners are not digital aliens:

*When we discuss live footage, most would have followed the online mass. The elderly, I believe, prefer to watch on TV rather than on a mobile or laptop screen.* (PW5)

Moreover, participants noted that <u>contemporary realities were targeted</u>. They mentioned, by way of example, the attempts at countering loneliness, and the material needs that were

addressed. Others were disappointed, yet again, that diaconia is not targeted enough to be able to address today's needs, and questioned whether they themselves could have done better:

*I believe that our parish is not yet attuned to the true, new, needs of the parish, to the foreigners living amongst us. We only know of the elderly living in* [the parish]. *We know those who frequent our church, but we do not know the people at the periphery of the parish. We are weak* (sic) *vis-à-vis the new realities of the parish.* (PW4)

In line with the above, another theme was elicited: <u>reaching out</u>. Parish workers wanted to reach out to the new realities discussed above and insisted that they be supported by their parish priest in venturing new ground. In a disheartened voice, PW5 argued that their priest not only does not support this view of listening to his parishioners' voice, but:

*They* [priests] *make fun of you. It seems that if there is no help and backing* [by the parish priest]*, the idea quickly dies.*

Similar sentiments were observed in parish workers' <u>ambivalence vis-a-vis opportunities</u>. In fact, a minor share of parishioners felt that the parish priests missed pastoral opportunities because they did not attend to the parishioners' voice. More so, they noted that some parish priests have a limited understanding of pastoral work, and would tend to reduce it to "mass, confessions and sacraments, only. The other things are not of equal importance" (PW5). Hence, they claimed that in their parish, pastoral work outside the liturgical remit was very limited, and thus led to missed pastoral opportunities.

In contrast, other participants noted that since their parish has made good use of the synergy between the parish priest and the parishioners, the negative effects of COVID-19 were minimal. In fact, such participants noted that pastoral work, especially in the diaconal sector, was well-received.

*I do not believe that people expected anything more, because I believe we did our utmost.* (PW10)

The last theme noted that the <u>parish workers' voices are muted</u>. This theme was only discerned in PW5's views, who noted that some priests would not try pastoral activities that they do not believe in, regardless of whether the suggestion would have come from the lay themselves.

### 1.4.3  Convergences: Pastoral work carried out and its reception

The notion of **'pastoral work' emerged as a polysemic term**, with varying connotations and implications across the board – among both priests and the laity. This was perhaps the strongest convergence between both groups. Regardless of theologising and continual dialogue, this term remains undefined, a rhetorical resource signifying anything from 'being present' to 'helping', from 'forming disciples' to 'catechesis' to anything that is interpersonal. If one were to define 'pastoral work', one can conclude that this term refers to any activity that the parish engages in. Given the polysemic nature of 'pastoral work', its reception was equally discussed in a variety of manners.

Both groups also converged on the importance of the **accessibility** of online catechesis. They shared the notion that more accessible catechesis helps children experience assorted styles of discipleship, while reducing the stress (on parents) involved in driving them around. In sum, they agreed on making formation more 'comfortable'. A common view was that accessibility initiatives were welcomed by parishioners.

They also agreed that pastoral work should be more **researched**, thus **targeting the true needs** of parishioners. Both agreed that their pastoral work might be overlooking pockets of marginalised people, a fact which prompted both camps to delve deeper into querying the situation.

### 1.4.4  Divergences: Pastoral work carried out and its reception

Parish workers strongly **demanded to be heeded to.** They insisted that pastoral work should take a 'inductive' approach, and thus, that their own voice should be foregrounded. In contrast, priests preferred to root their pastoral approach on **their vision of the parish and preferred ecclesiological stance**.

Interestingly, while a number of priests understood their interpretation of pastoral work through the **liturgical lens** of the sacraments and sacramentals, most parish workers focused their response on **being attuned to, and reaching out to**, the parish's needs.

In discussing pastoral work as the fostering of a prayerful culture, parish workers focused more on the **priest's role in the community**, while highlighting his presence as a beacon of hope. Priests focused on **how they attempted to be present** both offline and online. As with the

preceding organising theme (*Challenges*), one can observe, yet again, different starting points: the lay starting from an **ontological position** – thus, reflecting on their own identity as active participants in the parish life; in contrast, the parish priests often started from a **deontological position** – focusing on *what* parish goals can be achieved and *how* to achieve them, largely on the basis of *a priori* considerations.

## 2.    Philosophies

The organising theme *Philosophies* tapped aspects related to participants' views on the effects of COVID-19 on the Church and on spiritual life (in terms both of its positive and negative consequences), on the needs of Christians during the pandemic, and on parishioners' attitudes since the start of COVID-19. The focus on philosophies lies in that, as a whole, these aspects shed light on participants' overall belief systems vis-à-vis parish life and spiritual communion.

### 2.1    COVID-19 effects on the Church
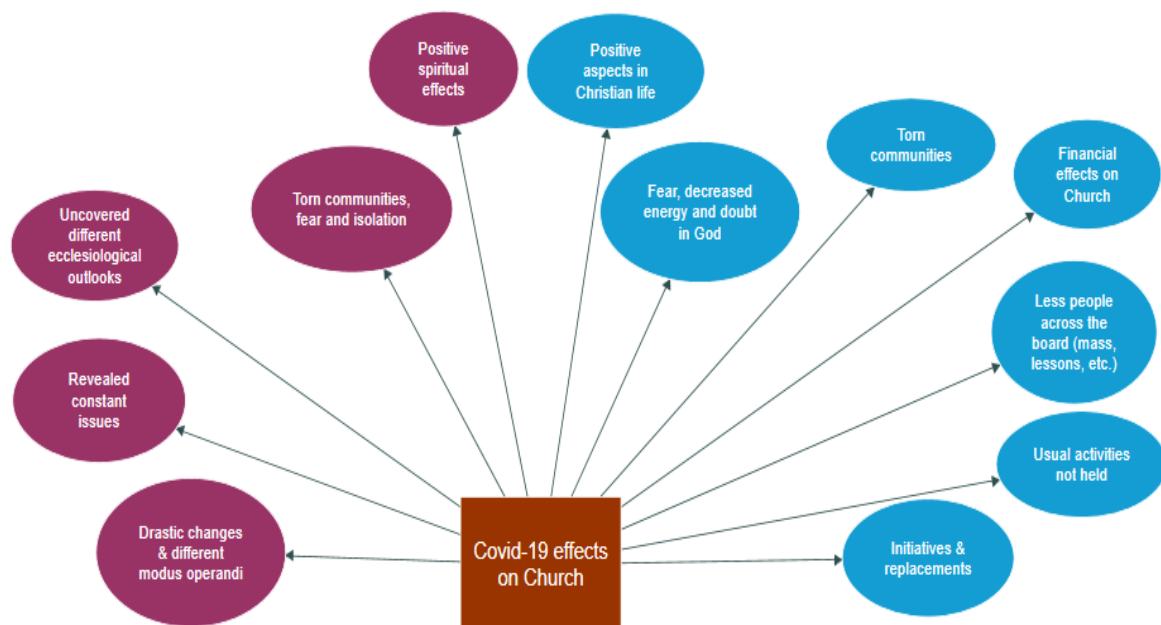


Figure 5. Parish priests' (purple) and parish workers' (blue) views on the effects of COVID-19 on the Church.

### 2.1.1   *Parish Priests: COVID-19 effects on the Church*

Parish priests argued that COVID-19 has led to some <u>drastic changes and a different modus operandi</u>. Priests noted that since parish offices were closed, new ways were explored of providing a space of encounter, such as longer opening hours (with them being more present), and makeshift confessionals. A strongly expressed challenge concerned how to keep contact with people. More so, priests noted that it was difficult to manage their pastoral impetus in view of the health authorities' recommendations:

*I could feel the palpable wish, the deep desire that the Church wanted to be* [present]*, it had its difficulties because of the demands imposed by the Health Authorities* […] *but on the other hand, She wanted to safeguard the relationships with people and their faith struggles. The fact that the Eucharist was stopped, seemed like everything stopped, everything halted, like, people were aloof and there were some who faced awful experiences.* (PP6)

COVID-19 also effected the Church's catechetical mission. A minority of priests felt that it took a blow, and the number of catechism attendees have declined drastically, which was described with an intense sense of lament.

Priests also noted that COVID-19 <u>revealed constant issues within the Church</u>. While this basic theme is made up of various singular ideas, the general feeling was that COVID-19 unveiled a number of sociological, anthropological, psychological and theological facts about the Maltese Christian:

*It became evermore evident who truly believes or just fulfils the obligation because it is their custom.* (PP7)

Priests summed up the Maltese's perception of the Church as a 'dispenser of the sacraments' and related matters – particularly mass and popular piety. For participants, this explained why people felt lost without the liturgical celebrations of the Sacraments. A small number of parish priests argued that faith involves building one's house on solid ground, and that perhaps our local Church has not helped in doing so. For instance, PP7 asserted that popular religiosity runs the risk of not going in-depth when speaking about faith; and the moment one's faith is challenged, the person might give up. He further notes that the lack of faith is most visible among feast enthusiasts – arguing that, since feasts were halted, such enthusiasts ended in a crisis of faith (crises which, in his view, are simply the result of a profound lack of faith to begin with).

In contrast to PP7's dichotomy (between 'faith' and 'a lack of faith'), PP6 discussed four new categories that were already perhaps present in the local community, but were not as evident as they are now (and post-COVID-19): (a) those who stopped attending church for whatever reason, (b) those who kept their daily prayer commitments, (c) those who returned to the Sunday mass, and (d) those who became lukewarm.

Other parish priests noted that their pastoral community was also hit by the fact that a number of people opted to stay at home and "have their mind at rest that they heard the mass" (PP6) online. In fact, PP1 commanded other parish priests to go out and search for the missing sheep, with reference to those who failed to return back to the Sunday mass. He notes that the onus is on the priest to teach sound Eucharistic theology, and to highlight the importance of participating in the Sacrament rather than simply 'listening' to mass.

More so, a strong chorus of parish priests lamented the fact that numbers (e.g., of attendees) plummeted. PP8 noted a drop of 40% of mass attendance, while most of the participants agreed that numbers post-lockdown are 'seriously', 'substantially', and 'way lower than pre-March 2020'. Some opted to answer the 'why' question by mentioning fear as an answer, while others note that the responses vary so it is hard to pinpoint one particular reason. Others noted that this could be that mass attendance is low in the hierarchy of values, since people are indeed going elsewhere (e.g., restaurants), but not to mass.

Although in the minority, some discussed age differences. They noted that the young population are the largest generation of non-returners. PP4 specifically spoke about young couples with children who, he argued, have either lost hope, or lost interest and have simply stopped attending.

Finally, PP1 accused the local Church that it was more interested in basilicas and invested more resources in *church buildings*, whilst somewhat neglecting *Church-building*. In his strikingly vivid lamentation, he argued that resources are not properly managed:

*We don't have* [resources] *to work with! We don't have* [resources] *to work with. Because if you had the resources* […] *pastoral agents employed, employed with the parish, you need a kit, pastoral work that involves the lay. School chaplaincies are a disaster! Where is our work with the youths?* […] *Disaster!* […] *There is none, because we don't have the resources to work with. And if you're going to work with the Gospel, you need to live the Gospel. Thus, we need to feed these people. We lost a number of valid persons, because we either paid them peanuts or we took all their evenings, poor souls.* […] *So, we need to invest in pastoral agents. Look at other works, for example, administrative, that we do have resources for. But only for that. Pastoral work with children, school chaplaincy work, with youths, this is all extremely important.*

The points mentioned above culminate in the basic theme of arguments stating that COVID-19 uncovered different ecclesiological outlooks. This basic theme encompassed a number of

singular theological voices, building on the previous one. Some noted that in the early days of COVID-19, a sense of spiritual hope in God was revived, but it was quickly spent, and more so post-lockdown. Others argued that this pandemic served as a purification exercise, where God took away the cult so that people focus on Him instead. Others stated that COVID-19 directly affected our faith and its practice, or that the Maltese Church lacked true catechism. The latter argument was made to illustrate how, in participants' view, some people ended up becoming 'spiritual orphans' once the (public) liturgical office was paused due to health measures. Priests argued that the catechetical mission is one of the main apexes of the Mass (PP7). For three separate times while discussing this theme, PP6 noted that the Church was not ready for COVID-19. This 'unpreparedness' was interpreted by others as a form of 'uncertainty' vis-à-vis whether people will come back to Church.

Other parish priests noted that it is the responsibility of the parish priest to make God accessible to all, and that he should be available for all the parishioners, irrespective of who they are, their religious and life choices and even their religion. If Muslims fall within the parish boundary, PP1 argued, then they are part of one's 'sheepfold', because – as PP2 noted – people look for a "caring heart" and long for someone who deeply cares and empathises.

When discussions focused on <u>torn communities, fear and isolation</u>, parish priests noted that fear, isolation and shock were shared emotions among many. Some participants spoke of both 'physical' fear and also a sense 'helplessness'. Perhaps, emotions related to isolation were the most mentioned. Priests nostalgically lamented that they could not visit the sick and that they witnessed severe isolation and solitude amongst the elderly – a most tangible effect of COVID-19.

Torn communities were mentioned as examples: prayer groups stopped meeting, some churches even closed their doors completely, some families decided to remain indoors due to vulnerable persons, and the list goes on. The elderly were mentioned frequently, but not exclusively; PP1 argued instead that the pandemic's effects were more pronounced among youths because:

*'faith is caught, not taught', so youth groups were devasted. Good luck grouping them again.*
(PP1)

Participants also mentioned <u>positive spiritual effects</u>, arguing that: (a) given the plethora of online masses, the Christian message entered peoples' homes, presented in a professional manner, and people got to know the Archbishop more (PP1); (b) there was a greater emphasis on community life due to the push to safeguard the elderly's health, more solidarity, and a welcome team who 'acknowledged' people upon entry in church (PP1); (c) COVID-19 promoted the idea of the "family space, [and] sacred spaces in homes" (PP7) – praying together as a family was a rediscovered form of prayer that the local Church promoted. The spiritual effects of COVID-19 are further explored below (see *COVID-19 effects on spiritual life*).

### *2.1.2 Parish Workers: COVID-19 effects on the Church*

Somewhat similar effects were observed by the lay participants when discussing the <u>positive effects</u> of COVID-19. Three nuances could be discerned in their responses, namely the views: (a) that social distancing helped people become more reflective in church (rather than engaging in conversation); (b) that parishioners appreciated the act of praying as a community (e.g., family prayer time, mass, etc.); (c) that diaconal work was not reserved for the select few, but rather many people contacted lonely people – thus, diaconia was discussed in terms of a *shared* collective mission.

