

REPRESENTATIONS OF CATHOLICISM

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Research Report – 2022

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report presents the findings of a qualitative inquiry on representations of Catholicism in Malta in the third decade of the 21st century. The study was conducted by *DISCERN*. The following executive summary provides key details on methodology, analysis and findings.

Methodology

In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with 44 participants of various backgrounds, between 18/11/2020 and 17/11/2021. After formulating the research aims and research questions, an interview guide was designed, discussed by the research team, and piloted. Data were subsequently collected, transcribed into text and analysed using thematic analysis, relying largely on Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2012, 2019) approach. Recruitment involved a *quota sampling* scheme: participants were contacted if they fulfilled specific age–gender–region–education combinations. This increased the study's validity and contributed to the possibility of deriving sociological inferences from it. Moreover, throughout the whole research project, *DISCERN*'s research team (the authors) worked in a flat organisational manner, limiting the negative impact of cognitive biases on the final outcome. Importantly, all the findings presented in this report solely concern participants' views and perceptions.

Thematic analysis (a) adopted an inductive orientation (i.e., limiting the influence of researchers' *a priori* conceptualisations as much as possible), and (b) coded content largely at the semantic level (i.e., at the level of explicit meanings) (see Braun & Clarke, 2012). The analytical procedure involved searching for themes and patterns across the dataset. The key research questions guiding the present analysis revolved around representations of Catholicism in Malta, mainly targeting the following aspects:

- (1) What being Catholic means (lived Catholicism)¹
- (2) The Catholicism(s) around us (the realm of the thinkable)
- (3) Attributions to/expectations of the Catholic Church (project)¹

¹ **Lived Catholicism** “is an emerging notion reflecting the move to the study of Lived Religion over the past 30 years. It encompasses a number of other terms, including everyday Catholicism, folk Catholicism and customary Catholicism; and pays heed to the ways that Catholicism is lived through empirical research” (<https://livedcatholicism.org/>). Within social representations theory, **projects** (or **joint projects**) refer to the aims that collectives tend toward, even implicitly, that is, the “not-yet” (Bauer & Gaskell, 1999, p. 343) guiding social life (Buhagiar & Sammut, 2020).

Following the above, an abductive analysis (Salvatore, 2017; Buhagiar et al., 2018) was conducted, to understand the general ‘motifs’ or patterns that resurfaced among a multitude of themes. Abductive reasoning proceeds from fragments of evidence to the most parsimonious explanation (Salvatore, 2017). Whilst the thematic analysis coded themes semantically (relating to different aspects of Catholicism), the abductive analysis sought to understand the representational currents (latent or explicit) imbuing recurring patterns of reasoning.

Findings

The findings of the present inquiry are presented below. Following Braun and Clarke (2006), the findings converged primarily around the patterns in participants’ **views and reasons**, and not necessarily around the frequency with which such views were expressed. This study was mainly concerned with the realm of the thinkable vis-à-vis Catholicism and its dimensions.

Thematic content

The thematic analysis yielded the following **thematic structure and content**, tapping four domains: (I) Being Catholic; (II) Catholicism; (III) the Catholic Church; and (IV) Associations.

Table A – Thematic Analysis: Themes & Subthemes

Themes & Subthemes	
I. Being Catholic A. Universalism, Perspectivism & Subjectivism B. Catholic Faith & Values C. Catholics in Social Landscape D. Distinctions E. Relationship with Practice	II. Catholicism A. Substance B. Modality of Belief C. Depictions of God D. Relationship with Belief E. Science & Religion
III. Catholic Church A. Function B. Depiction C. Catholic Church in Social Landscape D. Relationship with Church E. Ultimate aim F. Focus or Change	IV. Associations A. Word Associations B. Social Groups (General) C. Social Groups (Specific)

Note. **Table A** presents the main themes—**I. Being Catholic** (lived Catholicism¹); **II. Catholicism** (belief; realm of the thinkable); **III. Catholic Church** (project; institution); and relevant **IV. Associations**—and subthemes, as identified across participants during analysis. Themes are presented in bold type and Subthemes in normal type. Analysis (a) adopted an inductive orientation, and (b) coded content largely at the semantic level (i.e., at the level of explicit meanings). The labelling of themes and the contents of the themes themselves (the descriptions presented below) were data-driven, that is, informed by an in-depth analysis of participants’ views.

(I) *Being Catholic* was generally understood in terms of abiding by a set of (A) secular general human values: being good, being non-judgmental, helping others and being honest. Participants appreciated the subjectivity and perspectivism inherent in any religious outlook whilst positing such values as being universal. The spiritual dimensions of (B) the Catholic faith—and associated value structures—were emphasised too, promoting humble engagement in the world. Other aspects of this theme articulated (C) what being Catholic means in the social landscape (i.e., the decreasing number of Catholics, and different aspects of Catholic identity). Moreover, (D) distinctions between ‘who the Catholic is’ versus ‘who the Catholic is not’, and between Christians and Catholics, were mentioned too. Finally, (E) participants generally preferred the doing of good deeds over participation in prayer, ritual and mass; and saw good deeds as more indicative of who the good Catholic is.

In turn, (II) *Catholicism* was largely represented in terms of its substance and associated modalities of belief. Whereas *being Catholic* was more explicitly framed in secular terms, the (A) substance of *Catholicism* was articulated in more religious terms, emphasising faith, spirituality, Catholic values (e.g., charity and love), ways of life (merging cultural and spiritual practices), and existential dimensions (the provision of meaning). Some participants questioned Catholicism’s relationship with LGBTIQ+ issues; and universalist and perspectival discourse constituted a common pattern of argumentation, largely when contextualising Catholicism amongst other religions. In terms of (B) modalities of belief, participants variably emphasised the transcendent elements of Catholicism or else reduced Catholic belief to its symbolic (non-transcendent) dimension. Interestingly, during the course of interviewing, (C) God was depicted as Relational; as Other; as the founder of, or as separate from, the Church; or—more rarely—as unreal or unfair. Participants’ (D) relationship with beliefs was saturated with the influence of Catholic upbringing and acculturation. Here, belief was contextualised in its sociological context (e.g., decreasing numbers of adherents), or else in terms of the spiritual influences of negative life events. Finally, some participants framed (E) science and religion in complementary terms, while others represented science and religion as being oppositional.

When discussing the (III) *Catholic Church*, participants mentioned its (A) functions, tapping spiritual/religious, social, moral and didactic domains. Moreover, the Church’s (B) depiction was replete with tensions and complexities relating to the Church’s conservative versus progressive currents (with a general preference for the latter); its closeness versus distance to people; the wholesomeness of help-provision versus the ugliness of abuse; and notions of

natural fallibility versus outright inconsistencies. Here, the metaphors of ‘spiritual doctor’, ‘grandmother’ and ‘mother’ were sometimes used for the Church. When positioning (C) the Catholic Church in the social landscape, participants generally saw society as better off with the Church, whilst highlighting desired changes in Church projects. Three patterns of argumentation contended (1) that the Church has a duty to speak up on social issues/public controversies; (2) that the Church should not speak on social issues/public controversies; or (3) that it depends (e.g., speaking up without interfering in private matters [e.g., LGBTIQ+ issues, sexual issues, etc.]; aiding reflection without involving itself in partisan politics, etc.). Camps (1) and (3) were larger than camp (2), with various caveats and qualifications calibrating participants’ arguments across the board. In contrast, participants were more united when it came to LGBTIQ+ issues, arguing: that the Church’s stance on LGBTIQ+ can harm the vulnerable/young and should be changed; that more is needed despite increased Church acceptance; or that LGBTIQ+ Catholics should be allowed to marry. In turn, participants’ (D) relationship with the Church was tense; and while some perceived (E) the Church’s (attributed) aims and the desired aims as being aligned, others saw them as misaligned. Here, discussions largely centred on spirituality and a desire for the Church to go back-to-basics (e.g., being closer to people). Finally, participants argued that the Church should (F) focus on, or change by: being more open; renewing itself; focusing on its core spiritual/communal mission(s); collaborating more with non-Church entities; and/or improving communications.

Finally, various (IV) *Associations* were made with the Church. Firstly, (A) word associations (with the words ‘Religion’ & ‘Church’) were elicited from participants. Secondly, substantive associations characterized the relationship between various (B) social groups (general) and the Church as follows: some group categories were seen as being ‘for’ the Church (e.g., Church groups), and others as ‘opposing’ the Church (e.g., demographic groups, such as ‘youth’). Finally, when specifying (C) social groups (specific) and their relationship to the Church, three groups stood out: Church persons; youth; and priests/nuns. Participants represented these groups in a variety of manners, with some discernible patterns: (1) *Church persons* were characterized largely as members of ‘a different ingroup’, who are held to account for living out the values they avow; (2) *youth* were overall characterised as indifferent toward Catholicism; and (3) the representation of *priests/nuns* was characterised by its diversity.²

² Here, it is worth noting that participants were asked directly about Church persons and youth, as per the interview guide, but not about priests/nuns (see Appendix).

Recurring patterns (abductive analysis)

In turn, the abductive analysis (Salvatore, 2017) was based on observations made during the thematic analysis, yielding the following **recurring patterns**, as illustrated by various thematic exemplars wherein such patterns of argumentation featured.

Table B – Abductive Analysis: Recurring Patterns

Recurring Patterns	Thematic exemplars
<p>I. Universalism, Perspectivism & Subjectivism</p> <p>A recurring motif highlighting (1) values deemed as being <i>universal</i>; (2) the importance of individuals’ <i>perspective</i> or <i>subjectivity</i>; and (3) the reduction of Catholic identity to one or some of these three aspects.³</p>	<p>I. Being Catholic: A. Universalism, Perspectivism & Subjectivism + E. Relationship with Practice</p> <p>II. Catholicism: A. Substance + B. Modality of Belief + D. Relationship with Belief</p> <p>III. Catholic Church: E. Ultimate Aim</p>
<p>II. Toward a Social Church</p> <p>When speaking normatively, participants’ discourse often adopted a back-to-basics approach, highlighting the primacy of (1) action over words; (2) increased Church presence in (vulnerable) people’s lived realities; and (3) Church engagement in systemic social issues (e.g., poverty, anti-materialism, etc.).</p>	<p>I. Being Catholic: B. Catholic Faith & Values + E. Relationship with Practice</p> <p>II. Catholicism: A. Substance</p> <p>III. Catholic Church: A. Function + C. Catholic Church in Social Landscape + E. Ultimate Aim + F. Focus or Change</p>
<p>III. Diversity & Ambivalence</p> <p>A diverse set of views—and the accompanying ambivalence—about Catholicism and spirituality, generally reflecting various forms of ‘qualified belief’.</p>	<p>I. Being Catholic: C. Catholics in Social Landscape + E. Relationship with Practice</p> <p>II. Catholicism: B. Modality of Belief + D. Relationship with Belief</p> <p>III. Catholic Church: B. Depiction + C. Catholic Church in Social Landscape + D. Relationship with Catholic Church</p>
<p>IV. Openness (mostly vis-à-vis LGBTIQ+)</p> <p>Issues relating to openness—especially vis-à-vis LGBTIQ+ identities, rights and experiences—were commonly highlighted. Participants generally argued that the Church should adopt an unambiguously pro-LGBTIQ+ stance.</p>	<p>I. Being Catholic: A. Universalism, Perspectivism & Subjectivism</p> <p>II. Catholicism: C. Depictions of God</p> <p>III. Catholic Church: B. Depiction + C. Catholic Church in Social Landscape + E. Ultimate Aim + F. Focus or Change</p>

Note. **Table B** presents the recurring patterns in the data, as per the abductive analysis. The table includes the most significant thematic exemplars containing content pertaining to the recurring patterns.

³ As indicated in the text, in this report, the term ‘universalism’ does not here refer to the soteriological doctrine of universal salvation. This term is rather used to describe values deemed as being natural and widely shared (in this case, the use of the term is not meant to denote matters of moral ontology per se). Similarly, ‘perspectivism’ is meant to denote participants’ portrayal of being Catholic/Catholicism as a matter of perspective, and ‘subjectivism’ is meant to denote participants’ emphasis on individuals’ subjective take on the matter.

Conclusion

This qualitative study mapped the representation of Catholicism in Malta, emphasising the *lived* dimension (**Being Catholic**), the *realm of the thinkable/belief* dimension (**Catholicism**), the *institutional/project* dimension (**Catholic Church**), and the *intergroup* dimension (**Associations**) surrounding Catholicism. The findings concur with previous work by DISCERN. In a qualitative study on parishes, participants had argued for a bottom-up Church where lay voices matter (Mifsud Inguanez et al., 2021). This corresponds with the abductive findings of the present inquiry, highlighting the move **Toward a Social Church**. Moreover, in a quantitative study on youth, whilst Catholic youth stated they give importance to faith ($Mean = 7.05/10$; $SD = 2.13$), they barely included a transcendent dimension in their belief system on average ($Mean = 0.24$ [on a scale from -10 to 10]; $SD = 2.34$) (Buhagiar et al., 2021). Similarly, tensions in people's relationship to Catholicism had characterised a previous study by DISCERN (Inguanez & Gatt, 2015). These patterns accord with the above findings highlighting **Universalism, Perspectivism & Subjectivism**, and **Diversity & Ambivalence**. The above findings also make the following contribution: the current representation of Catholicism demands more **Openness (mostly vis-à-vis LGBTIQ+)**. This is all the more significant when considering that this topic did not constitute a core aspect of the interview guide; rather, participants mentioned LGBTIQ+ issues on their own initiative, and frequently. In conclusion, by charting the contemporary representation of Catholicism in Malta, this study presents findings of a historical significance, and contributes to local ecclesial and parish contexts by delivering pointers for further reflection and decision-making:

1. **Reflection on the relationship between spiritual ambivalence and general values** (cf. Diversity & Ambivalence; Universalism, Perspectivism & Subjectivism), with a view to ameliorating communication and understanding changing spiritual orientations.
2. **Sustaining the move toward greater openness**—toward LGBTIQ+ individuals and other minorities—where it is present, and **introducing it** where absent (cf. Openness).
3. **Achieving greater presence in the community** by focusing on people's lived realities and practical service (e.g., anti-poverty) at the grassroots (cf. Toward a Social Church).
4. **Future research** can adopt a quantitative approach to the study of representations of Catholicism, based partly on the findings herein. The representational tensions inherent in this dataset can inform meaningful survey questions, aimed at better understanding the statistical patterns underpinning representations of Catholicism. Applied longitudinally, quantitative research would elucidate representational change over time.

I. INTRODUCTION

Socio-economic and socio-cultural changes influence communities' relationships with religious expressions and related behaviours (Fulton, 2000). Scholars have noted that phenomena such as increased consumerism and discursive emphases on personal consumer choice, often run in parallel with the relegation of religious expression to inferior positions in the lives of many (Fulton, 2000). Beyond this 'common sense' view of religiosity and its ebb and flow, one finds other complex patterns when seeking to explain Europeans' relationship with religiosity over the past decades. It is true that cultural emphases on personal choice run counter to what tends to be expected by canonical religious rules and texts—in part, this is precisely because, at the institutional level, religion is often represented in terms of a set of prescriptions and proscriptions. However, it is precisely the negotiation and renegotiation of (sometimes contradictory) cultural, societal and personal values and discourses, that are worthy of social scientific study. Despite ostensible similarities, such patterns play out in different manners across different contexts, often times irreducibly so.

For instance, Malta is a Catholic-majority country in Southern Europe, with Catholicism imbuing various aspects of many of its inhabitants' collective memory and religious practice. One finds various expressions of Catholicism on the islands, both doctrinally and in terms of cultural traditions. At present, the Constitution of Malta holds that Roman Catholicism is the religion of Malta; and the Church retains a high degree of influence, transmitted generationally, in schools and through communication media. The study of representations of Catholicism in Malta is important. By studying such representations, one opens a window into the Maltese cultural milieu. More importantly, changes in the local representation of Catholicism over time reflect, precipitate and run parallel to, changes within the wider social sphere.

Demographically, the number of self-identified Catholics (practising and non-practising) in Malta is estimated to be around 83% (European Commission, 2019). Among youth aged 16–25, this number stands at around 81% (Buhagiar et al., 2021). Sunday mass attendance is estimated to stand at around 36% (DISCERN, 2018), and expressions of religiosity vary according to personal dispositions and demographic variables. For instance, youth aged 16–25 tend to see faith as somewhat important in their lives, on average ($Mean = 7.05/10$). However, they are also highly ambivalent as to whether there is a transcendent element (e.g., an actual transcendent God) to life or not ($Mean = 0.24$, on a scale from -10 to 10). In general, youth are

also inclined to understand religious issues symbolically, rather than literally ($Mean = 2.05$, on a scale ranging from -10 [literal] to 10 [symbolic]) (Buhagiar et al., 2021).

The above data were based on Duriez et al.'s (2005) shortened post-critical belief scale, which measures (a) the Inclusion (vs. Exclusion) of Transcendence in one's beliefs, and (b) the extent of Symbolic (vs. Literal) Interpretation of religious issues. In a paper studying post-critical beliefs within a social representations framework, Lauri et al. (2009) argued that, in the Maltese context, a low score on Inclusion of Transcendence does not automatically indicate a lack of belief in God. Rather, low versus high Inclusion of Transcendence may be more indicative of a person's inclination toward the Catholic Church and Catholic belief (as opposed to theism vs. atheism). This further illustrates complexities in religious identification and belief. Such complexity was also tapped in a study by Inguanez and Gatt (2015), wherein participants generally claimed it is hard to believe in the existence of the Trinity (p. 62), whilst generally seeing the Eucharist (p. 93) and confession (p. 95) as important. On the community level, parish communities were generally seen as sustaining people's faith (p. 184); and materialism (p. 200), experimentation with other faiths (p. 203) and the problem of evil (p. 206) were seen as obstacles to the faith, or as causes for a change in—or the loss of—one's faith.

Beyond quantitative measurement, people's orientations toward Catholicism are bound to be diverse, the world over. One need only consider the various expressions of the laity and the clergy, the varieties of consecrated life, writers' relationships with Catholicism (e.g., Sigrid Undset, Joris-Karl Huysmans, etc.), and lesser-known expressions such as the fools for Christ (see Seward, 1980) or people living religiously hybrid lives (e.g., Zen Catholics; see Hand, 2004). Similarly, despite—or rather because of—the hegemonic influence of the Church on the islands, one finds a variety of expressions of Catholicism(s) in Malta. One need only frequent different parish milieus, speak to parish priests or read about the islands' history to sensitize themselves to this fact. Diverse representations of Catholicism can also be found in the works of various local authors, from Professor Oliver Friggieri to Immanuel Mifsud. This diversity resists simplistic categorisations, and calls for mapping the *social representation* of Catholicism: that is, the actual content pertaining to the 'realm of the thinkable' when it comes to Catholicism(s) in a specific context: Malta.

1.1 Social Representations, Ambiguity and Common Knowledge

One conceptual framework that is suitable for present purposes is that of social representations theory (SRT). SRT is concerned with how communities make sense of changing phenomena and renegotiate this meaning over time (Marková, 2000). Among various definitions, the following definition withstood the test of time: a social representation is a “system of values, ideas and practices with a twofold function” (Moscovici, 1973, p. xiii): (a) that of creating a symbolic environment that members of a social group can orient themselves in and pick up; and (b) that of enabling intelligible communication between people in the same social group (Moscovici, 1973, p. xiii). Social representations work by *anchoring*, or familiarising, foreign objects (e.g., when people sought to understand the novel coronavirus in 2020 by comparing it to the influenza virus); or by *objectifying* them (e.g., the use of “visual and linguistic ‘tools’” [Nerlich & Jaspal, 2021, p. 569] to concretise the COVID-19 pandemic). Anchoring and objectification drive the process of representational change, both for novel objects and for living phenomena such as religions (Moscovici, 1984).

Two key concepts within SRT that are relevant for present aims are the following: (a) the notion of ‘joint projects’ (Bauer & Gaskell, 1999); and (b) the notion of ‘cognitive polyphasia’ (Jovchelovitch, 2002). *Joint projects* refer to the trajectory of a specific collective, even if this remains implicit. Bauer and Gaskell (1999) define joint projects as a “not-yet” (p. 343). This trajectory shapes the path taken by representational change (Buhagiar & Sammut, 2020). For instance, the Grand Theft Auto (GTA) videogame series can be represented as ‘a menace to the youth’, by educators seeking to advance a moral project of their choosing. Alternatively, GTA can be represented as ‘good raw fun’ by gamers seeking to broadcast their skills on YouTube. The same object of concern can thus be represented differently by different social groups (however amorphously these may be defined) with different interests, be they articulated or held implicitly. Accordingly, re-presentations (cf. Chryssides et al., 2009) are generally, ultimately, either *for* or *against* a particular project, even if implicitly (Buhagiar & Sammut, 2020). Indeed, despite the title of this work specifying representations ‘of’ Catholicism, as will be seen below, the normative/prescriptive dimensions of participants’ arguments are highly evident, signifying re-presentations that are *for* or *against* different Catholicism(s) in various ways (Buhagiar & Sammut, 2020). In summary, research generally points toward groups’ “Social re-presentation SR for Project P [e.g., a Church that is ...], of/as Object O [e.g., Catholicism], by Group G₁, in Context C” (Buhagiar & Sammut, 2020, p. 8).

The second concept is that of *cognitive polyphasia*. This term denotes the process whereby different and/or conflicting modes of thinking co-exist within the same community, individual or group (Jovchelovitch, 2008). While this process can feature at the individual level (e.g., conflicting belief systems or paradigms in the same individual), it is ultimately a social process signifying how reasoning and similar activities unfold across collectives (see Provencher, 2011). This notion is used to understand the co-existence of different knowledge types, such as social knowledge, theological knowledge, scientific knowledge, mainstream versus alternative medical knowledge, and so on. For instance, one could rely on both homeopathy *and* panthenol to treat eczema, despite the contrasting principles underlying homeopathy and conventional medicine. Holding contradictory beliefs is an all too human characteristic.

In religious domains, joint projects feature in the various trajectories pursued by religious (sub)groups. Similarly, cognitive polyphasia has been used to understand diverse religious expressions and phenomena. For instance, the appropriation of ritual or belief, the borrowing of ideas, and the integration of different systems of thought are common practices in the religious domain (see Abela, 2000; Falade & Bauer, 2018; Riley, 2019). Syncretism, eclecticism and changes in belief over time (despite the retention of core principles hitherto seen as limiting such changes) are therefore natural and inevitable.

Before proceeding, a distinction should be made between ‘institutional knowledge’ and ‘common knowledge’ (Jovchelovitch, 2008). Institutional knowledge is formalised and safeguarded by human structures such as the scientific community, the Catholic Church, the Buddhist Sangha, and so on. Common knowledge, on the other hand, is generated in communities, who assimilate this knowledge into pre-existing knowledge structures, and allow it to guide its norms and relations. Common knowledge allows for identity development and changes along with other aspects of community life. Although such knowledge may be seen as ‘inexact’ from an institutional viewpoint, common knowledge is necessary for the development of communities. It is precisely the foundation that allows the fulfilling of social, material and communal needs—something that institutional knowledge *per se* may be ill-equipped to address (Jovchelovitch, 2008). At times, institutional knowledge and common knowledge interact. Consider, for example, the debates surrounding the meaning, and proper use, of *sensus fidelium* in Catholic milieus, wherein a particular appreciation or interpretation of faith on the part of adherents carries a certain weight in doctrinal affairs (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2019). Consider also scholarly efforts at distinguishing between *sensus fidelium* and *sensus*

laicorum (Rush, 2004, p. 83), thus limiting the power of the laity in deciding matters of faith on their own. This is a perfect example of institutions limiting and channelling the power of ‘common knowledge’, and the respective concepts and demarcations that follow.

Here, it is immediately clear that the lives of members of a collective (be it religious or otherwise) are influenced—bilaterally—by the institutions relevant to that same community, thus spawning various opportunities for cognitive polyphasia (see Jovchelovitch, 2008). Whilst not an inevitable outcome of the encounter of different knowledge types, cognitive polyphasia—or the presence of multiple ‘utterances’/‘voices’/‘appearances’—tends to be present wherever ambiguous or abstract notions are the subject of discussion (Provencher, 2011). Consulting different knowledge types therefore becomes a way of clarifying knowledge in ways amenable for use by the collective in question. For instance, naturally, there are various elaborate theological debates on the nature of self-giving, *kenosis*, and related concepts; these may well be concretized and understood as ‘helping’ or ‘being there for others’, at the community level. Similarly, birth, marriage, burials and similar human activities can be both subjects of theological scrutiny or social scientific scrutiny, *and* at the same time concretised into actual communal practices (e.g., birth in a hospital, marriage in a Church, in-ground burial, etc.). These more concrete knowledge and action trajectories serve to minimise the ambiguity and the gaps between institutional and common knowledge (Provencher, 2011). They also serve to actualise a collective’s joint project (Buhagiar & Sammut, 2020), be this related to spiritual ascent, community regulation, the advancement of specific social mores, and so on.

1.2 Different Religious Orientations

As already alluded to, the above discussion can be applied to the study of religion in general, or (in this case) to Catholicism in particular. In both of these cases, one finds competing belief systems, the oft-discussed tensions between science and religion, interactions between doctrinal Catholicism and ‘Lived Catholicism’ (see <https://livedcatholicism.org/>), and other discursive dichotomies. Falade and Bauer (2018), for instance, provide evidence showing how religious beliefs and views on science can co-exist in a multitude of ways: either complementarily or else with one knowledge type being privileged over the other. In their study, cognitive polyphasia could be seen in how participants discuss science and religion as ‘parallel’ knowledge forms, or else in how one knowledge type is privileged over the other in specific contexts (Falade & Bauer, 2018).

Of course, such discourses and interactions are to be expected in an era where religiosity tends to assume a ‘background’ role in public life (Fulton, 2000). Yet, implicit as it may be, the influence of religious thought remains palpable. For instance, Fulton (2000) observes how religiosity and religious discourse have increasingly shifted into the psychological sphere over the past decades. New forms of religious belief and practice are evidence of this, as is the evolving discourse surrounding religion as a form of therapy. For instance, Smith and Denton (2005) speak of *moralistic therapeutic deism*. This is not an official religion in itself (Smith, 2016). Rather, it is a religious orientation that could well be adopted by members of different religions, and by non-religious individuals as well. Moralistic therapeutic deism is characterised by five beliefs: (a) a creator God monitors the world; (b) God may intervene in people’s lives when this intervention is asked for; (c) from God’s perspective, humans should be good to each other; (d) good people are rewarded through heaven or similar happenings; and (e) the ultimate goal in life remains that of feeling ‘happy’ (Smith, 2016).

Here, *moralism* is inherent in the emphasis on ‘goodness’, *therapy* is inherent in feelings of ‘happiness’, and *deism* is used to signify a God who is non-interventionist or else only minimally so. This religious orientation contrasts with the Catholic emphasis on suffering, sacrifice and total self-giving, but has managed to integrate itself in a variety of Catholic milieus. Martin (2013) observes how moralistic therapeutic deism is a ‘thin’ religious orientation, capable of accommodating various modes of religious expression. This orientation opens a window into “what life is like for a teenager in a late capitalist consumer society” (Martin, 2013, p. 489). Although the original studies on moralistic therapeutic deism were conducted with teenagers, the same could be said for adults: a non-judgmental, vague but ultimately benevolent God who acts as a therapist, can pretty much accommodate any market niche or identity markers, thus potentially impeding religion from fulfilling its more radical commitments toward social justice whenever these are present.

Over time, the concept of moralistic therapeutic deism tended to be appropriated by purity-focussed fundamentalists intent on accusing more moderate Christian churches, as a quick YouTube search easily illustrates. Nonetheless, the concept retains its utility, as seen above. In Malta, Abela (2000) described a similar religious orientation among Maltese youth, who were described as adopting a ‘mix and match’ approach to religion, combining the beliefs of traditional, Catholic culture(s) with the Western European lifestyles they observed on the media, during their travels or during interactions with persons other than their co-nationals.

Despite similar upbringing patterns, Abela (2000) noted how youth naturally exhibited a multiplicity of religious identities and expressions, both Catholic and non-Catholic, which replaced conventional expressions over time. Reminiscent of the notion of moralistic therapeutic deism, a number of young Maltese Catholics tended to discover new ways of relating with religion, which were less ritualistic but more subjectively meaningful. As expected, a more *personalised* God emerged in such scenarios, one who adopted a largely therapeutic stance and simultaneously imbued believers' lives with meaning (see Abela, 2000).

1.3 Representations of Catholicism

The variety of religious orientations should be considered in tandem with the variety of representations of Catholicism. Here, one finds particular divergences. For instance, whilst representations of the clergy may be somewhat ambivalent or mixed, representations of God, Jesus or spiritual activities such as prayer, are usually more positive (see Abela, 2000). Similarly, one would be hard pressed to find anti-theist or misotheist arguments (cf. Schweizer, 2010) in the local Maltese context. This is meaningful as it indicates that disengagement from institutional Catholicism can be accompanied by an increased subjectivisation, perspectivism and a general appreciation of an *interiorized* Catholicism (cf. Fuchs, 2010). The 'repository' of such beliefs, or the 'realm of the thinkable', that is, the 'ecology' or 'geography' that sustains these beliefs—is precisely the social representation of Catholicism that is dominant in a particular period. In Malta, this 'realm of the thinkable' is also necessarily affected by European and global influences, through the mass media and intercultural encounters. Thus, the topics of discussion, controversies and dilemmas infusing the online mediascape, feature in local discourse as well.