What parish priests discussed as <u>torn communities, fear and isolation</u>, parishioners discussed as: (a) <u>fear, decreased energy and doubt in God</u> on the one hand, and (b) <u>torn communities</u> on the other. Discussing the former, parishioners noted that since Malta is an aged population, and given our proximity to Italy, the general feeling was that of fear, distrust, being lost, and disorientation. Furthermore, theologically, people doubted whether God was really in control. While in the early weeks, parishioners were eager to help, they faced dilemmas:

*Listen, what is important in this moment? That I save myself, or that I go to church?* (PW4)

In discussing <u>torn communities</u>, parish workers noted how communities and their formation/cohesion was influenced by the different phases of the COVID-19 national management plan. They argued that the sudden halt to normal parish life left deep wounds, and left everyone panicked. PW4 noted that the "radical" decision to close churches was not even needed during World War II, and thus it was unprecedented. Participants differed as to whether they felt that the sense of community was lost, or else whether they felt that the sense of

community was regained following the re-opening of Churches. The majority was of the latter opinion; PW8 noted that after the first post-lockdown mass, people applauded in joy.

The lack of people in the pews also resulted in negative <u>financial effects on the Church</u>. More so, parishioners highlighted that no fundraising activities were being held, and that less people donated funds.

Parish workers also lamented that one could observe <u>less people across the board (during mass, lessons, etc.)</u>. Here, the focus was on the number of attendees, which decreased both during mass and also during other pastoral activities (e.g., due to COVID-19 mitigation measures). A general sense shared amongst participants was that numbers were already dwindling pre-COVID-19 (as the census showed); however, post-lockdown numbers plummeted even further. Participants believed that people must have either replaced the mass with other activities, preferred following it online, got bored with mass, or simply stopped practicing. Many parishioners noted that online, the numbers were very promising, while others noted that Maundy Thursday changed online traffic patterns for the positive (PW3). Others disagreed, arguing that numbers remained low across the board. The most salient aspect here concerned the decrease in mass attendance, with participants' discourse being strictly numerical. Different attributions were made to account for this: from viewing people as making excuses, to understanding the reality of families with children.

The low numbers could also be because the <u>usual activities were not held</u>. In their discussions, participants focused on the main Solemnities and other liturgically meaningful events, and were all in nostalgic accord. A fair share lamented that the village feast was not held, not even in a reduced format (as was done in Gozo). Furthermore, such halting of annual activities must have:

*left huge effects, effected children, because they* [used to] *have an active parish life* […] *And youths* (PW8)

On the other hand, a minority commended the Church for suspending external feasts and processions.

Participants noted a series of <u>initiatives & replacements</u> brought about by COVID-19. This basic theme was made up of an assortment of initiatives, that can be loosely grouped into three categories, that is, those related to: (a) sacraments and sacramentals, (b) mitigation measures, or (c) the digital migration of parish life.

Participants who mentioned the initiatives falling under category (b), argued that parishes were now tasked with more sanitisation and social distancing work. Speaking of liturgy, parishioners commented on the digital migration of mass, while others noted that for their parish, this was technically impossible. Others mentioned new initiatives, such as online rosaries – both those animated by the parish team, and those inviting parishioners to join in – adorations, and an online Lady of Sorrows celebration. Interestingly, some commented that the initiatives were more prayerful than they usually are in person. Of note was the discussion of pain surrounding the postponement of Holy Communion and Confirmation celebrations.

Others noted that online meetings were often better attended, and that numbers climbed steeply for catechesis, even though others noted that the numbers of youths actually meeting together dwindled drastically.

### 2.1.3   Convergences: COVID-19 effects on the Church

The three basic themes of <u>torn communities, fear and isolation</u> (parish priests) and the parishioners' <u>fear, decreased energy and doubt in God</u> and <u>torn communities</u> (parish workers), all discussed **the sense of loss and fear** that the local Church experienced. The descriptions afforded by some of the respondents aid the reader to understand that the painful, "radical" and **unprecedented event of church closures**, came as a surprise. Yet, both groups agreed that **COVID-19 only unmasked realities that were already present** within our communities – a note perhaps highlighted in the basic theme concerning the <u>constant issues revealed</u> by the pandemic. The **main issues here were ecclesiological ones** – revolving around the role of the lay, different theologies of sacraments and sacramentals, and diaconal work. In turn, the main question among respondents implicitly asked, '**how does the Church become a beacon of hope once again?**' Interestingly, both groups **discussed COVID-19 in positive terms** (<u>positive spiritual effects</u> and <u>positive effects</u>) as well. Both spoke of how **COVID-19 re-oriented our attention toward the community**, both in terms of being attentive to the other and also in terms of shifting prayer from a strictly individualistic act to a communal one.

### 2.1.4  Divergences: COVID-19 effects on the Church

Perhaps the only divergence here was that the **parish priests, yet again, tended to be more attentive to the logistical changes** brought forward or uncovered by the pandemic, while the **parishioners paid more attention to how such changes were lived**. It was evident that parish **priests tend to approach questions from a 'how' perspective** (e.g., 'how can this issue be resolved?'), whilst **parish workers appreciated 'what' was actually happening** (cf. Challenges and Changes needed in one's parish/pastoral work).

## 2.2  COVID-19 effects on spiritual life
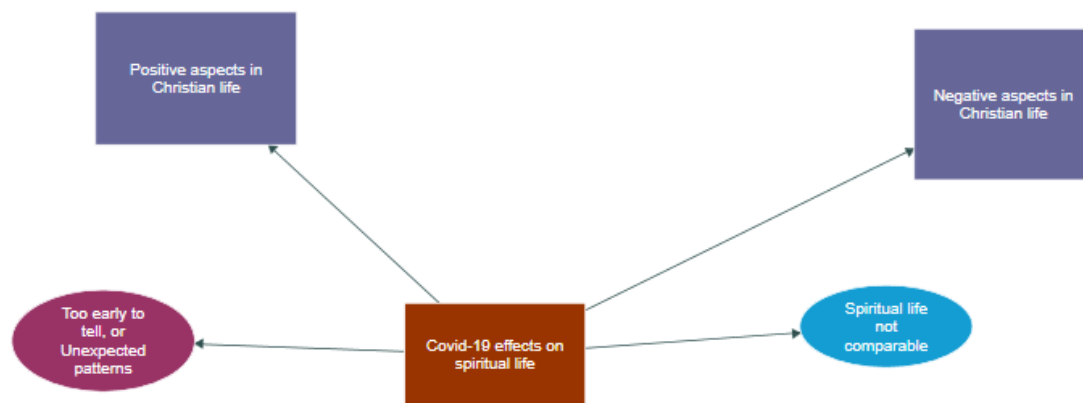


Figure 6. Parish priests' (purple) and parish workers' (blue) views on the effects of COVID-19 on spiritual life (positive aspects and negative aspects).

This theme concerned the spiritual effects of COVID-19 and can be divided into two: the **positive** and the **negative** effects of the pandemic. It is here worth noting that both priests and parishioners converged on the idea that spiritual life is hard to define, with the parish workers clearly stating that spiritual life is not comparable between one person and the next. In fact, PW3 notes that spirituality is a one-to-one relationship with God, and one can only have an inexact perception of people's spiritual life:

*I do not think I can answer you, because I do not know. You used the word 'spirituality'. But spirituality is me and God. So how can I know how* [COVID-19] *affected them spiritually? You can only have a perception.*

Parish priests were a bit more hesitant and noticed that it is still <u>too early to tell what the spiritual effects of COVID-19 will be</u>, while also noticing <u>unexpected patterns</u> in the data. For instance, parish priests noted that while they expected parishioners to flock back to mass post-lockdown, this was not the case.

## 2.2.1 Positive aspects in Christian life
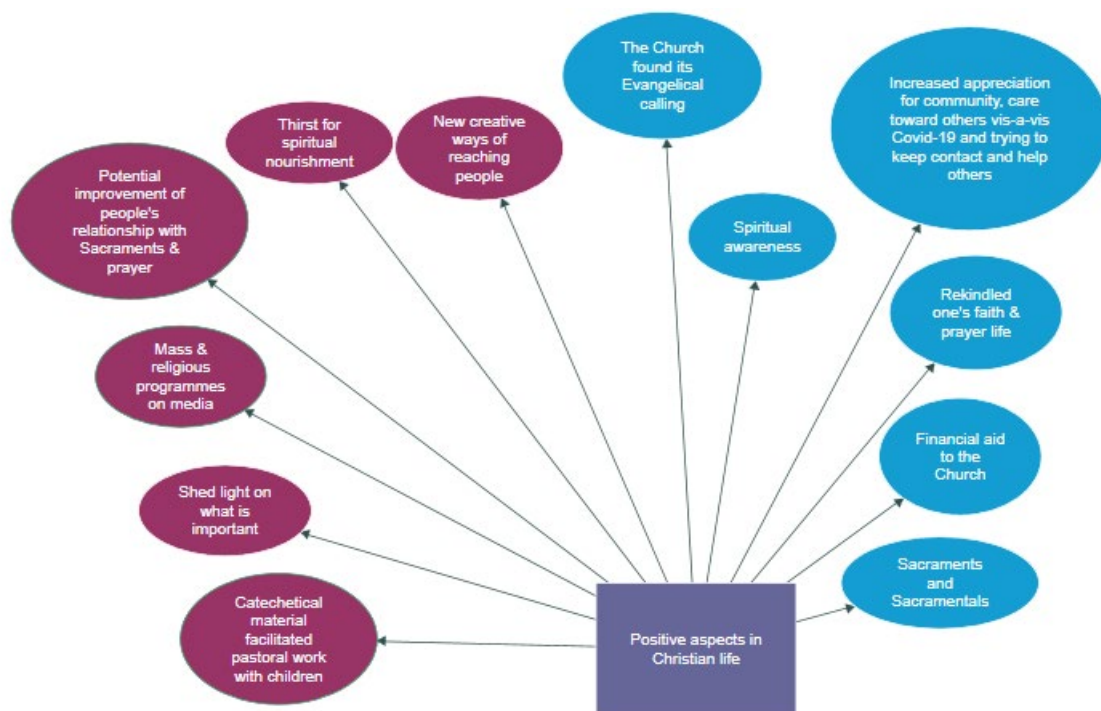


Figure 7. Parish priests' (purple) and parish workers' (blue) views on the *positive* effects of COVID-19 on spiritual life.

### *2.2.1.1 Parish Priests: Positive aspects in Christian life*

Priests noted that <u>catechetical material facilitated pastoral work with children</u>, while also arguing that COVID-19 <u>shed light on what is truly important</u>. In discussing the latter, priests argued that post-COVID-19, pastoral work needs to be focused on the family, as instructed by the Archbishop. Priests strongly re-iterated the need for the Ecclesia, and the Church as living its identity as a community on a journey. Moreover, they highlighted the importance of God's Word and of good moral examples, and the role of diaconia, which makes the Church more relevant for society and addresses the vulnerability of humans.

Other participants also noted the positive influence of <u>mass and religious programmes on the media</u>: A number of priests highlighted the fact that these offered an opportunity for people to get to know the bishops "as they really are" (PP8), as opposed to relying on previously held conceptions. Other opportunities arose for many who would not have had time to attend daily mass, to now be able to follow it via the mass media.

In theological parlance, what the parish priests hinted at in the above three basic themes was a retrieval of the five-fold ministry of being Church: *leitourgia*, through celebration of the sacraments; *kerygma*, through sharing the Word; living *koinonia* as a community on a journey; *diaconia*, in service to the marginalised; and *martyria* when witnessing for our identity.

The above basic theme was linked to the view that there was a <u>potential improvement in people's relationship with Sacraments and prayer</u>. This was attributed to the fact that families are spending more time together due to a reduction in activities. More so, one particular priest highlighted the fact that people were accessing the Sacraments in an "understanding" environment (PP8). Scepticism was also present:

*I do not know whether home prayer increased in reality.* (PP8)

In their responses, priests often hinted at their parishioners' <u>thirst for spiritual nourishment</u>, noting how people missed the liturgical actions they were accustomed to. Perhaps PP4 summed it up best:

*There were those who felt the need to do what they used to regularly do: the daily mass, those who attended the adoration, those who were active in the parish, they really must have felt it hard, not being able to attend.*

Others opted to differentiate between the 'really committed Christians' and 'the rest who did not come back' when the Churches re-opened.

A small minority of priests also noted that COVID-19 enabled the Church to seek <u>new creative ways of reaching people</u>. Despite only a few priests tackling the topic, all generalised their comments and noted that the Maltese Church tried its utmost to be a beacon of hope. PP7

summed up a sentiment which, despite rarely being verbalised in the transcripts, could be discerned (as a sentiment) across the board:

*In these circumstances, one can realise that the Church gives its share in very concrete ways in different settings and needs. Even through its message of hope. When one appreciates how many parishes, all of a sudden, started using online messages, other digital aspects, social media, etc., etc., one realises that we are thirsting to enter peoples' homes and be near our people.*

### 2.2.1.2 Parish Workers: Positive aspects in Christian life

In line with the above, parish workers too believed that the Church found its Evangelical calling during the pandemic. They argued that it became more reflective and retrieved its diaconal vocation. Reflection was discussed in terms of: (a) a renewed awareness of how superfluous certain external celebrations (e.g., basilica inaugurations, etc.) could be; (b) a new-found consideration for other people (e.g., by wearing masks properly, respecting rules, etc.); and (c) a creative re-consideration of one's relationship with tradition and traditional expressions. One participant also made the argument for 'Christianising culture' in accordance with the style of St. Paul (i.e., the strategic idea of offering something appealing to be able to proselytise in return). More so, a spiritual re-awakening was observed by the participants:

*I believe that many people retrieved a spiritual and reflective life.* (PW4)

In turn, diaconia was discussed in terms of service, voluntary work with Church entities, and day-to-day solidarity. In discussing this notion, participants argued that diaconia is not the work of the few, but rather an integral part of the Church's identity.

Linked to this was the notion of spiritual awareness, whereby the fear of death, the pandemic (perceived as a warning to the Christian), the Pope's speeches and teachings, and the liminal space which the pandemic put many in, were seen as providing myriad opportunities for spiritual growth. Here, the sense was that negative experiences can spur people into a more Christian way of life, particularly because of fear and other negative emotions that are experienced. In fact, participants argued that many came in touch with their spiritual needs during the pandemic. PW3 highlighted that the Pope's sombre interview on Canale 5—where the Pope spoke of prioritising "We" over "I"—left a mark with several of his colleagues, even

those who were perhaps non-practicing Christians. This participant argued that the Pope spoke to the human, not the Christian.

In turn, this heightened spiritual awareness also <u>increased the appreciation for community, care toward others vis-a-vis COVID-19, and attempts at keeping contact and helping others</u>. This basic theme is composed of two main categories. Firstly, participants discussed the increased their appreciation for community. They observed that, both vis-à-vis the local level (i.e., between people, e.g., people thanking ushers at Mass) and vis-à-vis the structural level (i.e., the Catholic Church, e.g., the Pope's Urbi et Orbi), the lack of contact with one another helped us to appreciate the other more. According to PW4, Pope Francis summed it best when he reminded the world that 'we are in this together'. In fact, parishioners spoke of a shift from individualism to community, which emerged out of a realisation that we are all in the same situation.

Secondly, stemming from this increased appreciation for community life, on a more social level, participants argued that trying to keep contact with others was a constant preoccupation during the pandemic, and that this meant that interpersonal encounters took on a greater significance, and a deeper spiritual orientation. Social media played a vital role in this respect.

According to participants, this deeper spiritual orientation inspired by COVID-19 <u>rekindled one's faith and prayer life</u>, specifically in terms of being urged to pray more. In fact, they noted that, in the first months, this urge was perhaps stronger. Moreover, 'new' forms of prayer were also observed by participants, such as altered processions, Urbi et Orbi, and online rosaries and adoration. Participants also highlighted the newly found importance of the domestic church:

*They demanded that […] perhaps the domestic Church, I believe, increased in importance. More so, family members while having more time to spend with their family, managed to allocate more time for individual and family prayer.* (PW5)

PW5 also noted that, despite the financial struggles brought about by the pandemic, their parish church still received substantial <u>financial aid</u>, despite there being no collections during mass. They noted that many parishes used this quiet period to start refurbishing projects.

There was, however, consensus among pastoral workers vis-a-vis the importance of <u>Sacraments & Sacramentals</u>, with participants noting the lack of access to the various liturgical celebrations during the pandemic (including but not limited to Communion, Confession, Anointment of the Sick and house blessings). Among the participants, there was the sense that liturgy was taken for granted pre-pandemic. Secondly, in terms of the experience of longing for ('missing') mass and appreciating mass once again, participants argued that whilst the lukewarm remained unenthusiastic, others really thirsted for spiritual communion and the sacraments.

### 2.2.1.3 Convergences: Positive aspects in Christian life

Both parish priests and parish workers agreed that **COVID-19 enabled the Church to be 'pruned'**. The Church was invited to distil itself from a theology that is overly influenced by ancillary cultural traditions, and to **re-focus itself on the Christian message**. Both also agreed that an increased spiritual awareness was felt, which aided the Christian to further understand the intrinsic relationship between prayer, belief and lived experience: *lex orandi, lex credendi, lex vivendi*. Pope Francis' message concerning the importance of the 'We' (as recounted by PW3), perhaps summarises this point of convergence best. Concerning those whom parishioners often labelled as the 'lukewarm faithful', but who spiritually converted during the pandemic, it is understood that their **conversion happened precisely here: by further opening themselves to the other**.

Furthermore, in discussing the positive spiritual aspects about by COVID-19, **neither priests nor parish workers emphasised numbers**. This contrasts with the prevalence of 'numbers talk' during discussions of negative spiritual effects. When considering positive spiritual effects, participants' discussion converged around **the theological, ontological, and deontological aspects uncovered by the pandemic**, rather than the statistics. Moreover, a retrieved ecclesiology of **'a community of faith on a journey'** was clearly discernible amongst the participants.

### 2.2.1.4 Divergences: Positive aspects in Christian life

A major divergence could be observed, yet again, in the starting point of both cohorts. While the priests mostly reflected on the **individual** relationship of the Christian with God, parishioners focused more on the **communal** aspect. Moreover, priests emphasised, at some length, the **personal** relationship of the person with the Sacraments, while the lay highlighted

the **evangelical calling**. While priests went for a more **rational and conceptual formal** theological understanding, parishioners opted for a more **emotional and espoused** theology. The below quotes by a parish priest (PP8) and a parish worker (PW4) illustrate this point:

*I believe that the televised mass helped. Many people got to know their bishops and who they really are. Many people did not used to listen to the daily mass, but are now watching it on TV. Obviously, it is not the best option, but it is a step. Then, when it comes to the sacraments, they appreciated a space where they could understand.* (PP8)

*A sense of altruism and solidarity. People who volunteered in initiatives organised by the Church itself. In the diaconia groups, many were visiting houses with daily shopping, and running errands. That was a positive form of diaconia.* (PW4)

### 2.2.2    Negative aspects in Christian life
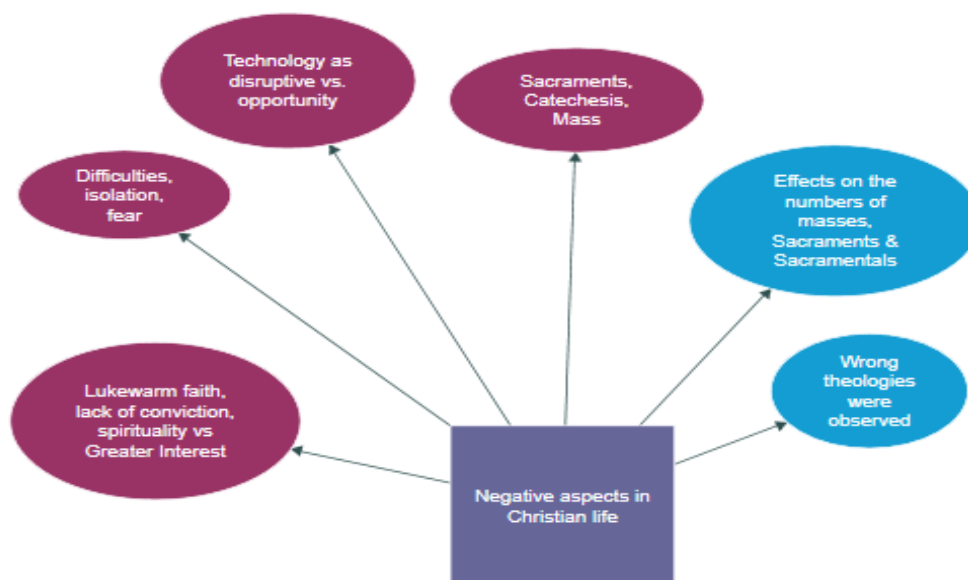


Figure 8. Parish priests' (purple) and parish workers' (blue) views on the *negative* effects of COVID-19 on spiritual life.

#### 2.2.2.1 Parish Priests: Negative aspects in Christian life

According to parish priests, during the pandemic, people experienced a Lukewarm faith and spirituality/lack of conviction versus Greater interest in the faith. Priests noted that some of their parishioners were distraught with a sense of apathy and a lukewarm faith. In fact, priests were not too hopeful that people would return back to the same pre-COVID-19 numbers, even though one particular parish priest (PP8) noted that the youth, especially those in their mid-twenties, not only returned but were themselves spiritually hungry. A similar hunger was observed among the elderly by other priests; while others commented that those who were already lukewarm pre-COVID-19 were not affected spiritually by the pandemic.

Another spiritual effect was related to the <u>difficulties, isolation and fear</u> observed within communities. Participants spoke of parishioners who craved the community but were too afraid to meet, or else of young couples with children who faced great difficulties and needed to listen to a word of encouragement.

While technology could counteract loneliness, PP2 noted that technology is deteriorating the social fabrics of family life. When discussing <u>technology as disruptive vs. as opportunity</u>, PP2 asserted that the individual use of technology and lack of communication, which was further enhanced during lockdown, affected our families negatively. PP8 differed and noted that the digital world of communications offers many opportunities to share spiritual messages.

The question of less participation in the <u>Sacraments, Catechesis and Mass</u>, was also raised, with parish priests noting that they did their best to accommodate people's needs. Despite their efforts, all the priests who tackled this theme agreed that lower numbers could be observed in both the liturgy and catechesis. Thus, 'numbers talk' did feature here.

### 2.2.2.2 Parish Workers: Negative aspects in Christian life

Like the parish priests, parish workers mostly focussed on dwindling <u>numbers vis-à-vis the Mass, Sacraments and Sacramentals</u>, when describing the negative spiritual effects of the pandemic:

> *At first, they started coming, but all of a sudden, they vanished, especially youths and children. So, on the one hand, you have the youth nurseries packed with youths attending training sessions, while the Sunday masses* [are] *empty? Where are these children?* (PW5)

This notion was particularly elaborated upon by participants, and advanced three main points.

Firstly, (a) in discussing views on the effects of online or hybrid mass, participants variably spoke of the possible 'comfort' associated with streaming mass and the lack of a need to attend physically. Moreover, participants doubted whether digital church presence is really being effective at present, vis-à-vis deeper spiritual growth. Secondly, (b) one participant (PW7) stated that their sacramental life was not affected during COVID-19 as Confession was still generally available in some form or another. Finally, (c) most argued that Sacraments and the mass were greatly affected in terms, yet again, of numbers. Three main attributions were

offered for the dwindling numbers: (i) lack of conviction amongst the faithful; (ii) people no longer feel a need to honour their religious 'duties'; and (iii) the fact that safety measures were not always abided by during mass.

These attributions were levelled at 'people' to explain why they do, or do not, attend mass (physically or online). Several participants mentioned the quality of people's faith (e.g., talk of 'the lukewarm' vs. 'the committed'). Such notions were interspersed among arguments on dwindling numbers.

On a more spiritual level, parishioners argued against what they perceived as being false beliefs about God, such as the view that God sent us the pandemic, and that God is a punishing God; together with accusations from non-believers, and other 'ill-formed Christians', that God sends disease and viruses. Strikingly, participants listed a few of what they perceived as being wrong theologies. These can be categorised into two: (a) the idea that COVID-19 is a warning from God (e.g., because people are giving more importance to money/leisure than to God); and (b) the practice whereby one resorts to Christ or other elements of the faith only in times of fear (cf. mortality salience [Greenberg et al., 1995]). According to PW9:

> *You hear of people who don't believe, and they tell you: 'You see, your God? God sends*
> *sickness and viruses to the world!'* (PW9)

### 2.2.2.3 Convergences: Negative aspects in Christian life

Both parish priests and parish workers agreed that **COVID-19 has resulted in a sharp decline in the number of mass attendees**. They also agreed that other sacraments suffered a blow too, in numerical terms.

### 2.2.2.4 Divergences: Negative aspects in Christian life

Interestingly, priests and parish workers differed on the cause behind such low numbers. Priests generally attributed this to **lukewarm faith and spirituality**, lack of conviction, and a sense of apathy. On the other hand, parish workers blamed it on **wrong theologies** amongst the lay (rather than on people not prioritising their religion). Indeed, according to parish workers, many faithful have a **misconstrued theological understanding of God**, and often fall victim to believing what non-believers and non-practising Christians accuse them of.

## 2.3 Needs of Christians during the pandemic
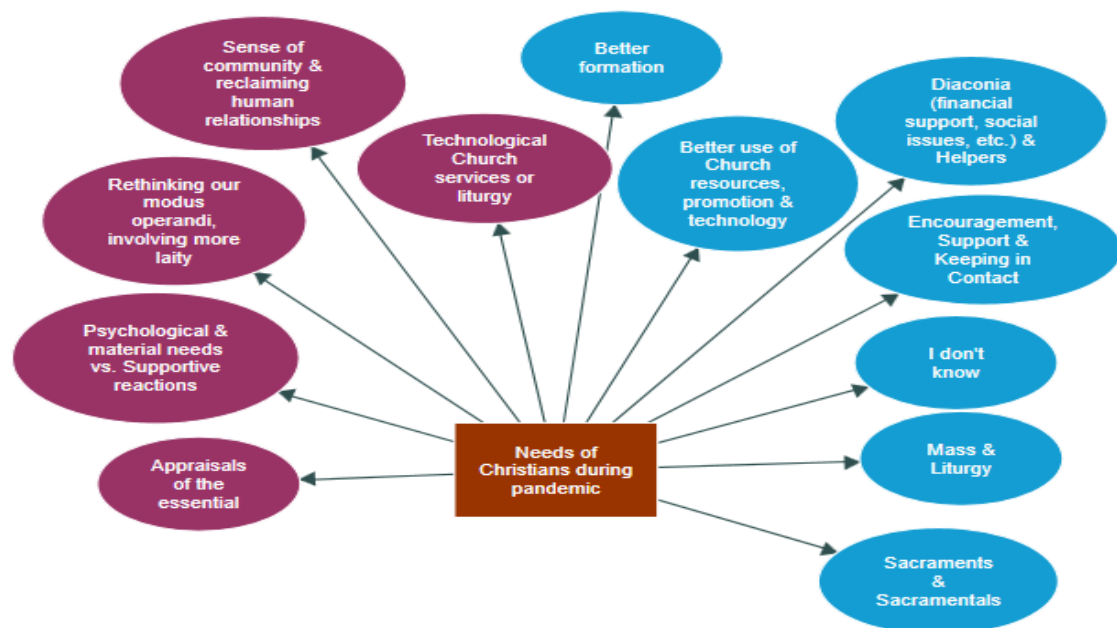


Figure 9. Parish priests' (purple) and parish workers' (blue) views on the needs of Christians during the pandemic.

### 2.3.1 Parish Priests: Needs of Christians during the pandemic

In terms of needs, parish priests provided different appraisals of what they considered to be essential. In fact, participants emphasised the importance of formation needs (the continuation of Catechism lessons was mentioned here) and of the Sacraments (especially Holy Communion). Furthermore, a minority maintained that if the Church's mission is essential, then the Church should not close its doors, not even during lockdown periods related to the COVID-19 pandemic:

*If those who were offering an essential service did not close, but continued offering such a service, if s/he believes in what s/he is offering … No one is telling the medical physician, 'close your clinic' so that s/he does not get sick or s/he does not get others sick. So, if we believe that our service is essential, we should, regardless of anything, and in all circumstances, continue to provide such services so that believers find what they need. (PP4)*

Another basic theme concerned Psychological and material needs versus Supportive reactions vis-à-vis one another. The idea here was that accompaniment (e.g., over the phone), and the help and support received by other people, allayed feelings of shock and fear, especially during the pandemic. As PP2 put it:

*I think that the COVID-19 pandemic was like an alarm, 'listen, take care of each other more'. It does not mean that before there was something wrong, but life alienates people, and*

*until we hear someone yelling for help, it seems that no one takes notice. This pandemic made us say that, 'listen, there is no need to hear someone yelling for help' – s/he is there, take the initiative and check whether s/he is in need.*

Similarly, parish priests argued that they noted Christians' (and people in general) need for a greater <u>sense of community</u> and for <u>reclaiming human relationships</u>. The idea here was that small talk, normal aspects of human relationships, and even the simple presence of a priest, can go a long way to foster human relationships. Participants argued that during the pandemic, there was more time to speak to one another, since day-to-day activities were stopped or slowed down. Parish priests maintained that this attitude should be retained post-COVID-19. As PP7 put it:

*I think that during the pandemic, the people had much more time to speak to each other. It seems that before, even if you phone someone, you would just tell them what you need to tell them and that's it. But during the partial lockdown, people were talking to each other more, they were sharing their ideas, thoughts, and their day-to-day life experiences. I think that if we had to remove this, we would be losing beautiful aspects in our lives now – what relationships are and what community means.*

Here, parish priests also mentioned the need to <u>rethink one's modus operandi, and to involve more laity</u> – emphasising that certain parish work can be done by the laity and not by the parish priest. Through this, the parish priest would be able to focus more fully on other matters within his parish that specifically require his input. Here, the idea was to go back to basics (pastorally speaking), to take the opportunities provided by the pandemic (e.g., to change the way certain parish work used to be done), and to think of measures aimed at retaining the involvement of the laity:

*whether to take this opportunity or not – if we are not going to take it, we would be 'committing suicide', kind of […] If things are to return to what they were before, we will be 'committing suicide'…Why are we not going to take this opportunity to reflect on the effects, why? Why people left, why several people left... I think that one should engage in this reflection and act upon it, otherwise we will remain the same – not just to know about it but to act upon it.* (PP6)

Some also noted greater cooperation between Church entities during the pandemic and hoped that this remains. Speaking about the present modus operandi, some parish priests maintained that parishes' resources are limited.