A review of the literature shows that representations of Catholics and Catholicism in the media feature mainly on two platforms: news media outlets; and fictional media (e.g., movies). Among the representations that have been studied, one finds the perennial debate concerning science and religion, and evolution in particular (Riley, 2019); simplistic portrayals of the relation between science and Catholicism (Riley, 2019); representational differences within the Catholic Church and outside of it (e.g., different reporting on Pope Francis by Catholic and secular media) (Blaney, 2017); the relation between Catholicism and diverse ethnic backgrounds, particularly in the US (Fuchs, 2010); and even portrayals of Catholicism in various television series and video games (Bosman, 2019). Whilst many such representations tend to incorporate both positive and negative elements, as with depictions of religion–science

relations, such representations tend to be critical of Catholicism, or else simplistic and intentionally profane (Bosman, 2019; Fuchs, 2010). For example, depictions of Catholics tend to be highly stereotypical (Fuchs, 2010), and, at the time of writing, a quick keyword search (e.g., ‘Catholic’, or ‘Catholicism’) on Netflix results in a clear over-representation of movies or series about abuse, together with occasional neutral/appreciative portrayals of the Papacy.

1.4 The Present Study

Of course, representations of Catholicism in the media constitute only one piece of the puzzle. The counterpart to media representations is the actual *lived Catholicism* of people in various communities. Accordingly, the foregoing review was not meant to present the literature on representations of Catholicism in an exhaustive manner. It was meant to contextualise this study within the broader literature. Lived Catholicism “is an emerging notion reflecting the move to the study of Lived Religion over the past 30 years. It encompasses a number of other terms, including everyday Catholicism, folk Catholicism and customary Catholicism; and pays heed to the ways that Catholicism is lived through empirical research [and] close listening” (<https://livedcatholicism.org/>). As seen above, Malta has its own idiosyncrasies and cultural happenings, and the islands’ national and cultural identity is highly influenced by the Catholic Church (Montebello, 2009). Accordingly, studying the representation of Catholicism in Malta entails looking closely at the lived dimension as well, embedded as it is in an essentially “Catholic matrix” (Tabone, 1995, p. 80), hosting a diversity of beliefs and practices.

The present study sought to achieve just that. Its main aim was to study the representation of Catholicism in the third decade of the 21st century in Malta, using in-depth semi-structured interviews with persons of different backgrounds residing in Malta. While research on religiosity tends to focus on youth—particularly in the Maltese context—a broader focus helped in mapping the representation more thoroughly. Accordingly, the following sections present the **methodology** and related considerations behind the present study, together with the **findings**. The findings are largely self-explanatory, and discussions of the main findings are incorporated within the substantive descriptions themselves. The report then **concludes** by reflecting on the findings in view of the broader literature, and by making recommendations.

II. METHODOLOGY

In-depth semi-structured interviews (of approximately 60 minutes each) were conducted with 44 participants, from all walks of life, living in Malta. Interviews were conducted between 18/11/2020 and 17/11/2021. Participants came from different localities, had different demographic profiles, and received 20EUR each for their participation. Recruitment involved a *quota sampling* scheme, whereby participants were contacted if they fulfilled specific age–gender–locality–education combinations. In the end, sampling was successful as participants’ demographic backgrounds checked a wide spectrum of such demographic combinations. This increased the validity of the study and contributed to the possibility of deriving sociological inferences from it. In fact, saturation was achieved by the 31st interview, after which participants’ arguments tended to revisit previously elicited (sub)themes to a large degree. All participants provided their informed consent for participation, and data was handled in accordance with the GDPR and the Archdiocese of Malta’s GDPD.

After formulating the research aims and research questions, an interview guide was designed, discussed by the research team, and piloted with 3 participants. The pilot interviews worked well, and only slight amendments were made to the interview guide following piloting. The data gathered from these 3 participants was therefore included in the final analysis. Another 41 participants were then contacted and interviewed. DISCERN’s research team (the authors) worked in a flat organisational manner, limiting the impact of cognitive biases.

Following the audio-recorded semi-structured interviews with participants (see **Appendix Section 5.1** for the interview guide), the audio data was transcribed into text and analysed using thematic analysis, relying largely on Braun and Clarke’s (2006, 2012, 2019) understanding of this analytical approach, and using the software NVIVO 12. Initially, a coding frame was devised and refined throughout the analysis of 7 interviews (see **Appendix Section 5.2** for the codebook). During analysis, the interview texts were coded on a line-by-line basis, noting each new idea that arose and categorising it accordingly. Overall, the thematic analysis used for the present study (a) adopted an inductive orientation (i.e., limiting the influence of researchers’ *a priori* conceptualisations as much as possible), and (b) coded content largely at the semantic level (i.e., at the level of surface meanings), whilst also taking note of the reasoning behind participants’ views (see Braun & Clarke, 2012). The data analytic procedure involved searching for themes and patterns across the dataset, in such a way as to answer key questions

about the representation of Catholicism in Malta among the general population. The key research questions guiding the present analysis targeted the following aspects:

- (1) What being Catholic means (lived Catholicism) (see Footnote 1, page 1)
- (2) The Catholicism(s) around us (the realm of the thinkable)
- (3) Attributions to/expectations of the Catholic Church (joint project)

Following the above, an abductive analysis (Salvatore, 2017; Buhagiar et al., 2018; see also Timmermans & Tavory, 2012) was conducted, to understand the general ‘motifs’ or patterns that resurfaced among a multitude of themes. Whilst the thematic analysis coded themes semantically (relating to different aspects of Catholicism), the abductive analysis sought to understand the latent currents relating to commonly recurring patterns of reasoning. Abductive reasoning is defined as a form of reasoning that proceeds from fragments of evidence to the most parsimonious and straightforward explanations (e.g., one uses abductive logic when they conclude that someone is inside an apartment if the door is unlocked) (Salvatore, 2017). Here, the evidence simply makes conclusions more probable in view of surrounding thematic structures. Importantly, the interview questions did not directly determine the course of analysis: both analyses proceeded inductively so as to authentically present participants’ views, regardless of whether the topics they discussed featured in the interview guide.

2.1 Participant Characteristics

Participants’ demographic characteristics are tabulated below (see **Table 1**). Participants were categorized into: 5 different age groups (18-22; 23-30; 31-45; 46-60; 61+); 2 educational levels (Tertiary & Non-tertiary); and 4 different regions (based on locality). Participants’ localities were categorised according to the National Statistics Office’s [NSO] (2020) classification. The categories ‘South-East’ and ‘Southern Harbour’ were joined together as ‘South’ to facilitate data collection. Overall, 38 participants identified as ‘Catholic’, 1 participant identified as ‘Catholic (non-practising)’, 1 participant identified as ‘Christian’, 2 participants identified as ‘Agnostic’, 1 participant identified as ‘Atheist’ and 1 participant identified as ‘No religion’. Religion was not an inclusion/exclusion criterion, and the table solely presents age–gender–education–region combinations, to protect participants’ anonymity. When specific participants are quoted below, participant numbers are used instead of their names. All quotes were translated from the original (Maltese, or a mix of English and Maltese) to English.

Table 1 – Participants’ demographic characteristics

#	AGE GROUP	AGE	GENDER	EDUCATION	REGION
1	18-22	20	Female	Tertiary	South
2	18-22	21	Female	Tertiary	West
3	18-22	20	Female	Tertiary	North
4	18-22	22	Female	Non-Tertiary	N. Harbour
5	18-22	22	Female	Non-Tertiary	West
6	18-22	21	Male	Tertiary	West
7	18-22	18	Male	Tertiary	N. Harbour
8	18-22	20	Male	Tertiary	South
9	18-22	21	Male	Non-Tertiary	South
10	18-22	22	Male	Non-Tertiary	North
11	23-30	26	Female	Tertiary	N. Harbour
12	23-30	26	Female	Non-Tertiary	South
13	23-30	28	Female	Non-Tertiary	N. Harbour
14	23-30	25	Female	Non-Tertiary	West
15	23-30	28	Female	Non-Tertiary	North
16	23-30	28	Male	Tertiary	South
17	23-30	27	Male	Tertiary	South
18	23-30	27	Male	Tertiary	West
19	23-30	27	Male	Tertiary	North
20	23-30	26	Male	Tertiary	West
21	31-45	38	Female	Tertiary	South
22	31-45	44	Female	Tertiary	North
23	31-45	34	Female	Non-Tertiary	N. Harbour
24	31-45	40	Female	Non-Tertiary	West
25	31-45	44	Male	Tertiary	N. Harbour
26	31-45	32	Male	Tertiary	West
27	31-45	45	Male	Non-Tertiary	South
28	31-45	38	Male	Non-Tertiary	North
29	46-60	46	Female	Tertiary	N. Harbour
30	46-60	49	Female	Tertiary	South
31	46-60	50	Female	Tertiary	North
32	46-60	49	Female	Non-Tertiary	North
33	46-60	60	Female	Non-Tertiary	West
34	46-60	59	Male	Tertiary	West
35	46-60	57	Male	Non-Tertiary	South
36	46-60	55	Male	Non-Tertiary	N. Harbour
37	61+	72	Female	Tertiary	West
38	61+	69	Female	Tertiary	North
39	61+	65	Female	Non-Tertiary	South
40	61+	/	Female	Non-Tertiary	N. Harbour
41	61+	82	Male	Tertiary	N. Harbour
42	61+	62	Male	Tertiary	South
43	61+	62	Male	Non-Tertiary	North
44	61+	64	Male	Non-Tertiary	West

Note. **Table 1** presents the demographic characteristics of the participants who took part in this study.

III. FINDINGS

The first part of this section reports the findings of the thematic analysis. The second part of this section reports the findings of the abductive analysis. Before proceeding, it is worth noting that the findings (both analyses) converged primarily around the patterns in participants' views and reasons (and the extent to which these were argumentatively backed), and not necessarily around the frequency with which such views were expressed. The codebook used during analysis did enumerate the number of participants among whom an idea featured, and the number of times this idea featured across participants (see **Appendix Section 5.2**). Nonetheless, whilst the frequencies listed in the codebook generally confirmed the salience of an idea, this was not always the case, as expected (e.g., some ideas were mentioned briefly but elaborated at great length). Accordingly, whilst the quantification of qualitative data in the codebook generally served confirmatory purposes, the below analyses (thematic and abductive) relied primarily on participants' expressed views and the extent to which they were argumentatively backed, as is customary in qualitative studies. Importantly, all the findings presented in this report solely concern participants' views and perceptions.

3.1 Thematic Analysis – Findings

Four main themes—**I. Being Catholic** (lived Catholicism); **II. Catholicism** (belief; realm of the thinkable); **III. Catholic Church** (project; institution); and **IV. Associations**—are presented below, together with their respective subthemes, and visual illustrations. Participant quotes were chosen by balancing (a) the salience of the idea in question, (b) its analytical value, and (c) the various age–gender–education–region combinations, to provide an output that is as unbiased as possible. **Table 2** presents the overall thematic structure.

Table 2 – Thematic Analysis: Themes & Subthemes

Themes & Subthemes	
I. Being Catholic A. Universalism, Perspectivism & Subjectivism B. Catholic Faith & Values C. Catholics in Social Landscape D. Distinctions E. Relationship with Practice	II. Catholicism A. Substance B. Modality of Belief C. Depictions of God D. Relationship with Belief E. Science & Religion
III. Catholic Church A. Function B. Depiction C. Catholic Church in Social Landscape D. Relationship with Church E. Ultimate aim F. Focus or Change	IV. Associations A. Word Associations B. Social Groups (General) C. Social Groups (Specific)

Note. **Table 2** presents the main themes—**I. Being Catholic; II. Catholicism; III. Catholic Church;** and relevant **IV. Associations**—together with their respective subthemes, as identified across participants during thematic analysis. Themes are presented in bold type and Subthemes are presented in normal type. Analysis (a) adopted an inductive orientation, and (b) coded content largely at the semantic level (i.e., at the level of explicit meanings). The labelling of themes and the contents of the themes themselves (the descriptions presented below) were data-driven, that is, informed by an in-depth analysis of participants’ views.

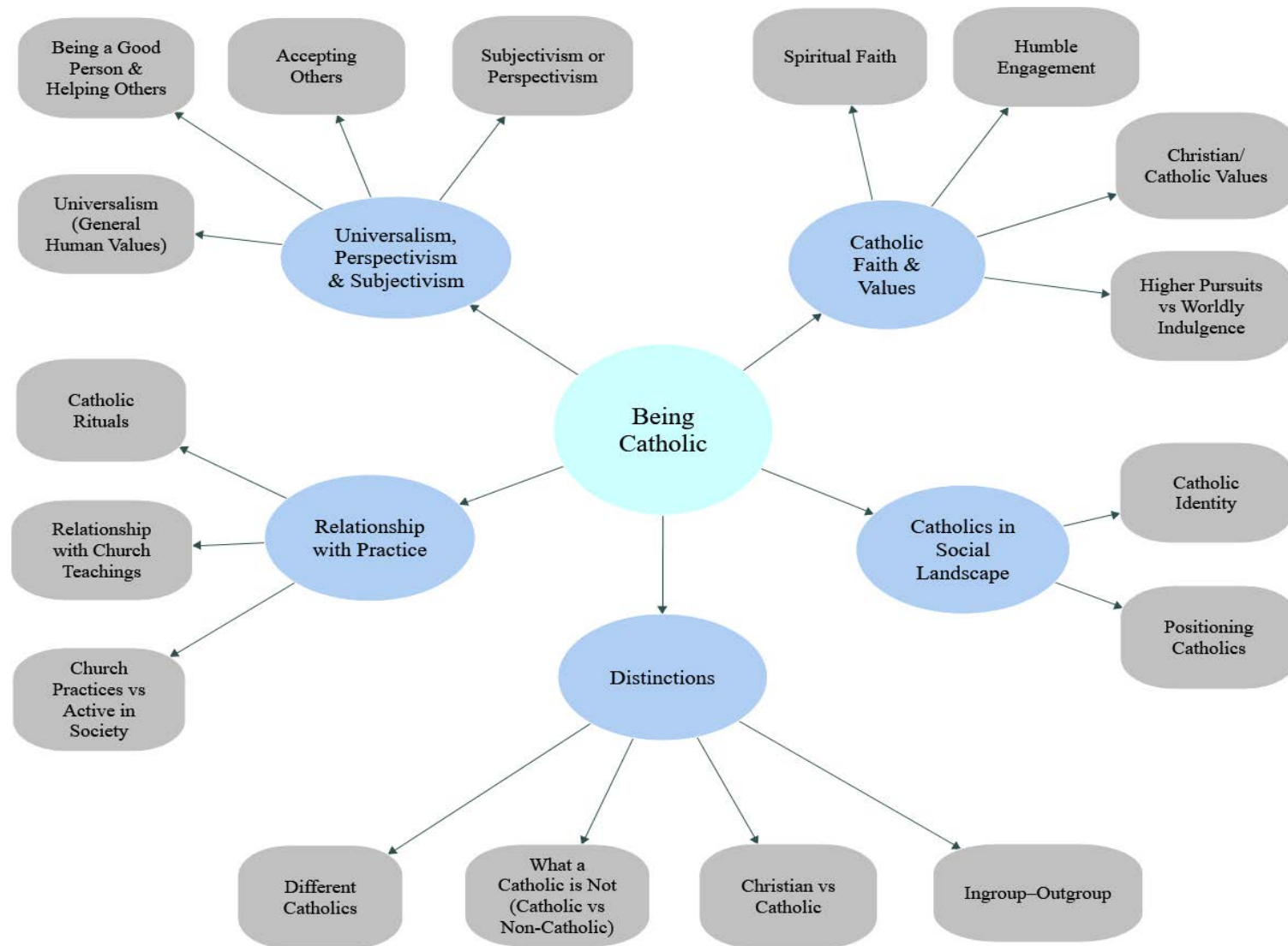
3.1.1 Theme I: Being Catholic

The first theme concerned what it means to be Catholic, and the characteristics that make one Catholic. This theme included the following subthemes, which are described below: (A) **Universalism, Perspectivism & Subjectivism;** (B) **Catholic Faith & Values;** (C) **Catholics in Social Landscape;** (D) **Distinctions;** and (E) **Relationship with Practice** (see **Figure 1**).