Finally, the parish priests mentioned the need for <u>technological Church services and liturgy</u>: the streaming of mass, the rosary, novenas, parish radios, online reflections, and so on. All these helped to keep the contact with the parishioners as much as possible – as parishioners could still attend meetings held by the Church community, from the comfort of their homes.

### *2.3.2   Parish Workers: Needs of Christians during the pandemic*

The needs of Christians during the pandemic, as perceived by pastoral workers, were many and diverse. Here, the main concerns were related to (a) better formation, (b) increasing the number of mass attendees, and (c) encouragement and support. With regards to <u>better formation</u>, participants maintained that theological formation (in terms of addressing old-fashioned beliefs about God, the need for *Vangelju*, etc.), interpersonal formation (Diaconia, care for others, etc.), and community formation (greater sense of bonding and fraternity) are necessary. As PW4 put it:

*I think that here we must work more – on how individuals are to be more Christian in their attitude towards each other. I feel comfortable with my family, with the people around me, but this is not enough. I have to feel the need to go and speak to others and see what the 'Us' needs are. 'Us', whether they are neighbours, or whether they are those who live in society's peripheries.*

Furthermore, pastoral workers mentioned the need to figure out how to make <u>better use of Church resources, promotion and technology</u>. Here, participants argued for improving ways of dealing with technology, such as social media, to create better connections with people, and for a better way of addressing the digital divide in parishes. Moreover, the other needs mentioned by parish workers included: (a) making better use of Church media for pastoral and parish needs; and (b) better planning, especially when it comes to actions and events taken or organised by parishes. Here, the need of professionalism in parish works was noted as a need:

*Why are we to use amateur software in the parish, why are we to engage amateur people who try to come up with professional products? I am saying this because of the message, not because of the audience. One is to be professional so that the message is good, so why does the Church not use its assets to do so?* (PP3)

Another perceived need concerned <u>Diaconia (financial support, social issues, etc.) and Church helpers</u>. Participants expressed the perceived need for more Church helpers. It was maintained that such helpers are needed to help: (a) with parish activities, and (b) with distributing food

and other basic needs. Furthermore, parishioners maintained that the parish needs to address (a) the need for the financial assistance of some parishioners, and (b) the need to address substance abuse and alcohol problems in parishes:

*On Sunday, we find like four people who are under 65 and can afford to stay for three masses in the morning and for another one in the evening to take the temperature, but not during weekdays – we do not have anyone, either because they are old or because the young ones are at work during those times. We have a mass at nine – who will you find during that time?*
(PW7)

The need to include foreigners as part of Diaconal work was also mentioned. Here, some noted the diversity among parishioners, and argued that whilst there was no coordinated effort between Christians and members of other religions during the pandemic, Christians should simply find a way to integrate Easter Europeans, Arabs and other minorities (who may or may not be Christian), as they have specific needs and customs that should be acknowledged.

Similarly, participants noted the need for encouragement, support and keeping in contact. Here, participants mentioned: (a) the need for psychological accompaniment, (b) the need for people to get closer to God for companionship, (c) socialisation needs, and (d) the need for the Church to reach out more to people. Parish workers reiterated that there were a number of parishioners who felt lonely, especially the elderly. For example, it was noted that the elderly generally attend Church to socialise with others. As PW8 put it:

*Positive words, comforting words, words of courage. Not always negativity, fear. This should be tackled as well, as people would be suffering, so it is good to address it.* (PW8)

There were some pastoral workers who maintained that they don't know what the needs of Christians (and of the public in general) are, as everyone is different. Others pointed out the need for mass and liturgy and sacraments and sacramentals. Here, participants reiterated their views on the usefulness of streaming, and once again lamented the decrease in mass attendance; decreased participation in the sacraments, sacramentals, confession and the Eucharist; and a decreased number of people doing Confirmation. The repetition in participants' claims (across this and other organising themes) generally revolved around 'numbers talk'.

### *2.3.3   Convergences: Needs of Christians during the pandemic*

In terms of convergences, both the parish priests and the parish workers emphasised the importance of **keeping in mind the lessons learnt from the pandemic**, especially with regards to online services offered by the Church, the services provided by the laity in relation to parish work, and the increased awareness of people's needs. Furthermore, there seemed to be consensus on **the need for more laity to be involved** in relation to work associated with the Church, be it diaconal or service-based. Both the priests and the pastoral workers argued that **the services offered by the Church should adopt a more professional approach**, to avoid issues relating to amateur services and to remain relevant to a wider audience.

### *2.3.4   Divergences: Needs of Christians during the pandemic*

With regards to divergences, it seems that, when discussing Christians' needs, parish priests focused more on **the broader picture**. They stated that the focus during the pandemic was more on what is essential. On the other hand, the **parish workers were more concrete** when it comes to Christians' needs during the pandemic. Here, the focus was more on the fact that there are not enough helpers to help with the work required within parishes.

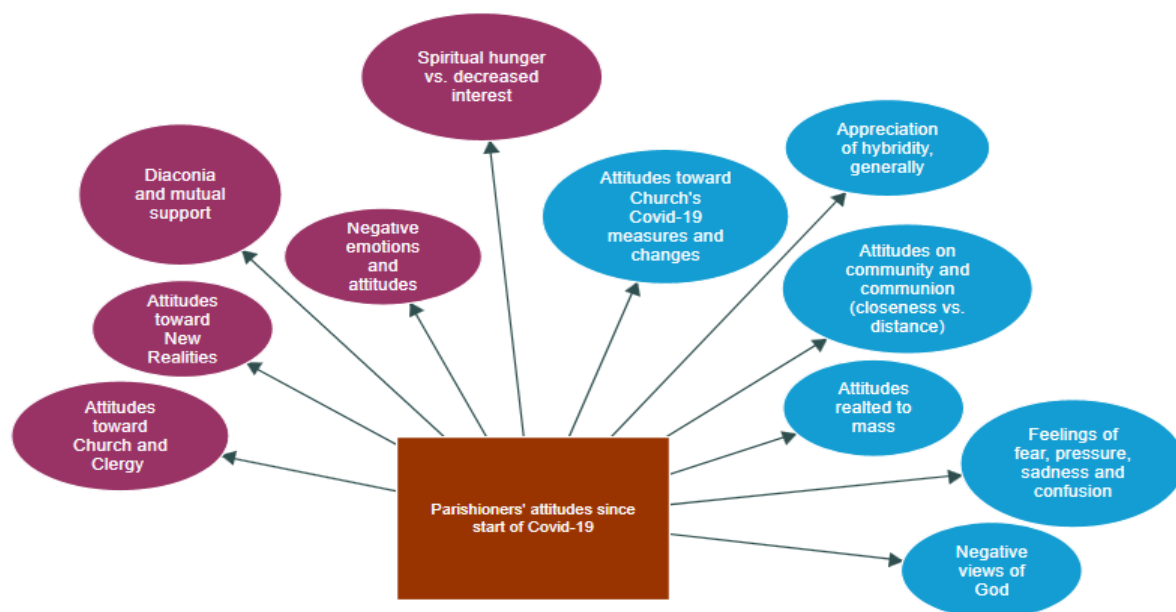## 2.4    Parishioners' attitudes since the start of COVID-19



Figure 10. Parish priests' (purple) and parish workers' (blue) views on parishioners' attitudes since the start of COVID-19.

### *2.4.1   Parish Priests: Parishioners' attitudes since the start of COVID-19*

The parish priests interviewed for this study maintained that people's <u>attitudes toward Church and clergy</u> improved during the pandemic. Parish priests argued that people's attitudes changed, due to the help people received by the clergy:

*I think that people's attitudes towards the Church, I think that we started to be trusted more, since we were there for them. That's what I think in general.* (PP2)

Moreover, parish priests maintained that people's <u>attitudes toward new realities</u> have changed, in that they now show an awareness of the new realities at hand. Parish priests stated that this awareness was shared by both parish priests and parishioners. The new realities mentioned included: (a) the total lack of community due to COVID-19, (b) different generations being impacted differently by the pandemic, and (c) what participants perceived as an individualistic culture. The general sense of unease, and attributions (to parishioners) of a decreased community vibe, can be appreciated in the following quotes:

*Naturally, the sense of community was reduced. One of the things that I noticed in Church; when Churches were re-opened and started operating under these new regulations, keeping the distance, etc. ... I laughed and said, I think that I really told people, "before I used to continually say, 'let's be together, let's be close to each other, let's participate, let's communicate – the mass is ours not mine'. However, now I am telling you, 'keep your distance from each other, separate yourselves from one another, enter the Church from one door and exit from the other, do not speak to each other outside the Church'". Before I used to tell them, "let's get out but stay a little bit on the parvis so that we can speak to each other after mass." I think that due to this pandemic, we lost the sense of community, and this had a serious effect when it comes to our physical contact with each other.* (PP2)

*The sense of solidarity increased. Not the same can be said when it comes to the supermarkets – here we forgot about solidarity and* [with people hoarding] *toilet paper, etc . In this regard, individualism came in, we went back to the Neolithic times in this respect.* (PP7)

As can be seen above, when asked about parishioners' attitudes, parish priests at times spoke about how they perceived parishioners' attitudes; but at other times, they simply reiterated their views on social change. Furthermore, parish priests maintained that during the COVID-19 pandemic, <u>diaconia & mutual support</u> increased; consequently, priests argued that parishioners expressed attitudes that were more supportive of the other (of neighbours, those in need, etc.). Activities organised by Caritas and KPD were mentioned once again, and held as being

indicative of parishioners' attitudes. However, <u>negative emotions and attitudes</u> among the parishioners were also noted by the parish priests. Participants mentioned: (a) depression, especially among those who lost someone to COVID-19, (b) anxiety, especially in relation to the pandemic and the 'new' way of life, (c) panic, (d) a generalised negative attitude toward life, (e) fear, and (f) sadness:

*It can be that* [the sense of community] *increased, but in another sense – in other areas like diaconia. I think that there was an increase in concern about the Other and this is still there. I think that I felt this more, lately, due to the Christmas period; there were a lot of initiatives by Caritas and KPD. Like it was revived, and we started to meet online, e.g., in two weeks, we did three meetings in relation to 'Kummissjoni Djakonija', whilst before we used to do one every two months.* (PP2)

*There were people who cried because of the Church, but I do not think that the cry was because the people could not go to Church, right? Or because kids could not go to the Catechism lessons. I think it was more of a general cry, as life was not 'normal' anymore.* (PP3)

Finally, parish priests distinguished between <u>spiritual hunger versus decreased interest</u>, and attributed both of these to parishioners, when asked about the attitudes of the latter. Priests talked about parishioners' decreased interest in spiritual matters and Church activities, and represented parishioners as being OK with not going to mass. At the same time (as per the tensions observed in the above organising themes), priests also mentioned the notion of 'spiritual hunger', which was expressed in terms of yearning for the Eucharist and yearning for community feeling – but not for homilies or the mass. As PP5 put it:

*There are a number of people who did not come back to the Church, and this shows that, in practice, this was not their priority.* (PP5)

### 2.4.2 Parish Workers: Parishioners' attitudes since the start of COVID-19

Parish workers spoke both about their own <u>attitudes toward the Church's COVID-19 measures and changes</u>, and about those of parishioners in general. Nonetheless, at times, they also spoke about what they perceived other parishioners' attitudes to be. Concerning COVID-19 measures, two principal positions arose: (a) some participants perceived parishioners as accepting and appreciating the Church's measures, and (b) others opposed the Church's measures and saw them as restrictive (or else attributed this view to parishioners in general). The former position argued that the Church's measures helped to safeguard people's health and lives; whereas the

latter was a reactionary stance that perceived the Church as being 'attacked by outside forces', both locally and internationally. Here, hopes (e.g., that Easter would be celebrated the following year), tensions (e.g., between physical and online mass/activities), and preoccupations (e.g., about whether feasts would be held), surfaced too:

*How the Church reacted to the COVID-19 pandemic in relation to the measures taken – there were those who accepted them and those who did not. Those who did accept the measures taken by the Church, understood the aim of the Church in this regard. For the Church, the human person has value, and thus it tries to take care of him/her.* (PW5)

*But then, we saw that the hairdresser can open their shop again, bar and restaurants can open as well, but the Church cannot open. I think that during those six weeks there was that sense – from the beginning of May to the 18ᵗʰ of June […] and the restrictive measures of those six weeks—I think that they were challenging. There was the perception that the Church did not put a lot of pressure to open again. That's what I can say.* (PW4)

Another important aspect that surfaced here, concerned a general appreciation of hybridity, among parishioners (as perceived by parish workers). That is, participants argued that people were generally welcoming of hybridity, both in terms of Mass, and in terms of other activities, like Lectio Divina and group meetings. By hybridity, most participants referred to a mix of online and offline activities. Participants argued that hybridity is the way forward in terms of evangelisation and pastoral work:

*So the urge, the need for something online, since there is no need for one to get out of his/her home, there is no need to find someone to take care of the children, or take care of the elderly, because most of the time we mention children, but in reality there are people who take care of elderly people and thus are not that flexible, they cannot come* [to events, etc.]. *So, I think that the hybrid approach is good and has value.* (PW3)

In contrast, attitudes on community and communion (closeness vs. distance) were slightly more contested, in that some participants noted the tearing apart of communities, and the sense of lethargy that swept across parishes. Here, participants maintained that if one cannot keep people involved in parish life now, then they will not be present in the future as they would get used to new lifestyles. On the other hand, other participants noted that people are now more aware of their family needs and of other people's needs, indicating feelings of closeness rather than distance:

*For sure, people are spending a lot of time in their homes, or maybe they are going for a walk in the countryside – before there were the activities,* [and] *voluntary work takes a lot of time. It depends how one looks at this.* PP8

With regards to <u>attitudes related to mass</u>, notions concerning dwindling numbers, the opportunities for online mass, and attributed patterns and causes for mass attendance or lack thereof, were mentioned once again by the pastoral workers. More concretely, <u>negative emotions and attitudes</u> featured too. In fact, it was clear that depression, confusion, pressure on children to adapt, and fear, were salient preoccupations for some parishioners. This featured also in the interviews with the parish priests. Furthermore, <u>negative views of God</u> featured too, this time being attributed more specifically to parishioners. As per the above text, parish workers here argued against some people's views that COVID-19 is a warning from God. Participants attributed this belief to parishioners but rejected it themselves.

### 2.4.3   Convergences: Parishioners' attitudes since the start of COVID-19

Both the parish priests and the pastoral workers argued that the majority of parishioners accepted the **measures and regulations surrounding Mass attendance**, despite some views to the contrary. Furthermore, **the hybrid approach** was considered as something positive by both groups interviewed. Both groups also argued that the hybrid approach should be retained, even after the pandemic. Furthermore, **negative emotions** among parishioners were also noted by both the parish priests and the parish workers.

### 2.4.4   Divergences: Parishioners' attitudes since the start of COVID-19

In contrast, whilst parish priests focused on **the lack of returnees to Church** (when these re-opened), the pastoral workers focused more on **the negative views of God** that they encountered among their communities. Furthermore, the parish priests focused more on the attitudes of the parishioners in relation to **day-to-day life**, whilst the focus of the parish workers was more on the attitudes of the people towards **the Church and its guidelines** in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic.

## 3.      The Future of Parishes

The organising theme *The Future of Parishes* tapped aspects related to participants' views on the parishes' immediate priorities, post-COVID-19 parish priorities, and post-COVID-19

effects on parish life. This global theme also tapped participants' views on how parish life and work *will* be like in 5 years' time, and how it *should* be like. This global theme was particularly future-oriented, when compared with the other global themes, despite some overlaps being evident across and within both organising and basic themes.
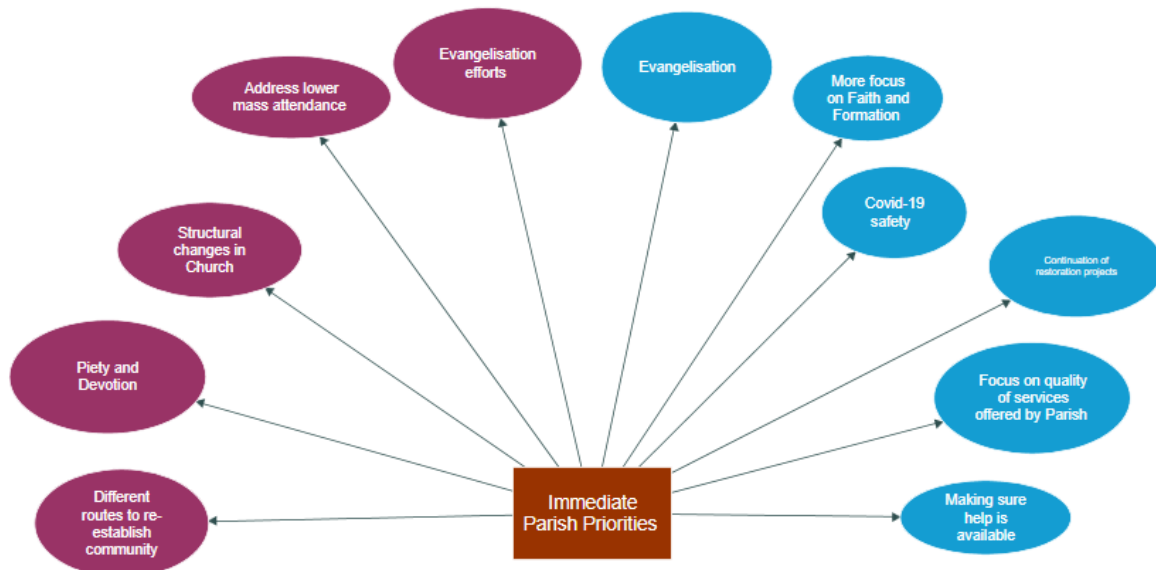
## 3.1 Immediate Parish Priorities



Figure 11. Parish priests' (purple) and parish workers' (blue) views on immediate parish priorities.

### 3.1.1 Parish Priests: Immediate parish priorities

When speaking about *immediate* parish priorities, the need to address lower mass attendance surfaced among parish priests. Here, once again, parish priests spoke about the continuously dwindling numbers of mass attendees. They noted that this phenomenon started prior to the COVID-19 pandemic but argued that the pandemic accelerated the decline in mass attendance. Priests also maintained that there is the need to contribute to the formation of mass-goers as joyful Christians:

> *One of the things that I feel is that those who do come* [to church] *are a bridge between the Church and those who do not come. And therefore, I repeat this – as the Bishop told us, in families – because it's in families that people live. So, when a mother comes to Church regularly, I think it is a priority for her to learn that when she goes home, it is important for her family to see her as a joyful Christian. This is how the message is passed on. If she just tells them, 'how come you did not go to mass?', 'is this a new trend, you do not believe anymore?': All this will do is that they'll sink deeper probably, or she becomes irrelevant,*

*they don't pay her any notice. But that mother who goes back home singing, and even though she might find a mess in the kitchen after her daughter cooked some food for her boyfriend, or after finding clothes on the bathroom floor, she continues singing – that mother, I think she would be passing on Jesus's message to a greater degree, you see? Never mind that she might come to me crying and telling me that her children are breaking her down […] So there is a very concrete form of pastoral work, which can be done by those who already come to Church and are getting formation.* (PP2)

Parish priests mentioned different solutions for better formation, framing these as immediate priorities. For instance, they maintained that one should invest in <u>different routes to re-establish (a sense of) community</u>. Examples of such routes include face-to-face gatherings, online gatherings, and the re-establishing of contact with various social groups, such as youth groups, married couples' groups, children's groups, and so on. Furthermore, parish priests maintained that the set-up of new parish groups to help families in need and the re-establishing of contact with volunteers are of utmost importance:

*When we come back, eh, I do not like them and I do not, I try not to organise social activities, but after* [COVID-19,] *we will have to organise many social activities…* (PP1)

Furthermore, parish priests maintained that, to re-build a sense of community within the parish, it is of utmost importance to try and form human relationships in God. Participants also perceived the need for the parish to attract professionals as much as possible, for work purposes and for the provision of services. For example, priests mentioned the idea of having professionals invited to parish social gatherings – not necessarily for the activity per se, but to bring them closer to the parish priest and the parish community.

Moreover, parish priests maintained that <u>evangelisation efforts</u> should not merely involve sacramental work. Rather, participants stated that such efforts should also focus on non-sacramental pastoral work, diaconia, long-term evangelisation, addressing spiritual dryness, encouraging prayer, and enriching synodality. This was seen as requiring a coordinated diocesan effort:

*Secondly, what I see as a priority, erm, is the need for more, erm, for broader pastoral work. Not the sacramental type. You see? Erm, and it's the same, I mean, it involves preparation, a certain openness, and commitment. Even for prepared laity to get involved – meaning that we are to have trust in each other.* (PP6)

Contrasting ideas about <u>piety and devotion</u> featured as well. These were mentioned both in the context of local traditional devotions, such as parish feasts and the decoration of the Churches, and in terms of the importance of prayer among parishioners—especially prayers and devotion towards Christ and Our Lady. Furthermore, parish priests mentioned the need for <u>structural changes within the Church</u> – referring to changes on the administrative level, such as changes in the members within certain parish groups, and changes in terms of a re-structuring of Commissions and of the pastoral methodologies currently being employed. The importance of being open to change, rather than resisting it, surfaced during such discussions. The reason here, participants argued, would be to sustain the sense of dialogue promoted in *Fratelli Tutti*.

### 3.1.2    Parish Workers: Immediate parish priorities

The parish workers interviewed for this research study maintained that parishes should <u>focus on COVID-19 safety</u>. Participants insisted that Church helpers are to continue monitoring people's behaviour in Church as much as possible, so that the parish adheres to the guidelines issued by the Health Authorities, mainly in terms of sanitization and the use of visors and masks. Another priority which was mentioned by the laity was the <u>continuation of restoration projects</u>. Here, participants stated that since the funds are there, such projects should continue. Participants also mentioned <u>evangelisation</u> as a priority. They insisted that it is of utmost importance since face-to-face meetings are no longer possible. It was emphasised that the discourse used by priests should be appropriate to the audience at hand. As previously mentioned for diaconia, the need to diversify, and to be 'targeted' and specific in one's approach was highlighted:

> *A change in mentality is important, a change in the mentality of how the message is conveyed. We should get away from the pulpit, get out of the Church, we should go out there, so the priority is definitely the change in mentality. So, I identified for you the need for people to come back, those who left and ideally some new people as well. I identified evangelisation as a priority, because it could be that online instruments are important, needed and effective; and a change in mentality which ... listen, opportunities, we cannot remain closed within the Church building...we have to go out and reach the different target audiences that we have, because we should not keep reasoning as if we have just one type of audience... We have different target audiences.* (PW3)

Participants stated that priority should be given to the <u>quality of services offered by parish</u>. Participants argued that there should be a move away from focusing on *quantity* and toward a

focus on the *quality* of what is being offered by the Church. This was mainly mentioned in relation to mass, mass attendance, parish feasts, priests' homilies, and the importance of having priests be trained to speak in front of a camera and to evangelise through technology.

Some participants stated that the priests' priority should be the parish rather than other activities (such as other groups/entities he might be involved in). Parish workers' representation of the priest saw the good priest as one who is perpetually present in the parish, and available for others. Participants also cited, as a priority, the need to move away from investing in relatively unimportant matters, such as Basilicas, cultures of pride, and so on. Rather, according to participants, there should be <u>more focus on the faith and formation</u> of parishioners, and on <u>making sure help is available</u> and provided when needed. Participants argued that, during such times, the focus should be on helping: the poor, those who are stuck in their homes, and those who are suffering from anxiety. As per PW7's views:

> *I'll mention our parish. Here we only have* [a few] *priests, who are still active. We can't accept a situation where I phone the Church and no one answers. If accidentally – and these things did happen, because people do speak and they also spoke to me – there was a person who was dying and they phoned the Church for a priest to go quickly, but there was no one available ... Yes.* […] *The parish priest maybe had another meeting on the day – but the other priests? One was at* [mentions place]*, and the other one went and I do not know where he was ... And I think he has another organisation and he goes there. And there is another one whom you do not see. Some priests, you do not see them or else you see them for mass, but then you do not find them in the parish.* (PW7)

### 3.1.3   *Convergences: Immediate parish priorities*

When it comes to convergences, both the parish priests and the pastoral workers maintained that **evangelisation should be one of the main priorities**. Furthermore, they both maintained that the discourse used in relation to evangelisation by the parish priests should be **targeted to the specific audience/s** being addressed, due to a plurality of voices and (sub-)cultures in contemporary society. Furthermore, participants maintained that this would make the **parishioners feel closer to the parish and to other parishioners** within their community.

### 3.1.4   *Divergences: Immediate parish priorities*

Parish priests emphasised the importance of **bringing parishioners back to mass** to a greater degree – the number of attendees was considered as important here. Parish priests also highlighted the importance of **engaging professional people within the parishes** to a greater extent. On the other hand, the parish workers emphasised the importance of **keeping the**

**Church safe**, due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, the parish workers mentioned the importance of **having a priest who is always available in the parish**.

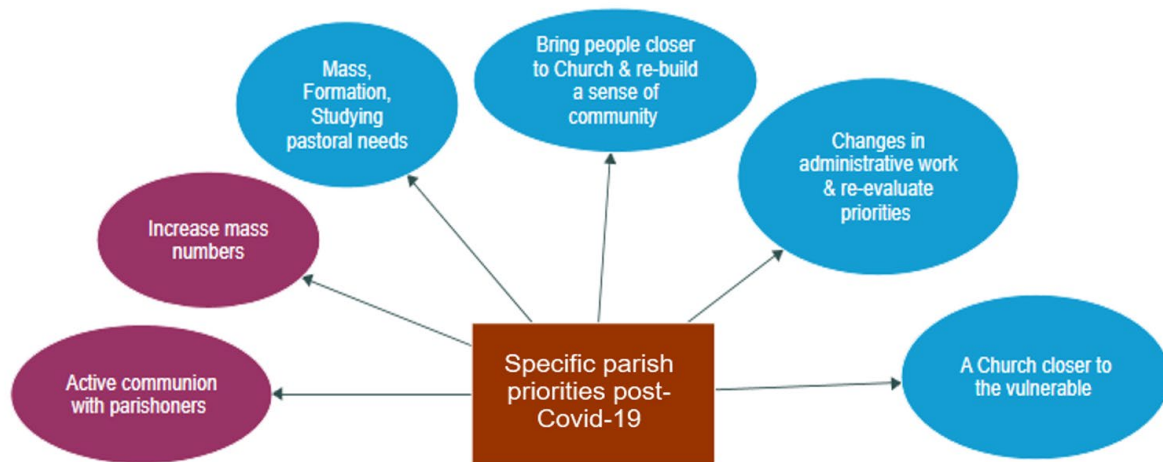## 3.2 Specific parish priorities post-COVID-19



Figure 12. Parish priests' (purple) and parish workers' (blue) views on *specific* parish priorities post-COVID-19.

One organising theme revolved around *specific* parish priorities in a post-COVID-19 world, whereas another organising theme revolved around *general* parish priorities post-COVID-19. The former theme describes participants' views on their *specific parish*, whereas the latter theme describes participants' views on *parishes in general*. This section starts with specific parish priorities post-COVID-19.