Overall, *Being Catholic* was understood in terms of abiding by a set of general secular human values: being good, being nice, helping others, being honest, accepting others, and so on. Whilst appreciating the subjectivity and perspectivism inherent in any religious outlook, participants generally emphasised such values and attributed to them a degree of universality. Hence, the term ‘universalism’ is here used to describe values deemed as being natural and widely shared (in this case, the use of the term is not meant to denote matters of moral ontology

per se). Alternatively, participants emphasised the spiritual dimension of the Catholic faith, together with the value structure that flows from it. Also relevant were participants' positioning of the Catholic identity in the social landscape, the distinctions they made between 'Catholic' and 'non-Catholic', and their relationship with practice and ritual. Overall, aspects of universalism, perspectivism and subjectivism tended to leak into some of the other subthemes as well, whereby principles, practices, values and ways of life tended to a significant degree to be framed in terms of all-encompassing terms (e.g., 'being good', 'love', 'charity', 'accepting others', etc.). What differed between subthemes was whether such terms tended to include a spiritual Catholic facet or not (e.g., contrast 'being good' with 'being good by abiding with Jesus' teachings').

Figure 1 – Theme I: Being Catholic – Thematic Structure



Note. **Figure 1** presents Theme I: (a) the main theme (Being Catholic); (b) subthemes (in blue) and (c) general codes (in grey).

3.1.1.1 *Universalism, Perspectivism & Subjectivism*

The first subtheme relating to *Being Catholic* was that of **Universalism, Perspectivism & Subjectivism**, which featured strongly among the younger participants, but which ultimately featured across the whole participant pool. Here, the emphasis was on human values framed in largely secular terms: being good, being nice, helping others, being honest, and so on. **Being a Good Person & Helping Others** constituted a core component of this subtheme. Here, participants elaborated on the importance both of being *actively* good to others, and of *avoiding* harm, generally stressing the importance of being helpful over ritual and mass (whenever these featured). The good Catholic was therefore represented as someone who helps others and puts them first, accepts others, and is not judgmental. The importance of action was prioritised over avowals of faith, such that Catholicism was represented as something one *does*: precisely by living up to one's values (which were either vaguely defined or concretised in specific actions) despite the struggle in doing so:

I think it's much more than going to church every week [laughs]. I know I said this already, but I think, it's mainly – I guess – helping those people that need it and you know, those people that maybe have less than you and you know that they're suffering, being empathic towards people and I think just being nice and respectful to people, you know. Especially in Malta, we have different cultures, you know, we have a lot of refugees and not looking down, like, on anyone. I think just being, like, a good person in general, you know, and like, sticking to, like, good values.

Participant 2 (Female, Tertiary, West, 21 years)

Among the ways that one can be a 'good person', **Accepting Others** was singled out at times. Accepting others was generally understood in terms of being humane, non-judgmental and inclusive. A good Catholic was here understood as someone who is inclusive, regardless of the diversity around them (in terms of ability, gender, etc.); and who sees human persons as having dignity. This set of values was seen as allowing one to be at ease with oneself and others.

So, the first thing that makes a good Catholic is that they are not judgmental. That's where you start. If you judge a person, you are already mistaken. Because, one, you do not know their story, what they went through, you do not know what made them become what they are. They could have had a bad upbringing, and no one showed them what's good or bad.

Or, erm, what they went through, made them react to things in a certain way. So, if you're judgmental, you're already wrong.

Participant 26 (Male, Tertiary, West, 32 years)

I think you need to be a good Catholic by accepting everyone and, ee, you know? [...] And you sleep peacefully. You sleep- I sleep, every night, peacefully.

Participant 32 (Female, Non-tertiary, North, 49 years)

The above came together in a shared stance across participants: that of **Universalism (General Human Values)**. Participants made 'universalist' arguments when highlighting values that they saw as being religiously neutral, basic, general, or shared across humankind, or that could serve as common ground to unite people from different cultures and religions. Such values were seen as being adoptable by religious and non-religious individuals alike. Here, religious affiliation was either disentangled from the idea of a 'good person', or else was deemed as being neither necessary nor sufficient for one to be 'good'. A minority of participants also made lay ontological arguments, attributing an objective basis to such values. Sometimes, these 'values' were left undefined, and at other times concrete examples were given by interviewees to illustrate what they meant, as per the quote below. Accordingly, 'being Catholic' was equated to being an adequate human being by subscribing to these (often implicit) values of kindness, solidarity, help-provision and charity—goals that 'being Muslim' or 'being Buddhist' could equally achieve. Attempts by interviewers to dig deeper into what makes religious categories (Catholic, Buddhist, Muslim, etc.) meaningful, were met with different levels of success. It was the customs, rituals and cosmetic cultural elements, that were seen as differing across religions.

Interviewer: *So, when we say, 'living the life of a good Catholic', what makes this person so?*

Participant: *But this is, as I said. You do not need to be Catholic to, there's no need. For example, Gandhi wasn't Catholic.*

Interviewer: *But if I had to press the point – because this, is there nothing, possibly – so if there is nothing over and above these general principles that make someone Catholic as opposed to something else? I'm not saying better or worse; but is there nothing that distinguishes the Catholic?*

Participant: [small pause] *There are the aspects that are visible, in the sense of how you pray, ee, how one goes to Church and the other goes to a Mosque, one lays down on a carpet, the other on, on a pew, eee one has the Eucharist and the other does not, eee the*

woman wears the hijab whilst our woman almost doesn't wear anything but rather undresses [laughs] [...] Erm, those are the aspects that show. Eee, you have those who take Communion – we take Communion and they don't.

Interviewer: *So, on the level of values, it's like you cannot think of anything?*

Participant: *No, because what's good remains good. Whichever way you look at it, it's going to remain good. If I'm a person, if I have a turban, and I saw that you were thirsty and gave you water; and then another one comes along with a pendant [domna] [small pause] this is like the parable of the Samaritan. Even though they were rivals, it was he who put him on the donkey, took him to an inn and took care of him. [...] The one who was supposed to be his rival showed him mercy.*

Participant 16 (Male, Tertiary, South, 28 years)

This universalist strand was interestingly complemented by a degree of **Subjectivism** or **Perspectivism**, which also permeated the dataset. Here, people's subjectivity was prioritised, or else being Catholic was framed as a matter of perspective: that is, one can look at it from different angles. For instance, according to participants, in God's eyes being Catholic means 'being good to others', whereas, in humankind's eyes, being Catholic means partaking in relevant rituals. The data exhibited the following patterns of argument. On the one hand, (a) everyone has their own definition of what being Catholic means (e.g., mass attendance and/vs. cultivation of virtue), and the term may carry no actual meaning unless one looks at the specific lives of Catholics—with no definition being necessarily seen as better than any other. On the other hand, (b) this opens up a plethora of ways of being Catholic, varying by belief, devotional style, lifestyle, spirituality, and so on. Accordingly, one could choose the aspects of Catholicism they like, and ditch the rest, with modern-day Catholicism being represented as more accommodating of sceptical attitudes. This was framed in either positive or neutral terms.

Everyone has their own definition of what makes you Catholic. Perhaps that's what makes it beautiful: that although Catholicism is a bit rigid, humans sort of alter it as they deem fit.

Participant 1 (Female, Tertiary, South, 20 years)

Participant: *Every individual has their own view [il-dik tieghu] [...] what it means for them.*

Interviewer: *Is this a good thing or a bad thing, that every individual has their own view?*

Participant: *It's neither good nor bad [...] You cannot place a value on it. You can neither say it's good, nor can you say it's bad. Because everyone has their own opinion.*

Participant 40 (Female, Non-tertiary, Northern Harbour, 61+)

3.1.1.2 *Catholic Faith & Values*

The second subtheme relating to *Being Catholic* was that of **Catholic Faith & Values**. Whereas the previous subtheme had ‘thinner’ content—indicative of the vibes inhering in moralistic therapeutic deism (Smith & Denton, 2005)—this aspect of *Being Catholic* was more traditionally Catholic in religious terms. In this specific subtheme, the spiritual dimension of the Catholic faith was emphasised, together with the value structure that flows from it, promoting humble engagement with the world, spiritual faith and an aspiration toward higher pursuits as opposed to worldly indulgence. It is worth noting that whilst the subthemes **Universalism, Perspectivism & Subjectivism** and **Catholic Faith & Values** were both sizeable, content from the former subtheme was more likely to penetrate the latter subtheme, than vice versa. Accordingly, this subtheme and the previous one should be studied in tandem.

A relatively specific aspect of this subtheme concerned **Humble Engagement**. Here, participants equated being Catholic with helping others and fighting injustices without showing everyone what you are doing—the primacy of the deed over the spectacle. The view that Catholicism should be simple and personal, and the avoidance of displays of piety, were emphasised. In certain depictions of the ideal Catholic, humble engagement came out strongly.

I think, the Catholic that can mostly make a difference in everyday life is that Catholic who is, he is one of the rest. He does not exaggerate. This is a person who lives a very normal life: he's married, he works. But to me, personally, he gave me a space where I can show a certain vulnerability, or certain issues or certain struggles which—were it not for him—perhaps I wouldn't have 'accessed', let's put it this way. Or a priest who can help me in a similar manner, because there was a certain barrier keeping me from going there. This was a certain person who was there, is living right next to me, is living everyday life, he is inviting. He is a very common person, but at the same time, in his humility and simplicity, he could be a guide, and at the same time it's like he's always acknowledging his own faults as a human being.

Participant 18 (Male, Tertiary, West, 27 years)

Beyond humble engagement, participants spoke of **Spiritual Faith**, in terms of believing in God, having faith, maintaining a conversation with God, being motivated by this relationship to help others, and following Christ's teachings. Here, the terms used were more substantively Christian. On the one hand, participants spoke of cherishing one's relationship with God, loving and forgiving others, avoiding resentment and being at peace.

The Catholic is that person who is capable of continually dialoguing with God but lives their very normal life, and sort of, they externalise that dialogue in practical things. So, if you're saying, 'Listen, this person is struggling in this manner; how can I help them?'

Participant 18 (Male, Tertiary, West, 27 years)

On the other hand, participants articulated their relationship with doubt in various ways, from viewing religious details (e.g., the virginity of Mother Mary) as somewhat irrelevant for their faith, all the way to a faith that is filled with, and almost sustained through, doubt (a faith held critically even if less serenely than that of the unquestioning).

But then, what happens is that, for example, when ugly things happen—which happen to everyone—I see the difference between myself and my mother, for example. My mother is more accepting [taçcetta iktar]. Sort of, she's one of those who say, 'It's part of a bigger plan. We cannot understand. Eventually, we'll understand it'. I'm not like that [...] I want answers. And there are certain things that you won't have answers for.

Participant 21 (Female, Tertiary, South, 38 years)

Related to spiritual faith were participants articulations of what they deemed as being **Higher Pursuits versus Worldly Indulgence**. Being Catholic was here framed as a continuous battle against worldly desires and impulses (the idea of not falling for temptation), within the context of belief in something greater than oneself. This was seen as justifying a good life of meaningful sacrifices, as opposed to one dedicated to hedonistic pursuits.

I believe that my values are there not because someone gave them to me, because I went to MUSEUM [...]; but because I truly believe in the values I uphold. [...] Not just because I was sort of brainwashed into believing. No, I truly believe them. [...] I believe that when I believe, when I believe in something greater, life is more meaningful. And I think it's also, to a certain extent, it's a bit, a bit egoistic, this thing. That I want to believe there's something bigger because otherwise what's the use? What's the use of me being a good woman? What's the use of living a good life? Might as well live a debauched/indulgent [exxellerata] life if there's nothing then [...] So, I want to believe so that I can give a reason why [sic] I should live a good life.

Participant 21 (Female, Tertiary, South, 38 years)

Relating to the above, the general code **Christian/Catholic Values** articulated specific Catholic/Christian values that make the good Catholic, particularly when they truly cherish them. The application of teachings to one's life, the spreading of the Word of God, the ability to forgive others, and perseverance in the face of opposition were here framed as distinctly Christian/Catholic values, as were the ideas of going beyond the call of duty to help others, and of courageously abiding by Christ's teachings even at work or in the public sphere. Here, the primacy of 'helping others' was argumentatively justified on Biblical grounds, apart from appeals to one's sense of humanity; and Christ's teachings and the inner workings of conscience were given greater importance.

To abide by the Church's teachings, Christ's teachings, let me put it this way, right? [...] Well, that God is love, right, and your role is to love in all your deeds, right? [...] Again, this thing of respect, it [being Catholic] boils down to it.

Participant 31 (Female, Tertiary, North, 50 years)

At the same time, some participants argued that Catholic values are 'greyer' nowadays; that they are decreasing in their appeal when compared to a few decades ago; or that people express them less (i.e., held beliefs that are not avowed), especially when they include an ideological component that is perceived as being at odds with the views of society at large.

The Catholic would have ideologies that are a bit different than mine, for example. [...] Perhaps they won't agree with marriage or with adoption—this is more current—between gay couples. I'm not telling you they don't agree, but they'd be neither 'yes' nor 'no'. Perhaps they'd be leaning more toward 'no' rather than 'yes', or maybe more 'yes' than 'no'. Or perhaps, for example, they'd agree but they wouldn't dare state their opinion [ma jasalx li jsemmiha] in a group, because they'd know that what they'll say is wrong.

Participant 8 (Male, Tertiary, South, 20 years)

3.1.1.3 Catholics in Social Landscape

The final points of the previous subtheme lead straight to participants' positioning of **Catholics in the Social Landscape**. This subtheme highlighted: how outsiders perceive Catholics; how Catholics are becoming a minority in terms of influence; how Catholics try to persuade others in society to convert; how today's world can be an obstacle to the faith-filled life; and different aspects of Catholic social identity.