### 3.2.1 Parish Priests: Specific parish priorities post-COVID-19

Parish priests maintained the importance of <u>active communion with parishioners</u> in their specific parish. Here, participants argued that the main aims should be to: reach out to the families of Catechism pupils; organise adoration sessions, formation seminars and 'lectio divina'; build the 'Church-Family'; work with kids and the youth; re-start group meetings in parishes; offer words of encouragement; and create 'a net of contacts' for people. The parish priests insisted that such things are important as they make the parishioners feel that the Church is their family, and this helps build a sense of trust among them. PP7 and PP8 stated:

*What is certain is that after the pandemic, eh we have to reach out […] In my case, I am sure that I will start from the families who have kids at the age of Catechism lessons.* (PP7)

*Building a net of contacts – the parish should feel like a family, people should get to know one other.* (PP8)

Moreover, parish priests also mentioned the need to <u>increase mass attendance</u> in their specific parish – yet again. Here, participants mentioned physical attendance, the numbers of views of online mass celebrations, and similar metrics. However, they maintained that the lessons learnt during the pandemic should not be scrapped. In this respect, parish priests also discussed the benefits of a hybrid mode—a combination of off- and on-line interactions among parishioners. As PP7 put it:

*Certain masses for particular occasions, I still did them online, since it is good to keep what we have learnt from the pandemic. We cannot just remove it now […] There were several who said, 'are you going to stop the online mass now?' From my side, I wished not to continue, since people will remain comfortable in their homes. I agree with a hybrid mode. In fact, when it comes to adoration, I continued to do it online once a month.*

### 3.2.2 *Parish Workers: Specific parish priorities post-COVID-19*

With regards to the post-COVID-19 priorities of their specific parish, the parish workers stressed the importance of having the <u>Church become closer to the vulnerable</u>. Here, the laity maintained that it is of utmost importance that the parish priest understands his parish and tries as much as possible to be close to those parishioners who are in need. Participants claimed that attention should be given to the elderly, to foreigners, and to those who are feeling lonely and fearful; and that new realities within the parish should be addressed:

*To understand the sick more and be present with them in difficult times. Sickness is always there, and sometimes one won't know that a person is passing through a very difficult period.* (PW9)

Furthermore, the parish workers maintained that home blessings should be an occasion where the parish priest meets the families and gets to know them better. Since face-to-face interaction was kept at a bare minimum during the pandemic, participants stressed the importance of <u>bringing people closer to the Church and re-building a sense of community</u> in the parish. Parish workers maintained that the priests should do their utmost to bring people closer to Christ and back to Church. The need to re-unite groups was also mentioned as important, as this helps re-build a sense of community once again:

*I think that the most important thing…it is very important that the priests try to bring back those people who left the Church completely…I think that this is the most important thing.*
(PW6)

<u>Changes in administrative work and a re-evaluation of priorities</u> were also mentioned by the laity. They argued that getting back to 'normality' will happen, but with a slow pace. Participants also shared the sense that parish priests should be present where required—especially in certain group meetings within the parish itself. This was mentioned specifically when it came to groups of the elderly, since the latter find it more difficult to meet without the presence of the parish priest among them.

Finally, pastoral workers highlighted the need to address issues related to <u>mass, formation and the study of pastoral needs</u>, post-COVID-19. PW2 argued:

*This should be a collective effort so that then a pastoral plan can be designed […] A survey should also be conducted…distributed either in the Church or to every household, professional analysis should then be carried out, and then a pastoral plan would be drawn up for each parish.* (PW2)

Furthermore, parishioners suggested that to reach more people, mass time slots should be changed, since more people nowadays work outside the home and have various other commitments. Parish workers also suggested that: (a) the parish should start organising online formation seminars for post-Confirmation kids; and (b) a study should be conducted on today's pastoral needs. Here, a pastoral plan which takes into consideration the parish population and their needs, was seen as being necessary.

### 3.2.3   Convergences: Specific parish priorities post-COVID-19

With regards to specific parish priorities post-COVID-19, both the parish priests and the parish workers stated that one of the main priorities should be to **tackle mass attendance**. Another convergence concerned the perceived priority for the Church to be: (a) **closer to the vulnerable**; and (b) **more active within the community itself**. Here, the presence of parish priests within the community and within Church groups was cited as important.

### 3.2.4   Divergences: Specific parish priorities post-COVID-19

**Parish workers mentioned more parish priorities** than the parish priests. In fact, whilst the parish priests focused more on **active communion with parishioners** and **the increase in mass attendees**, the laity also mentioned **the need changing the way administrative parish work is conducted**, and the importance of **re-evaluating priorities within the parish**.

**3.3    General parish priorities post-COVID-19**
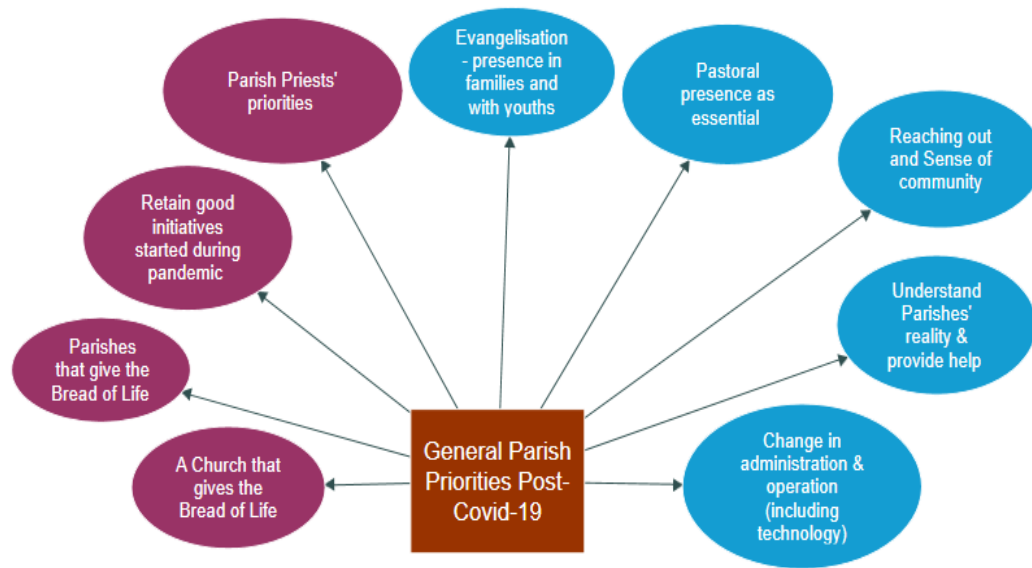


### 3.3.1   *Parish Priests: General parish priorities post-COVID-19*

With regards to post-COVID-19 priorities that are *general* to different parishes, the notion of <u>'a Church that gives the Bread of Life'</u> surfaced among parish priests. They spoke of the Church as a 'good Samaritan', a 'healer in battle', who relates to people without pomposity and difficult jargon. The notion of a 'beautiful and joyful Gospel' was emphasised. Simple living, community, and getting to know people as persons loved by God, were notions that featured:

*After the pandemic, the people, will be like a man who was robbed and left along the street by the thieves. The Church must be the Good Samaritan. Without pomposity and difficult words. A Church that heals – a hospital in a battle camp. Obviously, with its story, the Church offers healing through the Gospel – a nice Gospel, however, not an added burden.* (PP8)

Another priority that came up was that of forming <u>'Parishes that give the Bread of Life'</u>. Here, the parish priests focused on parishes, spoke of religiosity and spiritual communities, and the perception that many people are turning elsewhere for spiritual nourishment, instead of parishes. Here, interestingly, 'religiosity' was contrasted with 'spirituality', the latter being represented as potentially leading people away from what is essential to the faith. No clear answer was provided on how to calibrate one's pastoral methodology to address this issue. As PP7 put it:

*And in fact, we do notice this. Some people who are spiritual, are no longer coming to the parishes […] They go to groups or entities which are offering them 'only spirituality'.*
(PP7)

<u>Parish priests' priorities</u> were also mentioned. Generally, these were mentioned to point out things that are going wrong. The argument here was that some parish priests are wasting a lot of energy on trivial things. Participants also argued that feasts confuse priests' paternal role and take away a lot of energy that could be invested in priestly counselling, confession, and pastoral work:

*And no, for example issues related to feasts, these things take a lot of energy, a lot of problems, and then our essential things, like focusing on what the other person is telling you when someone is confessing or is asking for some counselling, you can't concentrate that much then. You will start to see them as unimportant; arguments soon start in such cases*
[laughs] (PP7)

Furthermore, the parish priests maintained that one should <u>retain the good initiatives started during the pandemic</u>, namely: (a) contributions by Catechists and parents, (b) lay initiatives (e.g., on social media), (c) initiatives started by parents, and (d) more space provided to the laity. Some parish priests noted that parishes are mixed, that is, some do give space to the laity, whilst others still retain control:

*The Catechists, I understand, obviously, that they do their own preparation, etc., but, but there are some parents who are also prepared, are teachers – and there are those who are not, but are still capable of delivering what they know. So, if they did contribute, why should I not accept their contribution then? I try to give some space, even with regards to this, like when you have a school – right? Like in a school, normally you have the teachers, true, but the parents' contribution might help as well. Right? One has to see how to work around it – and it might be the case that one opens up a little bit more, as well, eh ...* (PP6)

### 3.3.2   *Parish Workers: General parish priorities post-COVID-19*

The parish workers interviewed for this research, maintained that one of the general parish priorities post-COVID-19, concerns the need to implement <u>changes in administration and operation (including technology)</u>. Here, it was maintained that the Church should adapt to changing circumstances, especially in relation to the use of technology. Another important point that was mentioned here, was that the parish priests – especially the older ones – need to

change their mentality to adapt more to the changing circumstances of the parish – especially in relation to the parishioners themselves. As PW7 put it:

*We want a mentality that 'the world has changed'. The world changed a lot, and the Pope is also showing them that there are certain things that need to be changed. Are you understanding, you cannot keep holding onto an old system, that's the reason I am telling you that one should start to think about such things now – so that once this pandemic is over, we would be prepared. It's better than leaving the pandemic to settle down and then seeing what needs to be done afterwards. It will be too late then, we won't be prepared, right? (PW7)*

Moreover, the participants considered evangelisation – in terms of presence in families and among youth – as being important too, representing families and youth as the basis of a healthy society. Here, parish workers maintained that house blessings should not be mere 'house' blessings; rather, the focus should be for the parish priest to meet the family and get to know them better. Furthermore, parish workers argued that the parish priest should also try to contact his parishioners, even during day-to-day tasks such as shopping at the grocer – this would allow him to get to know his parishioners and attract some of them to Church:

*Exactly, to take interest […] make a difference, we had in the past, he is still alive. We had a priest who loved, for example, to go for a walk or to shop at the grocer and talks, it's nothing special. But I think that his presence, people were affected by it. I think that here in Malta, people still want such things. (PW5)*

The view that pastoral presence is essential was also mentioned by the parish workers, who argued that the focus should be on drawing up a pastoral plan and trying to adhere to it as much as possible. Here, being present and available was mentioned as a basic practice intended to get parishioners back to the parish and to set the ball rolling. As PW5 put it:

*I think I believe, what I believe most is in being present. Being present is enough, as one will be able to get the ball rolling, the ball will start rolling slowly, then other things will slowly follow. (PW5)*

During such uncertain times, participants also mentioned the importance of reaching out and re-building a sense of community within the parish – this theme revisited notions that were discussed across various global themes, concerning the value of getting people together, of having united parishes, of having people express solidarity and closeness, and of support to those in need:

*Even the sense of welcome, to tell you the truth, I think that the ushers did some difference, the ushers are offering a sense of welcome to the people. When you take the temperature, it is not something that one came and just sat down like before.* (PW10)

The importance of <u>understanding parishes' reality and providing help</u> accordingly, was also mentioned. Here, participants once again mentioned – as a general parish priority post-COVID-19 – the need for parish priests to understand their parish and the parishioners. Participants argued that this would help both in terms of the help that people can provide to each other, and also in terms of retaining/building a sense of community. This is because, as per participants' arguments, the pandemic showed people what their priorities should be. Parish workers mentioned the fact that the parish priest might, after all, not know the 'realities' of families, as strictly speaking, he does not experience such difficulties on a daily basis:

*Don't forget that the parish priest does not live in families, he lives in his own home. So, he is distant from the reality of families. It's fine, he is living in the parish, but he does not know about the kids' problems, homework, studying, O'levels and A'levels and other commitments, you understand? So ehm, ehm…since he lives on his own, he is distant. I am not telling you that he should go and live or get married.* (PW2)

### 3.3.3   Convergences: General parish priorities post-COVID-19
Both the parish priests and the pastoral workers interviewed for this research maintained that **the presence of the parish priest within his own parish** is of the utmost importance. Participants stated that the priests could simply be **present during day-to-day activities** – without the need for pompous or formal meetings. Furthermore, **the presence of the parish priest within the families** was also considered as important.

### 3.3.4   Divergences: General parish priorities post-COVID-19
Some parish priests maintained that **more laity are to be involved in parish life**, for example, in Catechism lessons. In contrast, parish workers focused more on culture, that is, they maintained that there needs to be **a change in mentality vis-à-vis parish administration**, in particular, a change in the mentality of older priests – in turn, this would help the laity will become more involved in parish life. However, overall, there were very few divergences here.
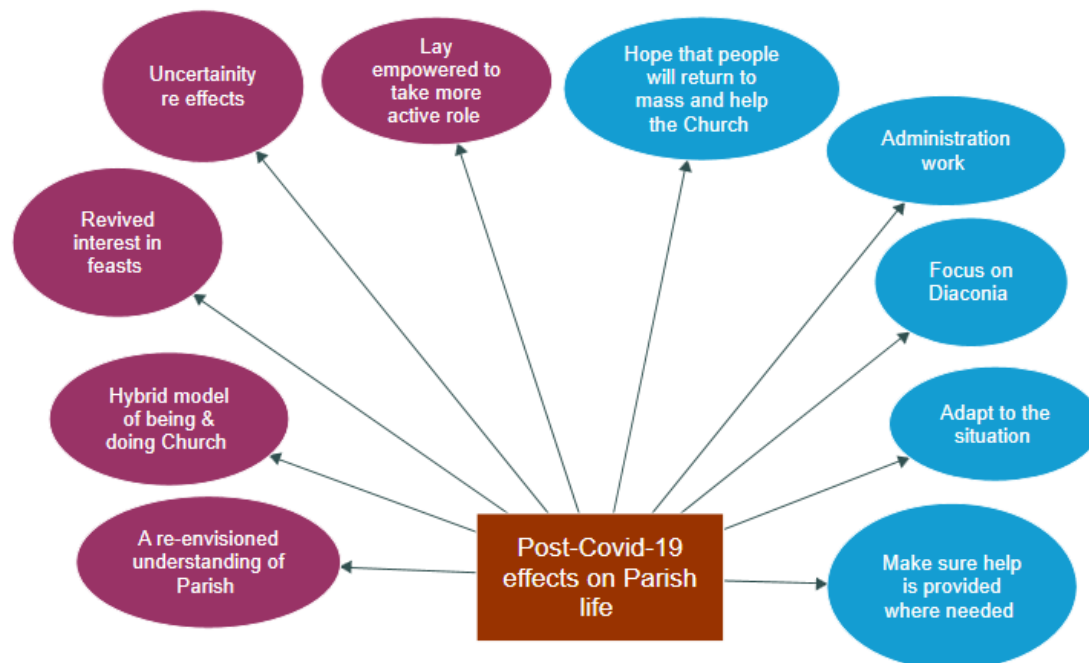
## 3.4 Post-COVID-19 effects on parish life



Figure 14. Parish priests' (purple) and parish workers' (blue) views on post-COVID-19 effects on parish life.

### *3.4.1 Parish Priests: Post-COVID-19 effects on parish life*

Priests emphasised the notion of <u>re-envisioning one's understanding of the parish</u>, such that parishes balance 'quantity' and 'quality'. This view was justified by recourse to the view that it would be easier for people to return to their 'normal' day-to-day life than to return to 'normal' life in the spiritual sense – this was framed as an effect of the pandemic:

> *The return of parishioners to 'normal' life will be faster, than the return to a 'normal' Christian life – in relation to attendance for religious activities. There is the risk that some people may remain distant from the Church.* (PP5)

Furthermore, parish priests aspired for a more *professionally organised* diaconate, arguing that evangelisation and character formation should be a priority, given the pandemic's effects. Issues surrounding resource-management came up, given that during the pandemic, there was more cooperation among different church groups (e.g., they no longer held their activities on the same days/time slots). Participants hoped that this positive effect of the pandemic would persist post-COVID-19:

*What I mean is, for example, I already mentioned it…when it comes to groups…I am going to mention two in particular…the altar boys group and the Museum…speaking personally, this was something that really used to hurt me… […] I really used to get hurt when, for example, the Church provides good opportunities or else is celebrating something important and there is no presence, there won't be that contribution, that commitment. It might depend on the persons…but not always. Today, however, I am seeing a difference and I'm glad about it…that one group does not disrupt […] the activity of another group. For example, during the novena, nothing is being organised during that time, since the altar boys would be providing their service in the parish.* (PP6)

Moreover, parish priests spoke of the need for the <u>hybrid models of being and doing Church</u>. This was mentioned primarily since people might have become comfortable with online/TV mass – once again reducing the idea of being 'Christian' or being 'spiritual' to the 'mass'. Here, some parish priests expressed their concern that online mass might be replacing face-to-face celebrations:

*I do not know, but there is something that I am afraid of – namely that people find it comfortable to stay at home and watch the mass on television, do you understand?* (PP3)

Hybrid models were also mentioned by the parish priests, as they might be creative ways to reach out to more people, in a post-COVID-19 scenario:

*Small communities of people, that are already used to meeting this way … as I think that post-COVID-19, we need to use these methods much more. Before, we used to inform people that we have a meeting, we had the parish pastoral centre, etc… We were happy that way. However, now I think that we have to use these technological methods as much as possible…* (PP2)

Furthermore, the parish priests were hopeful that, after the pandemic, the <u>laity would be empowered to take more active roles</u> within the parish. Parish priests saw this as the way forward, and as a practice that should be retained. The roles mentioned revolved around diaconia, prayer meetings, and Catechism lessons. At the same time, the possibility of a <u>revived interest in feasts</u> was noted too, given the potential of festas to provide opportunities for people to communicate with each other. Others were more cautious and expressed <u>uncertainty regarding the effects</u> of the COVID-19 pandemic on parish life:

*It depends on their spirit. Seeing it from the outside, it is not something wrong, the feast, with all that it involves and the opportunity it provides for people to communicate with each other,*

*to participate. Even when speaking about the collection of money—"where did they go?"— people will feel that they are participating. It might be that it is not something I like, maybe, to make the fireworks, but there is participation. The feast offers a lot of opportunities. I think that in one way or another, feasts will be revived.* (PP2)

### 3.4.2  Parish Workers: Post-COVID-19 effects on parish life

The parish workers maintained the importance of <u>adapting to the situation</u> even though it might be difficult to say how things will be post-COVID-19. Here, parish workers maintained that one is to take the necessary decisions as per the current situation –for example, using technology to contact people and hold online meetings. As part of adapting, participants also mentioned the importance of research, and of thinking things through more broadly:

*I think that to get back to 'normal' life, we have to look for the signs of the times. I think that the approach must change. If something was applicable before the COVID-19 pandemic, it does not mean that it will still be applicable after the COVID-19 pandemic.* (PW5)

Furthermore, parish workers maintained that the pandemic would leave an impact on parish <u>administration work</u>. Here, personal initiative was cited as important, and participants reiterated their call for the greater involvement of the laity in parishes, whilst also emphasising the need to tailor (administrative and other) roles to people's capabilities and interests:

*There should be a change in the people, even when it comes to myself, I do not want to remain here* [i.e., involved in their current position]. *I told him that I would like to continue helping but not as a mediator – it cannot be. First, nowadays I am different than seven years ago, I am getting older. I would love to continue helping the Church and to give some of my time.* (PW7)

The desire to <u>focus on diaconia</u> post-COVID-19 was mentioned too. In this case, diaconia was explicitly linked with the opportunity (post-COVID-19) for the laity to make their voices heard. These views re-presented the church as a bottom-up organic structure composed of people passionate for social change – as opposed to a clericalist organisation:

*Outreach by the church is important. After the pandemic, I think that we should work on what we have said: a church that reaches out, a welcoming church, a church that accompanies community members, reaching out and accompanying, so that the church will make a difference. How ready are we for this?* (PW10)

Furthermore, when speaking about post-COVID-19 effects on parish life, the parish workers hoped that people would return to mass and help the Church. Once again, the reduction of Christian life to 'the mass' re-surfaced. Participants put forward different views on whether people would become active within the church once again or not, advancing different attributions and presumptions. As PW8 put it:

*Where everything stopped, I think that some time will pass before people decide to dedicate some of their time to the parish once again. The speed by which this will start will be slower. Like, when it all started – it took some time to reach the point that was reached … there was a form of acceleration. Although such things are nice, they require a lot of sacrifice. One has to offer a lot of their time.*

Linked to this was the idea that parish workers should ensure that help is provided where needed (e.g., for people who suffered financially or health-wise). Thus, despite being asked about *the effects* of the pandemic, participants expressed their hopeful views for a better future.

### 3.4.3 Convergences: Post-COVID-19 effects on parish life

Both parish priests and pastoral workers maintained that the **laity should be given more power/roles** within the Church and the parish itself. Their case rested on two main points: (a) laity involvement would enable the parish priest to focus more on parish work suited to his training, and (b) the push toward greater lay involvement could inspire more people to involve themselves in church activities. Whilst lay involvement was sometimes discussed as valuable in and of itself, at other times, its strategic aspects (e.g., in terms of attracting adherents) were emphasised slightly more. Another important convergence concerned **the extent to which parishes should adapt post-COVID-19**. That is, both groups generally favoured **a hybrid mode** (i.e., both online and offline Church activities and participation), going forward. Here, a common pattern of argumentation appealed to **the inevitability of hybridity**, particularly due to the irreversible social changes brought about by COVID-19.

### 3.4.4 Divergences: Post-COVID-19 effects on parish life

Parish priests argued more explicitly that there will be **less parishioners** active in parish milieus post-COVID-19. In contrast, parish workers were **slightly more optimistic** that passionate individuals would involve themselves in parish activities once again, especially if they are approached by the laity and not by the parish priests themselves.

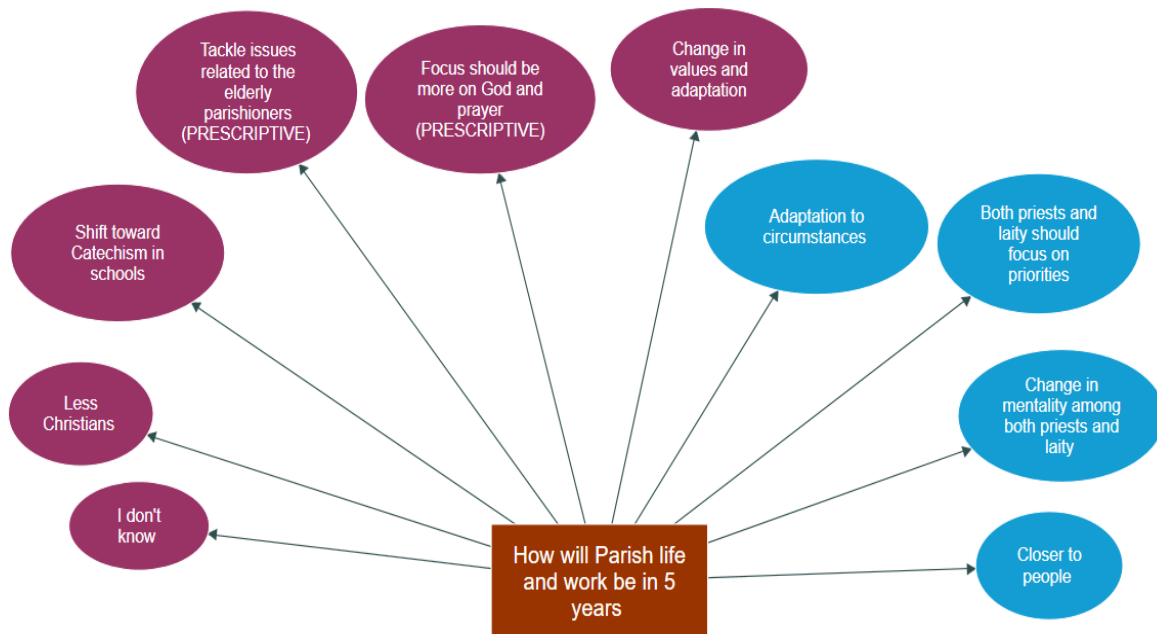**3.5    How will parish life and work be in 5 years**



Figure 15. Parish priests' (purple) and parish workers' (blue) views on how parish life and work *will* be like in 5 years.

Arguments relating to how parish life *will be* and those relating to how it *should be* were often conflated in participants' accounts. This is commonplace in qualitative research. To present results in a more sensible manner, 'will' arguments were distinguished from 'should' arguments, but in cases where these overlapped, this is noted in the text. This section starts with describing descriptive ('will') arguments, and is followed by a separate section on prescriptive ('should') arguments.

*3.5.1    Parish Priests: How will parish life and work be in 5 years*

Parish priests maintained that in 5 years' time, there will clearly be a change in values, and therefore adaptation will be inevitable. Participants rarely specified what values they were speaking about, and generally presumed that their ideas were consensual ones (cf. Marks & Miller, 1987). Nonetheless, some sociological patterns were identified, and these converged around a perceived increase in individualism and materialism. As PP3 put it:

*There are other values, I cannot say that there are no new values, and I do not want to say that there are no values or that there will not be any values, but, relativism, narcissism, hedonism, one's career…in my opinion, these are becoming more important…alienation, non-stop work, the focus on money, the economy, for me these things are becoming more god than God.* (PP3)

This reflected the tension between certain ideas of 'being Church' (and the related loss of the Church's hegemonic power) and the broader society. More prescriptively, parish priests reiterated the importance of involving younger generations in socio-political activities of interest to them, such as environmental issues:

*I imagine that if we try our best to involve the younger generations in the areas they like—for example, interest in society, in politics, in the environment…we should be open and offer such services where they can come, and we work together on such things.* (PP2)

For the question concerning how parish life and work will be in five years' time, some priests frankly stated, '<u>I don't know</u>':

[laughs] *We cannot even talk on how things will be the coming October! Whether things will be fine* [laughs]. *Let alone how things will be in 5 years' time!* [laughs] (PP7)

Moreover, parish priests maintained that in five years' time there will be <u>less Christians</u>. This was stated both in terms of (a) there being less people attending mass (e.g., the idea that children only attend mass if parents take them, that shallow faith yields a certain type of mass attendees, etc.); and in terms of (b) there being less priests and laity to work with (e.g., less active participation in parish life, more time-management considerations, issues surrounding unavailable resources, etc.):

*If we continue to offer 'fidi' which is either tied to one person or is just superficial, we will end up with a small community, lacking energy, people eager to know about each other. Even if they are very intelligent when it comes to ecclesiastical language, even if the discourse used is 'current'!* (PP8)

*Less people but more convinced. This will only happen if we have convinced Christians and if we, as a parish, propose something convincing.* (PP8)

*Not to be liked by people, but to build disciples. If, so as not to hurt anyone, I spend my time celebrating mass for fifteen individuals… I think that, with some persuasion, five of these would attend another mass … these happen every day, five will hear mass in the evening and the other five will choose not to attend.* (PP1)

Interestingly, there were some participants who noted a <u>shift toward Catechism in schools</u>, as opposed to the more traditional Catechism lessons. Priests' fear was that children who attend

Catechism lessons within their own school, would not be able to build a sense of belonging with their parish in the future:

> *The other challenge that we mentioned, is that of the number of kids who are attending Catechism lessons in their own schools. These children do not have any contact with the parish they live in, at all.* (PP4)

### 3.5.2  Parish Workers: How will parish life and work be in 5 years

Parish workers emphasised parish adaptation to different circumstances in the future. Here, participants stated that parish life and work will depend on several aspects: (a) the parish priest in charge of the parish in five years' time; (b) the laity who will be involved in parish work and life in five years' time; (c) the amount of people residing in the parish who are originally from other localities/countries; (d) whether priests' language will be understandable by all those attending mass (e.g., younger audiences); and (e) the degree to which younger people will be involved in parish life. On a more prescriptive note, diaconia and work in the social sphere were mentioned as important.

> *I am really convinced that if we had to have a discussion on what needs to be done, we will realise that we need professional diaconia.* (PW4)

> *I think that it depends on the volunteers, on the people, on the priests who will be present here during that period. If the same people remain, you will end up having the same things.* (PW8)

Parish workers also argued that there will be a change in the mentality of both the priests and the laity. Three points were mentioned, both descriptively and prescriptively: (a) the need for youth involvement in parishes, as opposed to excessive reliance on elderly parishioners; (b) a change in the mentality of parish priests (e.g., not relegating extra work to parish workers); and (c) a change in some parish priests' homilies, especially in relation to content and duration:

> *This is something which needs to come from above. What I mean is that a homily of twenty minutes ... ... I really like to listen to those by the Archbishop: he preaches for about five to six minutes. Here, people are used to homilies of twenty minutes, and it seems that there is a competition here between three priests revolving around who spends the most time preaching* [laughs]. *Are you understanding? Literally, if one takes twenty minutes, the other will spend twenty-one minutes. Literally, the Archbishop is giving an example, but these things need to be monitored.* (PW2)

More prescriptively, parish workers maintained that there should be a clear distinction between the parish priests' role and that of the parish workers. Here, they meant that even though the parish workers might be willing to help, they cannot be given certain tasks:

*I'm sorry to say these things but…. That's why I told you…we cannot be left alone. One cannot say, 'oh there's* [so-and-so]*…or 'there's Joseph' or 'there's Mary'. 'We will inform them and they'll do it!' No, if it is the role of the priest, then the priest should do that task. I cannot do it for him…* (PP7)

On a more hopeful note, some participants maintained that in the coming five years, the Church can become closer to the people, but only if it speaks their language. Here, participants cited Pope Francis as an example of someone who uses accessible intelligent discourse:

*I mean, that we are to be understood by the people. We cannot continue using certain words…This is what the Pope is showing us. I will mention the Pope again, the Pope shows us, by what He says and by what He is doing. How come we are still rooted in the mentality of feeling superior?* (PW7)

Parish workers also referred to a greater focus on priorities. Here, it seems that the participants focused more on how parish life and work *should* be, rather than on how it *will* be. This theme largely revisited the arguments mentioned above (in this section), but also added the view that there should be an effort to keep priests in Malta (rather than, e.g., sending them for 'il-missjoni') – this was based on the view that there aren't enough priests serving locally, or that their numbers will diminish even more in 5 years' time.