When **Positioning Catholics** in the social sphere, participants argued that Catholics may be particular in that they try hard to persuade others of their beliefs. In contrast, some participants also argued that people may feel shy to say they go to Mass nowadays, and that at the same time, the actions of Catholics (e.g., priests) reflect on the Church as a whole. This argument was made with reference to greater scepticism among Catholics concerning the faith (due to information technology, etc.), or else from a nostalgic point of view emphasising the difficulty of living up to one's Catholic ideals nowadays.

It's almost as if nowadays people laugh at you if you say, 'I'm Catholic', you see? [...] And we became, everyone, nowadays, television and what not, everything—I mean, I do watch television, but—everything is heading the other way [kollox mewġa bil-kontra ġe]. So, you have to choose what to see. Participant 44 (Male, Non-tertiary, West, 64 years)

Nowadays, being Catholic is ten times more difficult than, for example, 30 years ago. Because nowadays, you have everything, everything is in the open. If you go on the internet, you can find anything. Participant 43 (Male, Non-tertiary, North, 62 years)

Apart from highlighting the challenge inherent in living a Catholic life (precisely due to the socio-cultural direction taken by society at large), some participants positioned Catholics as a group that is, or is becoming, a minority. Here, nostalgia, resistance to alternative views, the conflation of ethnic and religious categories, and ingroup cohesion vibes were relatively stronger, and the alternative to 'Catholic values' was at times represented as a stance where 'nothing matters'.

I think, nowadays, it's not that it's difficult, but that: you start feeling that you're in the minority. Not that it would bother me, I mean. But before it was the norm; nowadays, it's not the norm anymore. Nowadays, I don't know what the norm is really and truly. Nowadays, to be a good Catholic you need more perseverance. You need to not give up. So, before it was easier, ey. Because everyone was Catholic. Right? And as soon as someone went off-track [jiżgarra], they used to be marked. Nowadays, nothing matters [xejn mhu xejn]. So, today's society, we don't have that distinction. Before, the majority were good sort of, and once someone was bad, they would immediately be— Let's not forget, the villages were small, we didn't have this influx of foreigners. So, everyone knew each other, Maltese only. Participant 29 (Female, Tertiary, Northern Harbour, 46 years)

In turn, when speaking directly about **Catholic Identity**, participants argued: that Catholics are “human beings like any other, just with a different view” (Participant 10: Male, Non-tertiary, North, 22 years); that being Catholic means a lot to them; that many Catholics are in a grey area and suffering from an identity crisis; or that the question of what ‘being Catholic’ means is a tricky question. Notions of identity crises, grey areas, and uncertainty—especially when seen in light of greater access to information, as seen above—are highly indicative of the processes of cognitive polyphasia (Provencher, 2011) reviewed above.

If someone had to tell me: ‘I am Catholic’, I would imagine them going to Church every Sunday, maybe taking part in events, praying maybe during the week or whenever. Like, for me, that’s what a Catholic would be [...] I don’t do all of these things, and whenever you get like a questionnaire, ‘What religion are you?’, I always hesitate, because I know how I was brought up, but I feel like unless I go to Church every Sunday, like, am I a Catholic anymore? Like, I don’t really, I don’t know. There’s like that kind of conflict, in my head.

Participant 11 (Female, Tertiary, Northern Harbour, 26 years)

3.1.1.4 Distinctions

Whilst appreciating the diversity characterising **Different Catholics**, participants partly articulated what *Being Catholic* means by describing **What a Catholic is Not (Catholic vs. Non-Catholic)**. Accordingly, they argued that a Catholic follows Catholic rituals and authority, whereas a non-Catholic does not; a Catholic helps others instead of chasing money and power; and so on. A more specific articulation of this code framed Catholicism in **Ingroup–Outgroup** terms. Here, the idea was that the Catholic Church is like a club, and one is either a member or a non-member. Whilst appreciating people’s freedom to choose, the institution was represented as ultimately requiring at least a minimal degree of allegiance, as expressed in words and belief. Interestingly, in contrast to previous subthemes that did not distinguish clearly between different religions (e.g., Catholic vs. non-Catholic), the participants contributing to this subtheme did so, to some degree, by highlighting the importance of commitment, consistency, strict allegiance and reflexive self-awareness.

You have to decide well, because otherwise, if you’re going to—all right, so you’re Christian, you get your kids and when it’s time for Baptism, you baptise them. And then you get used to everything you face [...] You know, let me tell you, you have to decide. You have to decide beforehand: am I Catholic or not? If I’m Catholic, my dear, you have to be a real Catholic.

Participant 37 (Female, Tertiary, West, 72 years)

For me, if you form part of a club, you have to follow the rules of the club; it's not a question of when you happen to and when you don't. Like everything else, right? Obviously, [...] you're never going to agree with everything that the club does. But you also know that the club has certain rules, and it could also be that those who devise the rules do not agree with them but they have to do that. This is like any other institution. [...] It's not a question of what I like or don't. So, nowadays we're so focused on the view that the world revolves around us, that it's not that I'm part of a club; no, the club must please me, everything must please me. It's not good like that [...] I'm not going to tell you anything if you don't want to remain Catholic. [...] But do not be a Catholic just when you want to. Don't tell me you're Catholic, 'but I don't go to Sunday Mass, but this, but that'. So, what kind of Catholic are you? Don't be Catholic, it's fine [ma jimpurtax].

Participant 29 (Female, Tertiary, Northern Harbour, 46 years)

Interestingly, a minority view emphasised the distinction between **Christian versus Catholic**, in highly specific terms that went beyond denominational classifications. Here, being Catholic was equated with ritual and cultural background/identity, whereas Christianity was equated with authentic spiritual practice. The contrasts (i.e., institutional allegiance vs. willed authentic practice) between this general code and the previous one are instructive.

So, as a person who is conscious that they live in Malta—because you live in Malta, so it's almost like you're Catholic without choosing it—one starts being Catholic, or better yet Christian, when they realize that they are not Christian because they were born in Malta but because they chose to be Christian. But it's good to make the distinction between being Catholic and being Christian because they are not the same thing. Many times, the question of being Catholic is tied to your country of origin. So, the way I think, is that one can be born Catholic, but they can choose to be Christian.

Participant 20 (Male, Tertiary, West, 26 years)

3.1.1.5 Relationship with Practice

The final subtheme of *Being Catholic* concerned participants' **Relationship with Practice**. Participants generally preferred the doing of good deeds over participation in prayer, ritual and Mass, viewing good deeds as more indicative of who the authentic Catholic is. Nonetheless, a whole spectrum of arguments featured here, and whilst the thematic analysis was conducted in line with the principles of “internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity” (Braun & Clarke,

2006), this subtheme inevitably tapped aspects of the previous four. Firstly, participants' **Relationship with Church Teachings** ranged from equating 'being Catholic' with loyalty to Church teachings and engagement in **Catholic Rituals**, all the way to the view that 'being Catholic' does not imply following Church teachings to the letter—with an intermediate position being discernible in the dataset as well. When discussing the importance of **Church Practices vs. Being Active in Society**, the vast majority of participants argued directly for the greater importance of being active in society. In terms of popularity and the extent of argumentative backing, this view was followed by an intermediate position emphasising the importance of both ritual and social activity, and a minority position prioritising ritual over social activity. The following quotations illustrate this spectrum of arguments.

What you do is more important, your actions, your words, etcetera. So, it's not simply a question of going to Mass every day and saying the rosary and what not [...] So it's a question of how you behave yourself in society. So, that you really do it, because you believe in it. So, I think that that's the ideal Christian.

Participant 29 (Female, Tertiary, Northern Harbour, 46 years)

All right, you may tell me: 'But you don't go to Mass?' I don't need to go to mass. Because I pray whenever I want, where I want. And I think that Jesus listens to me wherever I am, and there is no need for him to stay telling me: 'Listen, you need to go to Church for me to listen to you', or 'You need to go there for me to listen to you'. Everywhere. As soon as I wake up in the morning, I do the sign of the cross [...] He still listened to me and I still thanked him.

Participant 36 (Male, Non-tertiary, Northern Harbour, 55 years)

Interviewer: *What's more important? To observe the practices of the Church—like Mass, the Sacraments or prayer? Or to be active in society, helping others, etcetera? [...]*

Participant: *One is intertwined with the other. They're intertwined. You cannot separate them, in my view. [...] One is interlaced with the other [...] I have two hands, but they're in the same body. But I don't love one hand more than the other. Do you see what I mean? So, they're really intertwined, such that you cannot separate them. Never.*

Participant 43 (Male, Non-tertiary, North, 62 years)

If you want to be a whole Catholic, no, you need to, by default, definitely, touch base with Church. At least touching base. In a way, it has to come from you, obviously, to give it enough importance to invest time in it. But no, I do not think you can be, or at least let me

put it this way: it's not that you can't be a Christian, but you surely cannot be a complete Christian—and by 'complete', by quite a good margin—if you say that you're not touching base with the Church. That's my experience.

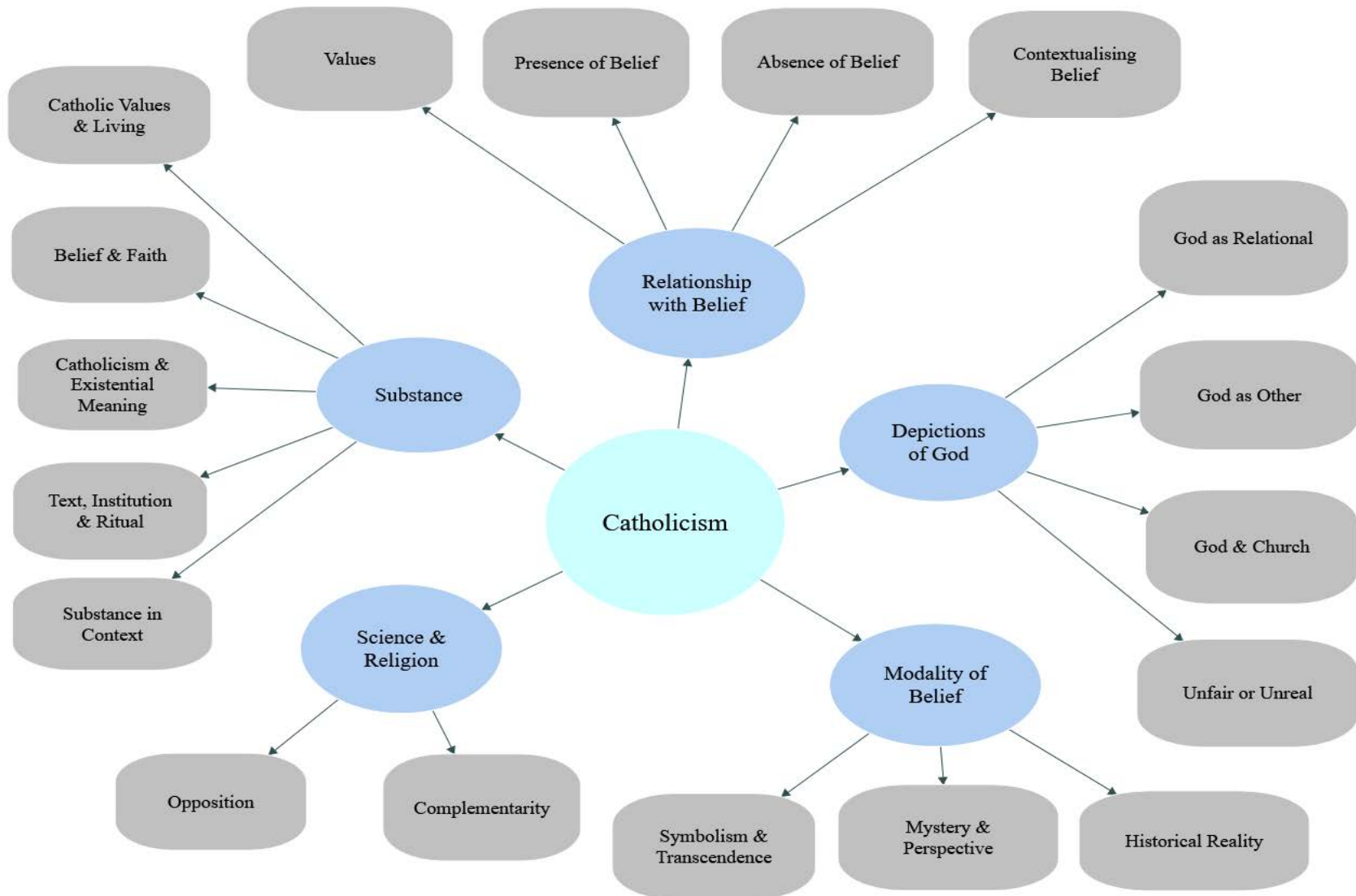
Participant 18 (Male, Tertiary, West, 27 years)

3.1.2 Theme II: Catholicism

The second theme concerned Catholicism and its different aspects: principally, its substance and associated modalities of belief. This theme included the following subthemes, which are described below: (A) **Substance**; (B) **Modality of Belief**; (C) **Depictions of God**; (D) **Relationship with Belief**; and (E) **Science & Religion** (see **Figure 2**).

The core substance of *Catholicism* was framed largely in terms of belief, faith and Catholic values, mirroring one aspect of what it means to be Catholic in the view of participants. Thus, whereas *being Catholic* was more explicitly framed in general secular terms, *Catholicism* was articulated in more religious terms, emphasising faith, spirituality and Catholic values. Catholicism was also framed in existential terms (the provision of meaning). Catholicism's take on LGBTIQ+ issues was questioned, and the religion was contextualised among others, with participants making universalist and perspectival arguments once again. The idea here was that Catholicism taps universal human characteristics; just as other religions do. More sublimely, participants discussed various transcendent and symbolic aspects of Catholicism, either appreciating the former aspect or alternatively reducing Catholicism to a nexus of symbolisms. One particularly interesting element of this subtheme concerned participants' various depictions of (the Catholic) God, as seen below. Participants' relationship with belief (rather than practice *per se*) was here problematised as well, as was the relationship between science and religion. Overall, Catholicism emerged as an amorphous yet varied belief system; a network of beliefs and modalities that can be represented to pursue different joint projects (Bauer & Gaskell, 1999), ranging from the purely spiritual to the concretely social.

Figure 2 – Theme II: Catholicism – Thematic Structure



Note. **Figure 2** presents Theme II: (a) the main theme (Catholicism); (b) subthemes (in blue) and (c) general codes (in grey).