### 3.5.3 Convergences: How will parish life and work be in 5 years

Both parish priests and pastoral workers argued that **both priests and laity will have to adapt to new situations** in five years' time. When asked about how parish *will be* in five years' time, most participants spoke about how it *should be*, thus **conflating descriptive and prescriptive arguments** in the process. Participants also shared a sense of urgency, in that they generally believed that **one should start working on adapting as soon as possible**. That is, one should try to invest in new and enthusiastic people. A general feeling was that **the Church cannot remain unduly tied to a traditional modus operandi** – rather, it should adapt its language accordingly. Discussions of (arguably inevitable) **shifts in mentality** were mentioned too. Finally, the idea that **the number of Christians will decrease** was shared by both groups, as was the idea that the few who remain will be **more committed**.

### *3.5.4   Divergences: How will parish life and work be in 5 years*

There were few divergences between priests and parish workers. Whilst the focus of parish priests was on **maintaining close relationships with parishioners**, the focus of parish workers was on the fact that **there will be less people to work with in parish milieus** (both helpers and mass attendees).
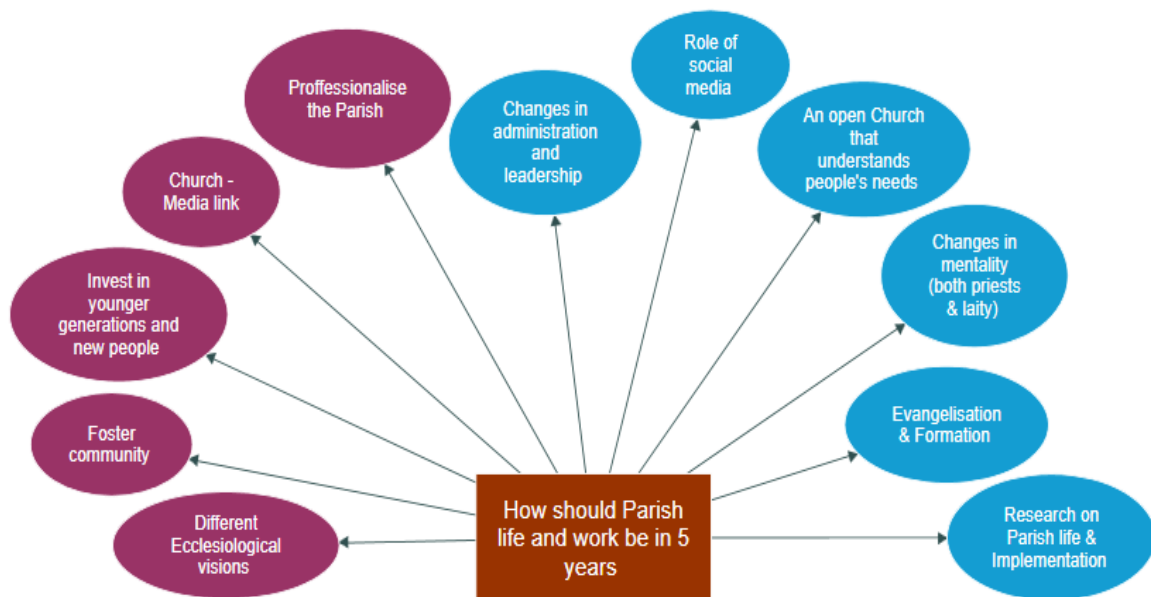
## 3.6 How should parish life and work be in 5 years



Figure 16. Parish priests' (purple) and parish workers' (blue) views on how parish life and work *should* be like in 5 years.

### 3.6.1 *Parish Priests: How should parish life and work be in 5 years*

Parish priests argued that <u>the relationship between the Church and the media should be improved</u>. That is, parish priests stated that the church should take on a greater role in the media, because as things stand, it has an unideal relationship with the media:

*As an example, we are far from the media.* […] *we have to see who is following such mass. That is, even if there are twenty people following it – it should remain. But are we having for example, good programmes on the media?* (PP3)

Furthermore, the most salient feature in relation to this subject concerned the <u>different Ecclesiological visions</u> that featured across participants interviewed. Here, different images and metaphors emerged, of the Church as: (a) the Madonna who rejoices in Baby Jesus; (b) Life that gives Life; (c) the Duluri who hugs her wounded Son; and (d) a church built around the Gospel and the Eucharist. Other imaginaries posited the Church as one that: (a) adapts to circumstances and to the people's needs; (b) forms people rather than providing "Sacraments like cheesecakes" (PP3); and/or (c) combines forces (against decreasing numbers and decreasing faith). Furthermore, other parish priests spoke of: evangelisation as God's work

through human beings; a future Church 'illuminated' by God; the parish as 'a family of families, strengthened by Christ on the Cross'; a future Church that utilizes religious tourism to subsidize pastoral work; a future Church as a community of humble, living friendships; a future Church that prays and listens to the Spirit; and future church that is 'Knisja li tisma' lin-nies'; a future Church that focuses on the Gospels rather than allowing political partisanship to manipulate it; and a future Church that is patient with the works of the Spirit:

*The parish needs to be sustained, it should be helped to be a family of families, weak but finds its strength in the Crucifix.* (PP8)

Furthermore, parish priests maintained that in 5 years' time, the <u>focus should be more on God and prayer</u>, within the community. Here, priests expressed their preference for people who seek depth and make a faith experience with Christ in the centre of their life. Importance was given to prayer and to following God and to investing time with Christ. The main idea was for people to love what they do in the Church, rather than seeing the Church as simply a "dispenser of Sacraments":

*How come these two come to receive the Holy Eucharist and they have not spoken to each other for twenty years. Where is Christ? Who is the disciple? Eh, somewhere…* (PP1)

The importance of <u>fostering community</u> was also mentioned by the parish priests. The participants argued that this can be done through various means. For instance, they mentioned the possibility of: the Church becoming closer to all members of the parish; having the Church as the Good Samaritan who accompanies people on their life journey; focusing on smaller groups of people who listen to, discern with, and accompany each other; making sure those around Church are 'committed'; offering open spaces for building personal contact; achieving a balance between the needs of the people and what is really essential; creating an environment of trust whereby people feel comfortable sending their children to parish centres; and using modern tools to keep contact with parishioners. Accordingly, the tension between those who were perceived as 'committed' and those perceived as 'non-committed' was prevalent, reflecting a slight ingroup-outgroup mentality among parish priests.

*Not a sense of 'I don't care about the others'…but those who are helping you, is really convinced. S/he does not come and help you just because there is nothing else which s/he can do.* (PP7)

Moreover, parish priests argued that, over the next 5 years, parishes should <u>invest in younger generations and new people</u>, principally by adapting meetings to youth's interests; investing in lay youth; closing the gap between intellectual/cultural spheres and the Church; and building an active laity. This is something which featured also in the previous theme – that is, when participants were asked how they think that parish life will be in 5 years' time. Furthermore, parish priests argued that the Church will end up having problems due to the ever-decreasing number of priests:

> *We should not burden the parish with experiences and meetings that are not that useful and that only attract 'specialised' Christians, and mostly the elderly; a lot of energy is required here* [to organise certain types of activities or meetings] *and will leave people with a sense of coldness within the community.* (PP8)

Similarly, participants reiterated their call to <u>professionalise the parish</u>, by (a) implementing changes in its financial system (e.g., channelling finances more equitably among the various Church entities, absolving priests from fund-raising duties, collecting funds at the parish level, not remaining highly dependent on people's offerings, etc.). More specifically, participants entertained the possibility of (b) delivering Catechesis by paid and trained people instead of volunteers, and of (c) using evidence-based research to know whether practices implemented in the parish are having the desired outcomes.

Finally, parish priests stated that parishes should <u>tackle issues related to elderly parishioners</u>. This was mentioned especially in relation to Eucharistic ministers, because these decreased drastically and because the elderly need further inclusion in the parish's ministry.

### 3.6.2   *Parish Workers: How should parish life and work be in 5 years*

Parish workers maintained that in 5 years' time, the Church should become <u>an open Church that understands people's needs</u>. Besides the need for targeting diaconia and for welcoming diverse people in parishes, ideas related to terms like 'openness' and 'welcome' were generally expressed in vague terms.

> *The ideal is that those who are already involved in community life, in parish life – remain involved, while reaching out to those who does not make a difference for them.* (PW8)

The parish workers also mentioned that <u>changes are required in the administration and leadership of the Church</u> at the parish level. Here, it was maintained that the Church should invest in younger parish priests, who are more open to adopting new ways; and that priests should follow the Archbishop's example and deliver shorter homilies (as per above):

*We are repeating. When you hear the same song, how long will you hear it, six times, seven times. Then when it comes to eight, ninth time, you will switch off the radio.* (PW7)

Another important aspect mentioned by the parish workers concerned the need for <u>changes in the mentality of both the priests and the laity</u>. Participants argued that without enough priests, then some Churches will have to close their doors – and that mentality was intimately linked to this:

*I think that 'it-tbeżbiża' cannot be just towards us but also addressed to the monks and to the priests to change their attitude and their own formation – how they should approach us, us who already go to Church. Like the artist, what does the artist do to bring people to the theatre? S/he will try his best to appear nice both in terms of the way s/he looks and also in terms of how s/he speaks and how s/he behaves so that people will get close to him/her.*
(PW7)

The importance of <u>focusing on evangelisation and formation</u> came up in this section as well. Parish workers maintained that leaders should be well-formed, and argued for <u>research on parish life and for the implementation</u> of recommendations based on research, in order to avoid being in a worse situation than the present one. As PW7 put it:

*I am sorry to say but I think and feel, maybe I am ignorant but, I did not see things changing but I think that we are repeating the same story every year.* (PW7)

Furthermore, the parish workers maintained that <u>social media</u> should be used to reach out to parishioners as much as possible – through online meetings. However, parish workers argued that there are some people who are digitally illiterate, thus it is important that not everything is digitised. As PW4 put it:

*It's good to have a strong media but it is important that we have the means to transmit such media to those who are not capable of using the social media; and this does not necessarily mean they are old people.* (PW4)

### *3.6.3   Convergences: How should parish life and work be in 5 years*

Both parish priests and pastoral workers maintained that, for the Church to remain valid in five years' time, it is important that it **offers a sense of welcome and tries its best to attract new people**. Furthermore, both groups argued for the **professionalisation** of the parish, in different domains (from day-to-day administration to the idea of engaging professionals, as per previous themes). Participants' arguments rested on the view that such developments would allow **the parish to offer a good service and to remain a valid entity**.

### *3.6.4   Divergences: How should parish life and work be in 5 years*

Although both parish priests and parish workers mentioned the role of the media in today's world – their focus was somehow different. The parish priests maintained that **the Church should be present on the media** and should try to understand what the people are following, thus being able to understand and target parish audiences more effectively. On the other hand, the parish workers focused more on **how the Church can reach different people through different mediums**.

**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. As discussed during the Aġġornament tal-Kleru (June, 2021), and during the webinars held with Kunsilli Pastorali Parrokkjali (June, 2021), there are five main points to consider when reflecting on the implications of this study. This report concludes by listing these points below:

(1) Given participants' arguments for **strengthening the voice of lay people**, it is advised that one reflects on the convergences between priests and laity detailed above, 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 above—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.

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# APPENDIX

**Parish Priests**

1) X'inhuma l-effetti li inti rajt fil-Knisja wara l-bidu tal-COVID-19?
2) X'taħseb mill-attitudnijiet tan-nies kemm ilu li beda l-COVID-19?
3) X'rajt li huma il-bżonnijiet tal-poplu Nisrani waqt il-pandemija?
4) X'pastorali xtaqu in-nies waqt il-pandemija (inkluż bħalissa)?
5) X'pastorali saret waqt il-pandemija u kif intlaqgħet?
6) X'kienu l-effetti tal-COVID-19 fuq il-ħajja spiritwali tal-Insara fil-kommunita' tiegħek?
    a. X'rajt li kien hemm nieqes fil-ħajja tan-Nisrani waqt il-pandemija?
    b. X'rajt li kien hemm tajjeb fil-ħajja tan-Nisrani waqt il-pandemija?
7) X'tara li se jkunu l-effetti tal-pandemija fuq il-ħajja parrokkjali ġaladarba tispiċċa l-pandemija?
8) Liema sfidi skoprejt li ghandek matul dawn l-aħħar xhur?
9) X'inhuma l-prijoritajiet immedjati tal-parroċċa tiegħek?
10) X'tara li għandhom ikunu l-prijoritajiet tal-parroċċa tiegħek wara il-pandemija?
11) X'tara li għandhom ikunu l-prijoritajiet tal-parroċċi in ġenerali wara il-pandemija?
12) X'taħseb li għandu jinbidel fil-ħidma pastorali tiegħek?
13) X'taħseb li għandu jinbidel fil-ħidma pastorali tal-parroċċa?
14) Kif tara li l-ħajja u l-ħidma parrokkjali se tkun ħames snin oħra?
15) Kif tara li l-ħajja u l-ħidma parrokkjali għandha tkun ħames snin oħra?

**Pastoral Workers**

1) X'inhuma l-effetti li inti rajt fil-Knisja wara l-bidu tal-COVID-19?
2) X'taħseb mill-attitudnijiet tan-nies kemm ilu li beda l-COVID-19?
3) X'rajt li huma il-bżonnijiet tal-poplu Nisrani waqt il-pandemija?
4) X'pastorali xtaqu in-nies waqt il-pandemija (inkluż bħalissa)?
5) X'pastorali saret waqt il-pandemija u kif intlaqgħet?
6) X'kienu l-effetti tal-COVID-19 fuq il-ħajja spiritwali tal-Insara fil-kommunita' tiegħek?
    a. X'rajt li kien hemm nieqes fil-ħajja tan-Nisrani waqt il-pandemija?
    b. X'rajt li kien hemm tajjeb fil-ħajja tan-Nisrani waqt il-pandemija?
7) X'tara li se jkunu l-effetti tal-pandemija fuq il-ħajja parrokkjali ġaladarba tispiċċa l-pandemija?
8) Liema sfidi skoprejt li ghandek matul dawn l-aħħar xhur?
9) X'inhuma l-prijoritajiet immedjati tal-parroċċa tiegħek?
10) X'tara li għandhom ikunu l-prijoritajiet tal-parroċċa tiegħek wara il-pandemija?
11) X'tara li għandhom ikunu l-prijoritajiet tal-parroċċi in ġenerali wara il-pandemija?
12) X'taħseb li għandu jinbidel fil-ħidma pastorali tal-parroċċa?
13) Taħseb li dan se jkollu xi effetti fuq il-ħidma tiegħek? Jekk iva, kif? Jekk le, għala?
14) Kif tara li l-ħajja u l-ħidma parrokkjali se tkun ħames snin oħra?
15) Kif tara li l-ħajja u l-ħidma parrokkjali għandha tkun ħames snin oħra?