3.1.2.1 *Substance*

The first subtheme naturally concerned the core **Substance** of Catholicism. The substance of Catholicism was framed largely in terms of **Belief & Faith**, and **Catholic Values & Living**. When explaining Catholicism as a belief system, participants tapped the unknown or the beyond, emphasising the notions of religion, faith and upbringing. In fact, many of the arguments constituting this theme tended to be arguments from ‘common knowledge’ (in the Maltese milieu), representing Catholicism as the spiritual faith one was brought up with, as God’s teachings, as the Church’s teachings, or as a way of life. Alternatively, they objectified Catholicism in terms of **Text, Institution & Ritual**: MUSEUM, Mass, the Bible, the Catholic Church or the Sacraments. In fact, at times arguments were left at face value, without further elaboration; this possibly indicates the hegemonic influence of Catholic thought, such that it structures people’s conceptual framework, with Catholic schemas featuring at the limits of inquiry or legitimation. Love, charity, social wellbeing, peace, harmony, delusion, vocation, and faith—as–decision, were all words/phrases associated with Catholicism.

Catholicism, for me, I base everything on the Sermon on the Mount. So, feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, clothing the naked, etcetera. [...] I believe in those, no question. [...] Because the human being, even if they’re not Christian, they should still do these.

Participant 43 (Male, Non-tertiary, North, 62 years)

On the one hand, the relationship between **Catholicism & Existential Meaning** was highlighted by participants seeking to make sense of life’s suffering, have a sense of guidance, extol the value of sacrifice, or find hope in their fast-paced lives.

So, you know that there’s a reason why you’re living. You live a good life so that eventually you enjoy the afterlife. But, there’s an objective. So, you’re not living for nothing [...] Suffering, for example, has a reason.

Participant 21 (Female, Tertiary, South, 38 years)

On the other hand, the relationship between Catholicism and truth was framed in absolute terms (Catholicism as the only Truth), contextualised (Catholicism as one truth among others), or else rejected (religion as hindering critical thought and growth).

Erm, obviously Catholicism should not be considered as the only way [...] but as the ideal way that we should go through.

Participant 34 (Male, Tertiary, West, 59 years)

When putting Catholicism's **Substance in Context**, participants contextualised Catholicism in the following contexts: (a) personal; (b) religious; and (c) social. Firstly, universalism, perspectivism or subjectivism featured once again, the argument being that Catholicism is one of many religions and that it is up to the individual to choose what suits them (personal context). Secondly, Catholicism was represented as: a religion that was created by humans; a religion that changed over time; one branch of Christianity; less strict than other religions (particularly when compared to the past); and/or more powerful in Malta than elsewhere (religious context). Thirdly, Catholic views (mostly) on LGBTIQ+ issues were once again framed as particularly problematic (social context).

I had neighbours who came out as gay. So, you start asking certain questions, and we all know that religion is questionable when it comes to LGBT issues and what not, euthanasia, whatever, I mean [...] Current affairs, of today's world, to put it this way.

Participant 8 (Male, Tertiary, South, 20 years)

3.1.2.2 **Modality of Belief**

The second subtheme concerned participants' **Modality of Belief**. The main general code here concerned **Symbolism & Transcendence**. Participants argued that Catholic beliefs/entities are (a) mostly transcendent, (b) mostly symbolic, or (c) a bit of both. The (a) first stance mentioned: miracles (e.g., Marian interventions) as indicative of a transcendent reality; the power and efficacy of prayer; the capability of ritual (e.g., sign of the cross), teachings and suffering to tap a reality beyond this world; and/or belief in religious entities (Jesus, Mary, Holy Spirit, Satan, etc.) through faith, formation or even 'proof' or (alternatively) non-exclusion. That is, generally, at a minimum, participants retained ties with an undefined transcendent reality, or did not exclude its existence. The (b) second stance argued: that Catholicism is (largely or exclusively) symbolic, like other religions; that most teachings do not necessarily tap a spiritual dimension but are nonetheless important; that the importance of religious symbolism is greater than that of historicity, despite the waning influence of symbolism in today's world; and/or that the Sacraments are symbolic (e.g., the Eucharist as simply commemorative). Naturally, the (c) third stance articulated both of these elements, advancing intermediate or ambivalent positions, which at times delved into **Mystery & Perspective**. Here, participants adopted an agnostic stance of 'not knowing', which was argumentatively backed, or else they argued that the question of symbolism versus transcendence is a perennial one that cannot be solved—one can

only adopt a perspective if they choose to do so. Alternatively, other participants cultivated a sense of spiritual doubt that seemed essential in sustaining their faith: a deeply embedded spiritual modality of doubt.

The safest way to say is both [symbolic and transcendent]. In the sense that, I mean, look [sighs] to believe that a person, for example, died and resurrected from the dead is absolutely bonkers and in no point of my life will I ever, logically, obviously, explain it [sighs] I am relying on, a text, in reality. I am relying on what people have relayed from generations, across generations. Now, the fact that in and of itself it is, he [Jesus] is a person, who remained so influential [...] Part of me would definitely argue, 'Listen, so he existed and I think he did something' [...] [sighs] The life of Jesus in the Bible [...] there are certain ideas, for example, you have this person, let's say he's a hero or he did some type of sacrifice for the greater good. I'm sure it was present before and maybe it became encapsulated in the best manner in the existence of this person who lived with people, gave himself to people, etcetera, all the rest of it. So, in a way, there's that symbolic element, for sure. So, these are values that, kind of, we have looked up to for a long time as a people, as a civilization, as a humanity. And you say, 'Listen, this is the best of us.' [...] I do believe, with all the scepticism otherwise [sic] about it, that certain events took place for sure, and I'm sure and [sighs], again, if you tell me [...] 'black on white, yes or no?' I'll tell you, 'Yes, I'm sure that beyond kind of, there is something more than this existence, and kind of, in the story of Christ, to meditate, it's like the mediator between this existence and that existence. Now, if you tell me, you ask me individually, 'do you believe there's a heaven? Do you believe there's a hell?' [...] I don't know whether to say 'yes' or 'no' [...] I believe there is something [...] that there is something beyond. I don't know if it's encapsulated in the correct manner, kind of, that, heaven, hell, I don't know. I haven't been there so who am I to say?

Participant 18 (Male, Tertiary, West, 27 years)

Finally, a minority of participants understood this issue largely in terms of the **Historical Reality** behind Catholic beliefs, arguing that the concrete narrative elements of Bible stories are enough for spiritual growth, or basing their faith on the view that certain Bible events took place, putting aside issues of belief modality.

3.1.2.3 *Depictions of God*

Perhaps a particularly interesting subtheme of *Catholicism* was that concerning **Depictions of God**. God was depicted (a) as Relational; (b) as Other; (c) as the founder of, or separate from,

the Church; or (d) as Unreal or Unfair. The (a) Relationality and (b) Otherness of God occupied the vast share of content constituting this subtheme. Most ideas of God were either ‘positively’ Catholic in the doctrinal sense, or else ‘negatively’ Catholic (i.e., by not diverging too much from Catholic axioms on God). As with **Universalism, Perspectivism & Subjectivism** (subtheme in *Being Catholic*) and **Substance** (subtheme in *Catholicism*), this subtheme opened a window into what can be termed as the fundamentally ‘Catholic’ psyche (on a meta-level) of participants, shining a light on the limits of inquiry beyond which further conceptualisation was deemed difficult.

Depicting **God as Relational**, participants argued that God is the Gift-Giver (gifting the Bible, human conscience, etc.); the Father (for us to be capable of understanding him); both Human and Divine, particularly in the person of Jesus; Love itself; the Communicator; or Refuge itself. Here, participants also detailed specific attributes of Christ (loving, forgiving, humble, simple, human, involved in social change and/or revolutionary); or else attributed perspectives and specific concerns to God, whereby God was represented as being concerned with our actions, love and goodness, as opposed to our sexual orientations or gender identities.

After all, Christ judges what's in our heart. [...] He's not going to keep a registry and tell you, 'Look, you didn't go to Mass on that day, you didn't receive Holy Communion that day'. No, Christ looks at how much charity we did, how much we loved, how much love there is in our hearts, despite our weaknesses, sins and vulnerabilities. That should be the point of departure.

Participant 34 (Male, Tertiary, West, 59 years)

Christ also mentions faith, hope and love [...] And the greatest one among them is Love [...] Will God stay looking at us, saying, 'Because you're [LGBTIQ+]?' Will [this] affect, whether [one gives] drink to the thirsty, food to the hungry, or clothes to the naked?

Participant 16 (Male, Tertiary, South, 28 years)

In turn, when depicting **God as Other**, participants discussed God as: the Creator (who created everyone, including minorities); Telos (toward which our lives, intellect and whole being necessarily tend); Ultimate Reality (the idea that ultimately God is the only reality); the Source of all values and guidance; both Human and Divine (linking to the above); Perfection itself (whilst allowing for human freedom); or the Undefinable (lay negative theology, wherein God's attributes cannot be specified). Interestingly, when discussing the relationship between

God & Church, participants argued that God is the founder and leader of the Church, or else argued for the separation of God (seen as the apolitical repository of all good things) and Church (seen as a political entity with its own projects or natural fallibility).

He does everything perfectly. He shows us the way. His ways, sometimes, we wouldn't know what they are. We say, 'Oh well, I have to go through that path'. [...] We do not understand them. But He would understand them. He knows our thoughts, what we'll do, everything.

Participant 33 (Female, Non-tertiary, West, 60 years)

When you grow up and such, and you go through many things in life and you see how life went by, you say, 'So after all, there is only God, otherwise life is but a dream'. 64 years went by like it was yesterday. You see? You say, 'I did not keep anything'. Except, let me put it this way, that we enjoyed our children and such, thank God, and that we always tried to live as Jesus would have us live.

Participant 44 (Male, Non-tertiary, West, 64 years)

The human intellect was created by God the human intellect aspires toward God. So, I don't think that there is a thought, ideology or human philosophy that completely contradicts the teachings of the Church [...] On the other hand, human beings on their own, without God's help, go astray. So, they'll be wrong on many things, and I think that fundamentally they won't have that strength, unless God provides it in a way that He deems fit, He decides upon [...] So someone who truly does not have any faith in Christ [...] They wouldn't believe in the supernatural element, but they still remain, sort of, within, or let's put it this way, God gives them the grace to remain within most of the teachings. Meaning that they won't murder or steal or such.

Participant 19 (Male, Tertiary, North, 27 years)

No one is perfect. Everyone has their good and bad aspects, and so the Church has its good and bad aspects because of the people who lead it. I'm not referring to the presence of God here. God is perfect and, supposedly, he created everything perfectly, right?

Participant 23 (Female, Non-tertiary, Northern Harbour, 34 years)

Finally, two minority positions argued either that God is unfair (based on certain Old Testament accounts), or that one can safely say that God does not exist.

But that indoctrination, the question posed by faith, 'You must believe in Him', 'God has his mysterious ways' and such, that's [nonsense] for me. [...] God of the Church, for me, let me tell you: 99.999% he does not exist. Because then there's the other perspective that

says, 'Listen, we're so tiny in comparison with the Earth, with the Universe; is it possible that there isn't something that controls us?' So, then it depends on what you identify as God. [...] Whether it's this entity, or whatever. So, whether there's something greater than us, who knows? Not even I do. But it's possible at the same time. I'm the type of person who, if I don't have black on white what's there and what's not, I cannot say, 'Yes, that exists' or 'I believe that ...'. I have to observe.

Participant 8 (Male, Tertiary, South, 20 years)

3.1.2.4 Relationship with Belief

The **Presence of Belief** and the **Absence of Belief** were both present in different manners in the dataset. Believers argued that Catholicism is the best religion in the world; that Catholicism is the path they chose out of other options; or that they cherish their faith but do so critically. Non-believers, in turn, advanced views ranging from agnosticism to atheism; and as per the above, the Church's stance on LGBTIQ+ was mentioned as one of the reasons prompting one participant to start a process of deconversion. Overall, participants' relationship with Catholic **Values** ranged from an appreciation of such values to the view that they are inapplicable to one's life or redundant. There was more agreement among participants vis-à-vis notions such as 'loving one's neighbour', and greater divergence vis-à-vis the spiritual facets of such values. Once again, universalist, perspectival and subjectivist views coloured this subtheme (e.g., the views that one does not need a relationship with any religion to be good, or that different people have different spiritual or axiological needs and orientations).

Universalist, perspectival and subjectivist thought is not surprising in and of itself. Such arguments are generally sensible to any interlocutor, regardless of their stance on the matter, and their presence in the dataset was to be expected. Their importance is appreciated when juxtaposed with participants' multifaceted ways of **Contextualising Belief**. That is, universalist, perspectival and subjectivist views become analytically interesting, when one considers that many Maltese natives had upbringings that were saturated with Catholic beliefs and practices. Accordingly, the relative 'secularization' of Catholic belief in the dataset, starkly contrasts with participants' observations that, in the past, Malta used to not be open to any religion other than Catholicism; or that Catholic upbringing and further Catholic acculturation throughout life used to be the normal state of affairs. Similarly, participants argued that Catholic influence is decreasing; that whether to bring up one's children as Catholic is a contemporary matter of debate (in contrast with the past); or that certain life events (e.g., the loss of a loved one) or

employment situations (e.g., the medical sector, where people are faced with mortality) instil great doubts. Accordingly, participants' positioning of Catholicism ranged from the sociological to the purely personal, as per the following quotations.

I've witnessed a change. Comparing when we were young, with today. And with my children's lives. I mean, when I look at my children; we certainly didn't live out religion in that manner. And sometimes I think to myself: I was raised in that religion; I had a certain upbringing and it used to be the norm. It was the norm not to go to Mass on Sundays only. It was the norm to belong to religious groups. It was compulsory, almost. For us, the Church was like our second home. It was the place where we met our friends, where the activities used to be greater in number than today. Nowadays, I say to myself, is it my fault that my children are not as close to the Church as I was? [...] Because, in reality, when you look at other youth [...] you see that even to make the sign of the cross, they don't do it. I know many people my age, so I'm not saying anything. It started among those my age and younger [minni 'l isfel bdiel]. I know many people my age who didn't stay. Now, unfortunately, when we're saying 'Catholicism', we look at the Church, we don't look at the religion.

Participant 29 (Female, Tertiary, Northern Harbour, 46 years)

Sometimes, I meet people who feel betrayed, and they always come up with this idea that no one has the right to stamp a religion on a newborn who doesn't know what's going on. For me, honestly, that doesn't affect me. Meaning that, it's true that I was baptised without knowing what was going on. But now that I'm a grown up, my hair fell down, I got old, etcetera, sort of: I don't regret it, let me put it this way.

Participant 25 (Male, Tertiary, Northern Harbour, 44 years)

People who work in the medical sector. I think, then, [sighs] you are challenged so much with your mortality that, for example, [sighs] Let me give you a totally practical example. Recently, we had a funeral [...] and we were a group of medical doctors, we were about 15 people, and during the Eucharist, everyone was receiving Communion, etcetera [...] But here you have a nucleus of people who all chose not to receive Communion. [...]. Something that fascinates me, in a way, and I get it because there's a certain gruesomeness and hopelessness in our mortality [...] that can be seen as being at odds with faith in general, I mean, it's a struggle among many, many, many people I see working, especially in hospitals, and especially in certain specialisations.

Participant 18 (Male, Tertiary, West, 27 years)

But then, sometimes, things happen in life that raise a lot of doubts and I feel that my faith did not remain as strong as it used to be. You start questioning much more: 'Why?'

Participant 30 (Female, Tertiary, South, 49 years)

3.1.2.5 *Science & Religion*

Finally, the relationship between science and religion/Catholicism was characterised either in terms of **Complementarity** or **Opposition**. Participants arguing for a complementary view advanced one or more of the following arguments: that religion is needed over and above science; that science and religion occupy different remits (similar to Gould's [1997] notion of non-overlapping magisteria); or that science and religion complement each other, aiding mutual comprehension. In turn, participants arguing for oppositionality either framed science and religion as different incommensurable logics, or else argued for the primacy of science and evidence over faith.

I believe, yes, that certain things, we feel, as human beings, that they are not simply like scientific facts. They require—like art, for example, which you find in Churches. They are not things you see in the world [...] I think there is a certain [small pause] gap [distakk] that perhaps we haven't bridged yet. So, as we said, in you, you have something—just like everyone else—that you cannot describe. Which is not material. But it sort of allows you [iggioghlek] to do whatever you do. It is the centre of our existence. What I like, what I dislike, whether I agree with you. These are all things that, perhaps, are in you but you may not have an exact reason as to why you feel them. And then you have the world that we try to understand, which surrounds us. The natural world around us. But at the end of the day, that question of where everything came from, or what is the point of it all [...] They are questions that, perhaps, we are not yet capable of answering. And maybe we won't be able to answer them purely from a physical perspective. [...] It is contradictory. But one does not live without the other.

Participant 9 (Male, Non-tertiary, South, 21 years)

I believe they are two fully opposite subjects, as I told you. Because one is based on facts and the other on faith. For some odd reason, I remember [there was] a teacher [who] used to teach both science and religion. I mean [laughs] [...] No, in my view, they don't go together. No, simply for the reason [...] This is as if I'm telling you, erm, I'm training for a marathon, I want to go for a job, but once I arrive home, I'll just eat pizza, burgers and calories.

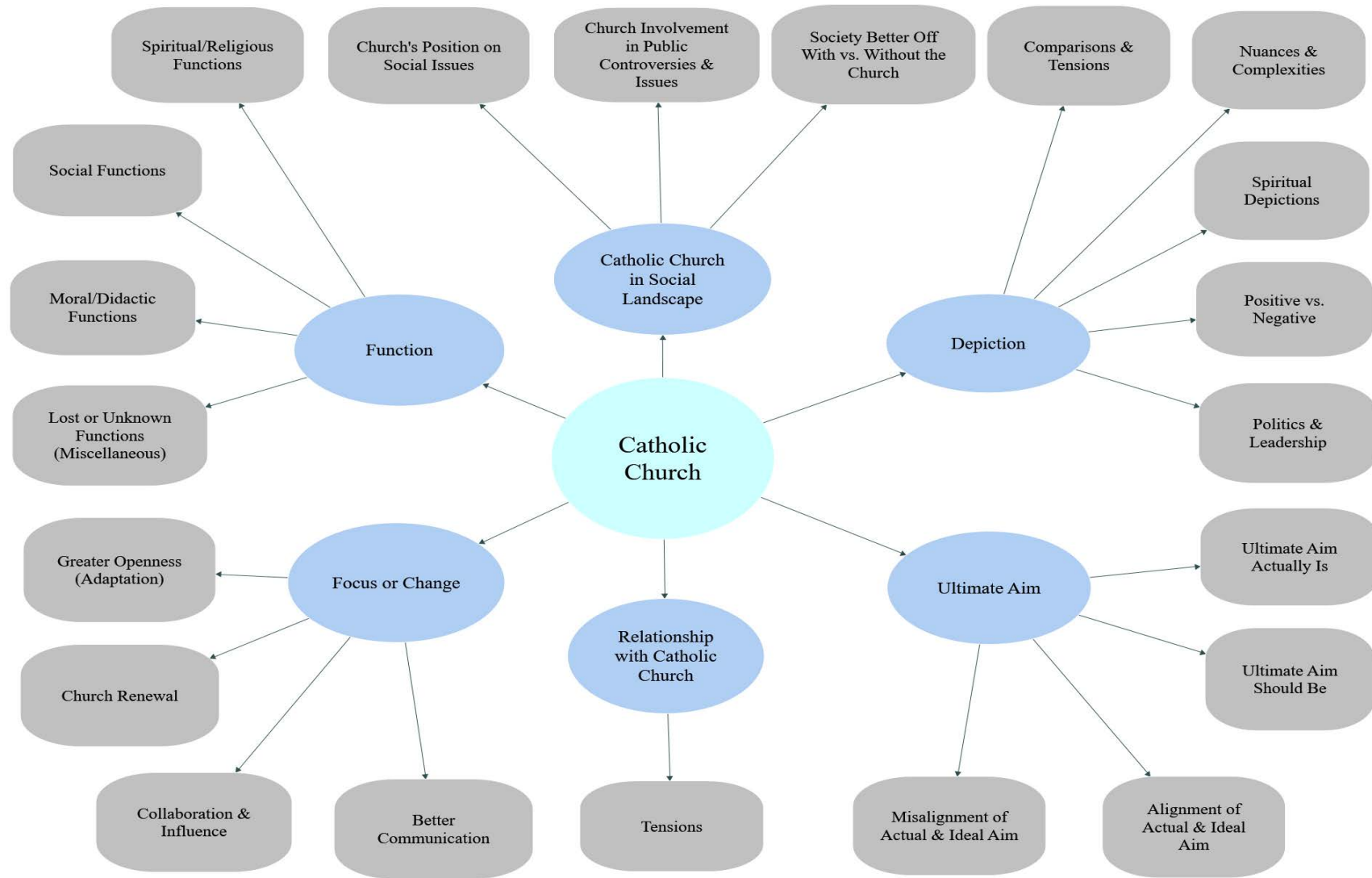
Participant 8 (Male, Tertiary, South, 20 years)

3.1.3 Theme III: Catholic Church

The third theme concerned the Catholic Church and its different aspects: principally, its functions in society, its overall depiction, its relationship to social issues, people's tense relationship with it, its attributed and expected ultimate aims, and the areas it is expected to address. This theme included the following subthemes, which are described below: (A) **Function**; (B) **Depiction**; (C) **Catholic Church in Social Landscape**; (D) **Relationship with Catholic Church**; (E) **Ultimate Aim**; and (F) **Focus or Change** (see **Figure 3**).

Overall, the *Catholic Church* was discussed from a variety of different viewpoints. Her functions were largely classified as spiritual/religious (e.g., connecting people with God, conducting religious functions & mass, etc.); social (e.g., helping others, uniting people, organising social activities, promoting love and acceptance, etc.); and moral/didactic (the Church was mainly construed as a guide but not an authority on matters of morality). The Catholic Church was represented by participants as harbouring various divides: progressive versus conservative; help-provision versus abuse; closeness to people versus distance from people; and social relevance versus irrelevance. Among other metaphors, throughout this theme, participants at times described the Church as a: (1) spiritual doctor, (2) grandmother or (3) mother. As per its label, this theme focused largely on the institution and its projects. When positioning the Church in the social landscape, participants generally argued that society is better off *with* the Church, but were naturally split over whether the Church should express itself on public controversies and vis-à-vis the Church's position on social issues. LGBTIQ+ featured once again, with participants strongly arguing for an actively pro-LGBTIQ+ Church. As with their **Relationship with Practice** (subtheme in *Being Catholic*) and **Relationship with Belief** (subtheme in *Catholicism*), participants' relationship with the Catholic Church was characterised by a variety of tensions. Such tensions emerged more clearly when discussing the ultimate aims of the Church: the alignments and misalignments perceived between the attributed and desired aims of the Church served to show that, overall, the desired joint project (see Bauer & Gaskell, 1999; see Buhagiar & Sammut, 2020) is that *for* a more social Church that goes back-to-basics by being hands-on and closer to people's lives. Appeals for the Church to focus on greater openness, Church renewal and its core spiritual-communal mission, surfaced too.

Figure 3 – Theme III: Catholic Church – Thematic Structure



Note. **Figure 3** presents Theme III: (a) the main theme (Catholic Church); (b) subthemes (in blue) and (c) general codes (in grey).

3.1.3.1 *Function*

The first subtheme concerned the Church's function. Participants mentioned the Church's **Spiritual/Religious Functions**, which included connecting people with God, conducting religious functions and mass, following in Jesus's footsteps, providing spiritual guidance to people, leading people to salvation, and administering the Sacraments.

Her essential role is to, it is trying to deliver to the people, communication, or skills, or, I don't know, in the sense of, basic methods of how anyone can communicate with God in their own way, or build a relationship with God in their own way. [...] But at the end of the day, I think that the idea of Church is to facilitate [...] humanity in general to have a conversation with God. Now, the way you will have a conversation with God is not the same the way I will have a conversation with God, so all efforts are directed to that. But there are different ways of actuating it. Participant 18 (Male, Tertiary, West, 27 years)

In turn, the Church's **Social Functions** were seen as the following: providing help (material & psychological); uniting people; organising social activities; promoting love and acceptance; welcoming everyone regardless of their beliefs and characteristics; and even playing a good role in international relations (through the Pope and Vatican).

Even if I need something personally, or some opinion, or I can go to the priest and he'll help me. Even, I don't know, for example, on marriage: I can go to the priest and he'll help. In fact, as you can see, for example, when people marry, it is normal for them to go to the Mass so that the priest conjoins them. So, in my opinion, the Church tries to do what it can to unite [biex tghaqqad]. Participant 3 (Female, Tertiary, North, 20 years)

Participant: *Like, for example, if she'll provide help, she'll provide help to everyone. So, whoever it is would know that the Church is helping them*

Interviewer: *OK. And help in terms of what? Help that's material, help that's—*

Participant: *Well, in our parish, especially, they do a lot for those in need, even food and stuff. They collect. Some would need furniture. We help everyone, I mean, there isn't Catholic or non-Catholic. Those who are not Roman Catholic would know that we help everyone.* Participant 35 (Male, Non-tertiary, South, 57 years)

Perhaps the most sizeable general code concerned **Moral/Didactic Functions**, where participants mainly construed the Church as a guide but not an authority on matters of morality.

On the one hand, the Church was represented as contributing: to the teaching and training of priests and nuns; to academia (through publications); and to people, through MUSEUM, marriage courses (Cana) and other fora offering life advice. On the other hand, participants specifically represented the Church as an entity that provides moral guidance to the individual (e.g., to lead a better life) and society (e.g., guidance away from materialism) alike. In general, the terms used indicated that participants see the Church as having the role of a guide, more so than an authority. That is, participants saw the Church as a point of reference, occupying more of a meta-ethical role rather than actively telling people what to do. Only a minority of participants saw the Church as an authority on moral matters, citing what they perceived as the Church's divine mandate to provide guidance, or else their fear of hell. Across the board, nuances and qualifications were plenty.

The Church is there for that. For these things, ey, to be a guide, toward the good [gwiida ghat-tajjeb]. I don't like saying 'authority'. Because 'authority', it's like you're saying that someone commands you, 'Because you won't do this, that will happen to you.' Right? More as a guide. Because then, you would have told a person what's good, and then if they do what's wrong it's not your fault ey. But you showed the way. You did your work and that's it [...] Because if you say, 'you're commanding', you'll look bad. So, you, for example, I can give you advice and tell you, 'I'm just giving you advice. I'm not interfering or whatever, but I would do this in your case. Now it's up to you'.

Participant 23 (Female, Non-tertiary, Northern Harbour, 34 years)

She is the moral compass when it comes to certain things. Especially nowadays, in a world where everything is fast, a life that is ever more materialistic. I don't know, for example, the mobile phone. Today, you have a particular mobile phone. Next years, a new one will come out, so it becomes obsolete.

Participant 17 (Male, Tertiary, South, 27 years)

Participants also noted that the Church's guidance functions are decreasing over time, because the Church has less credibility/influence nowadays (e.g., due to social change, or due to bad apples in the Church). Others pointed out that whilst the Church may provide moral guidance, they had some reservations on the methods they perceived the Church as using, citing fear and outdated views. Interestingly, when discussing other groups in society that provide moral guidance, participants mentioned art, environmental non-governmental organisations, food banks, specific individuals, the media, the fields of education and medicine, humanitarian organisations, sports organisations, the discipline of philosophy, the workplace, the family or

democratic institutions—giving an idea of who has moral guidance as one of their remits, and thus contextualising the Catholic Church further.

Finally, notions surrounding **Lost or Unknown Functions (Miscellaneous)** featured too. This general code was miscellaneous, and included (a) functions that participants represented as *not* belonging to the Church's remit (e.g., sexual relations between people); (b) functions that the Church lost over time, either because they are now taken care of by secular entities (e.g., charity, therapy, teaching, etc.) or because the mass media brainwashed people and the Church lost its functions as a result; and/or (c) the view that it is difficult to say what the Church does in society nowadays.

[Pause] *It's difficult to say, I mean. Nowadays, erm, I don't know [laughs] honestly. I don't know what she does.*

Participant 9 (Male, Non-tertiary, South, 21 years)

3.1.3.2 *Depiction*

The second subtheme concerned the Catholic Church's overall depiction. This subtheme incorporated various elements of what is commonly termed *public perception*. The Church's depiction was replete with **Comparisons & Tensions**, incorporating various **Nuances & Complexities**, and **Positive versus Negative** views. Tensions surrounded conservative versus progressive currents within the Church (objectified in debates and issues such as LGBTIQ+, the role of women, sexuality, indoctrination, the welcoming of foreigners and mental health), with a general preference for greater openness; the closeness versus distance of the Church's relationship with people; the extent of its relevance in society; a distinction between the Catholic Church and practising individuals (the latter being depicted more positively); the beauty of help-provision versus the ugliness of abuse; and perceived inconsistencies in Church leadership versus an appreciation of their fallibility. On the positive front, participants mentioned the Church's slight opening up over the years (e.g., not remaining resistant to women in the workplace), and the community/help-related functions and activities of the Church: charity, giving people a sense of belonging, integrating foreigners (e.g., in particular parishes where the parish priest provides that direction), good work done in silence, and so on.

Erm, but nowadays, I think, as well, the Church also started teaching about the importance for individuals to keep their dignity [...] In the sense that, because, ey, you know: even women, they were much more submissive. [...] And, even the fact that, on certain issues,

even surrounding the role of women, the idea that when a woman is married and has children, 'it's better if you don't work' and such. Nowadays, things are no longer like that [...] Perhaps before, people used to judge more, or the Church used to impose and things like that. Slowly slowly, this decreased. Participant 30 (Female, Tertiary, South, 49 years)

'There are these problems, let me work to address them'. And that's something that, that's by far the aspect of the Church that I admire the most. And any effort with that respect [sic] is something that I admire a lot. So, for sure, it's not representative, I mean, of the work that is done in the community. But if you had to tell me, 'What does it mean to you? For you, what's first, the thing that strikes you most, that comes to mind?' It's that, no doubt. [...] 'Listen, I'm in that sector [xogħol] because I want to be of service.' And so, these are the aspects of the Church that I admire. Participant 18 (Male, Tertiary, West, 27 years)

On the negative front, participants mentioned abuse (e.g., by priests), perceived corruption or malpractice, perceived elitism in Church schools, the Church's riches, or perceived brainwashing tactics to increase the number of adherents.

In fact, its greatest defect is not as much the scandals and the riches and the luxury, but that it's conservative. In the worst sense of the word. Because it's good to be conservative, meaning that you conserve that which is good even when facing thousands of challenges [...] But where there's the need to update yourself [taġġorna ruħek] and change things, there you need courage. And the Church doesn't have that courage, it is really afraid [tibža' ħafna]. Participant 34 (Male, Tertiary, West, 59 years)

The Church cannot teach Christian values, etcetera, etcetera, and then try to cover up or hide scandals that involve a part of the clergy, and then pretend that people, or a portion of the people, do not lose their trust in her. [...] The cases involving scandals and such, I believe, refer to the minority. But still, it remains a huge stain that can never be cleaned. There used to be, and there still are, cases where the Church, instead of referring to the competent authorities, tries to keep everything hush hush, everything covered up. And then if at one point it comes out in the open, it is only then that she gives names to the authorities. This behaviour is not exemplary. That's a mistake [Hemmhekk żball]. If a Pope does wrong [jiżbalja], or a Bishop, and a priest, the consequences and the image that this projects are very different. Participant 34 (Male, Tertiary, West, 59 years)

In turn, the **Spiritual Depictions** of the Church represented the Church as following in Jesus'

footsteps, as taking care of the mass/sacraments/prayer, as bringing people together and helping them live a better life, as inheriting the role of the apostles, as the temple of God, or as a source of spiritual identity (e.g., through baptism, confirmation, upbringing, etc.). Some participants distinguished between the spiritual/eternal Church and the worldly/material Church, and participants disagreed on the extent to which the Church is needed for people's spiritual growth. Interestingly, different metaphors for the Church characterised her as (1) a spiritual doctor, (2) a grandmother or (3) a mother.

For me to learn to make good decisions. That's what I want. I want them to teach me to make good decisions, just as a mother does to her children, the same thing, so that the children start learning to make good decisions, even though she won't be there.

Participant 39 (Female, Non-tertiary, South, 65 years)

Finally, the depictions relating to **Politics & Leadership** tapped (a) sociological/historical issues; (b) Church leadership; and (c) Church media. Participants mentioned these issues of their own accord, but did not generally discuss these matters at great length, possibly due to the sensitive nature of the issues involved. Point (a) advanced the views that the Church: is losing its influence on people; remains powerful; and/or was imposing and damaging (e.g., not giving absolution, interdett, land issues, etc.) in the sixties, leaving a lasting negative impact. In contrast, participants' views on (b) Church leadership were more mixed. The Pope was largely represented in positive terms, as a humble man who lives an exemplary life and is slowly shifting the public's mentality toward more openness (e.g., vis-à-vis LGBTIQ+ issues). The few codes that concerned the Archbishop, too, generally represented him in a positive light (e.g., noting his working relationship with state entities when encouraging COVID-19 vaccination). However, some saw the 'Church' as representing the people (including priests), and the 'Curia' as representing power. Similarly, the codes concerning (c) Church media were negative, attributing political bias to Newsbook (the Church's online news portal), and representing RTK (currently known as 103 Malta's Heart) as "no longer of the Church at all" (Participant 44: Male, Non-tertiary, West, 64 years), the argument being that it does not sufficiently promote Christian values (although these codes were few in number, they were not counterbalanced by positive codes).

Ehhh, I think that, well, especially, ee, Pope Francis, and even the Popes before him, emphasised that all religions should unite [jingħaqdu] if we want peace [għaqda] in the

world. Irrespective of what you believe in. I cannot tell you, 'Mine is right and yours is wrong.' And who told me that mine is right? So, that's what I think we need to— Unfortunately, society is full of stigma and prejudice.

Participant 29 (Female, Tertiary, Northern Harbour, 46 years)

The things they put on Newsbook, I think one has to take a step back. [...] Certain articles, one has to take a step back. It shows, sort of, that they're leaning toward one side. They should be more neutral. This one's neutral, that one's neutral: you should neither lean toward one side nor to the other. [...] And this makes people feel distant [tbieghed hafnias]. And I know that people grew cold toward the Church [tbieghdu n-nies mill-knisja] because of this. [...] I know what I'm talking about. [...] These things happened in the past. Let's not fall for the same things again. That's how I see it.

Participant 27 (Male, Non-tertiary, South, 45 years)

3.1.3.3 Catholic Church in Social Landscape

The third subtheme relating to the *Catholic Church* tapped participants' positioning of the Catholic Church in the broader social landscape. The first general code within this subtheme concerned whether participants thought that **Society is Better Off With vs. Without the Church**. The majority of participants saw society as ultimately better off with the Church, arguing that the Church: helps those in need; provides a sense of belonging and spiritual sustenance; advances social causes; safeguards religio-cultural practices; performs pedagogical duties and provides moral guidance; provides a sense of identity; is a point of reference for many; and/or keeps other religious powers in check. Some also could not conceive of society without the Church, or argued that the Church's presence is good for believers to practise their religion freely. In contrast, only a minority saw society as better off without the Church, arguing that: a world without religion is better; minorities would have less problems without the Church; there would be less sexual abuse scandals; the Church's functions are being fulfilled by other entities (e.g., the State); the Church influences people's minds too much; and/or spiritual sentiments are manufactured needs. The former set of arguments (stating that society is better off *with* the Church) were greater in frequency and argumentative backing, despite the presence of various qualifications.

No, no, it's better if the Church remains there. I believe that there's a lot of good. But, I mean, obviously, there's a lot to fix. But ultimately, the Church is not the building; the Church is the people [...] And although there are, to put it this way, the bad apples; there

are many good apples. And I believe that, I mean, I say this upfront, there's a lot of good.

Participant 25 (Male, Tertiary, Northern Harbour, 44 years)

I think that [society is better off with the Church]. [...] Nice values, you know? [...] Now I don't know if I'm mixing things up, because it's been a while since I [laughs] had a religion lesson. But that's the feeling I had [...] sort of, good values. [...] Erm, that. Basic things, I mean. Like don't steal, don't murder', mmm, I don't know. Like, don't cheat on your husband or wife.

Participant 15 (Female, Non-tertiary, North, 28 years)

Participants were naturally split vis-à-vis **Church Involvement in Public Controversies & Issues**. Three patterns of argumentation contended (1) that the Church has a duty to speak up on social issues/public controversies; (2) that the Church should not speak on social issues/public controversies; or (3) that it depends (e.g., speaking up without interfering in private matters [e.g., LGBTIQ+ issues, sexual issues, etc.]; aiding reflection without involving itself in partisan politics, etc.). Camps (1) and (3) were larger than camp (2), with various caveats and qualifications calibrating participants' arguments across the board. The general gist of the argument was that whilst the Church has a right to speak, just as everybody else, this should be done sensitively and sensibly. Nonetheless, when it came to the vulnerable, the poor and other similar social causes, participants were in agreement that the Church should speak up, merging descriptive arguments with normative prescriptions.

The Church should really stand up more for, for example, social welfare, sick children, people in hospitals. I think that the Church should regenerate itself more with these, and enter into society more where there's suffering.

Participant 36 (Male, Non-tertiary, Northern Harbour, 55 years)

But where she sees injustices, she shouldn't see colours. If she sees injustices. I think she needs to follow in Jesus' footsteps. Every religion follows the steps of its leader. What did our leader do? He stood up for the vulnerable, for the voiceless. So that's what I think is the Church's duty. [...] Where she sees human rights, like the environment. Isn't that a human right, for me to have space? For me to have a house to live in? To have something to eat? In fact, we're seeing the Church opening these kitchens. Why are monks [patrijiet] opening them? And this dinner that CARITAS organises. Why? Because she's always with the vulnerable. Always with those who cannot.

Participant 29 (Female, Tertiary, Northern Harbour, 46 years)

When locating the Church in the surrounding social landscape, participants also naturally expressed their agreement or disagreement with the [Church's Position on Social Issues](#). Once again, (a) LGBTIQ+ issues emerged as having particular importance vis-à-vis the Church, with participants overwhelmingly arguing the following: that the Church should speak differently about LGBTIQ+ individuals; that the Church's stance can have damaging effects on vulnerable/young LGBTIQ+ individuals and should not influence laws; that despite increased Church acceptance, the Pope remains more sensitive than the Church at large; that the Church's position on LGBTIQ+ issues is wrong; or that LGBTIQ+ Catholics should be allowed to marry. Participants' overall arguments for a more pro-LGBTIQ+ Church were clear.

If there's a person who's 12 years old, she's already doubting herself, whether she's gay or whatever. [...] 12 is a very tender age, meaning that it's vulnerable. And so, if she hears the Church saying that 'gays are not welcome', 'you're not living in Jesus' path': it's harmful. Don't tell me otherwise. [...] Personally, I believe that, if you're going to speak up to do harm, then keep silent.

Participant 8 (Male, Tertiary, South, 20 years)

On, erm, homosexuality and such, perhaps [...] Giving them more rights, it's like they didn't want to. They did give them, but it's not enough [...] I think sometimes, erm, the Church, with the things it said, I think, sometimes she, sort of, destroyed families and such. For example, you'd have some homosexual children, and their mother and father are Catholic, or they don't accept them for example. [...] So, I think they want to hide these things [...] They're not speaking properly on it [...] They have to be clear.

Participant 4 (Female, Non-tertiary, Northern Harbour, 22 years)

The other issues that were discussed are presented here in order of frequency, noting overall participant 'camps' in brackets: (b) poverty and social justice (Church is doing good work vs. Church should do more); (c) reproductive issues (pro-life vs. pro-choice camps); (d) divorce/separation (miscellaneous observations, generally arguing against the Church's stance in the 2010s divorce debate); (e) immigration (agreement with Church's position and immigrant support vs. wariness vis-à-vis immigration); (f) environment (overall consensus that the Church should speak/do more); (g) politics (majority view that the Church should not interfere in partisan politics vs. minority view that the Church should speak on political corruption); (h) cannabis; (i) euthanasia; (j) education; and (k) women (too few codes emerged on the last four issues to allow for meaningful analysis). A minority view also expressed

weariness with an over-emphasis (in the public sphere) on identity issues at the expense of social/communal issues.

[sighs] *Again, the old debates, in reality, I mean, I do not wish to fall for these, these many, sort of, these concurrent [sic] debates of divorce, abortion and gender. I think those are, kind of, highly superficial. Not highly superficial, but they represent a very- one aspect about it. But even, I mean, our education, our upbringing, the relationships you build with people of faith and the way they try to give you advice, intrinsically. I mean, by far they're [the controversies] not the only aspect of religion. Rather there's the value system, that gets incorporated and that gets communicated in every aspect.*

Participant 18 (Male, Tertiary, West, 27 years)

3.1.3.4 *Relationship with Catholic Church*

Overall, participants' relationship with the Church was characterized by **Tensions** on various levels, highlighting both positive and negative aspects. These tensions tapped participants' (a) upbringing in the Church, whereby made various observations on their upbringing within Church environments. Moreover, views differed as to whether to pass on the faith to children or not (regardless of the potential parent's beliefs), mirroring views expressed when discussing their **Relationship with Belief** (subtheme in *Catholicism*).

Because if I have, for example, 20 years, let's say I get married and have children, in my mind, once I have children, I do not imagine myself not baptising them, or not having Confirmation or not taking them to doctrine lessons or this or that. I will do those things for them.

Participant 3 (Female, Tertiary, North, 20 years)

If I had kids, I would want for them actually to not be, to not go to any kind of religious schools, like kind of grow up and kind of choose what religion they, kind of, get to hear what kind of religions exist, kind of choose what they believe in. I don't want to start by brainwashing them immediately like, that's it, like: 'This is your religion, stick with it until 18'.

Participant 14 (Female, Non-Tertiary, West, 25 years)

Moreover, participants naturally (b) expressed various degrees of closeness to the Church (e.g., the Church as a point of reference), or distance from the Church (e.g., an emphasis on thinking independently from the Church); (c) expressed an awareness of negative Church representations versus a willingness to defend the Church against accusations; and/or (d)

argued that their relationship is primarily with God as opposed to the Church, highlighting various internal conflicts, among other views.

If you ask me if the Church makes a difference in my life, well, once every while yes ey. To go there and listen a bit to what's being said, etcetera. Does it do good? It does no harm. To be fair, to be honest with you, no. I'm not one to go, as in, every Sunday, right? But every once in a while, yes. I feel good when I go, right? Not to say I went, but, like, it kind of helps you, right? I feel it kind of helps me.

Participant 10 (Male, Non-tertiary, North, 22 years)

For me, the Catholic Church is intimately linked to my life, thanks to my parents. Because my mother [...] in particular, had introduced into my psyche this fundamental idea that the Church is something that one cannot substitute, you cannot find a substitute for it. It has been a cardinal point of reference in my life. She used to take me to the Church every day, mass, etcetera. To the point where it became something that one cannot live without.

Participant 34 (Male, Tertiary, West, 59 years)

I believe in the Church. I really believe in it. Then, and I have very good friends, and I feel that I am religious. I feel conflict with what I believe. When you consider that, given my beliefs, I should tell them, 'No, you're disgusting. You're not supposed to marry, you're not supposed to have children'. No. I do not agree with these things, and so there, when you tell me, 'The Church': I have a few questions on the Church. But again, I don't question my religion. I question the Church, because I know how to make a distinction between the religion I cherish and the Church that is made of human beings. And so, the mistakes are not committed by my God, so to speak [...] As an institution. [...] I make a distinction between the Church, which is man-made, it is made of human beings, and decisions are being taken by human beings who are interpreting. At the end of the day. It's the interpretation of those who are leading the Church, and my values as a person, as a person who believes in God. And so then, there are times when, yes, I do not believe; or for example, there was a period during which the priest bothered me, and on Sundays I didn't used to go to mass, and I didn't used to feel guilty because I was getting nothing from it. So, I simply didn't used to go to mass. I didn't used to feel I was sinning. I was getting nothing from it. To the contrary, it's almost like I used to be annoyed. It was becoming something compulsory, and my faith was almost starting to get threatened. So, I just remove myself from such situations.

Participant 21 (Female, Tertiary, South, 38 years)

3.1.3.5 *Ultimate Aim*

The fifth subtheme on the *Catholic Church*, revolved around participants' views on its ultimate aims: both attributed and expected. Given the nature of the topic, connotations between descriptive ('is') and normative ('should') statements were inevitable, but questioning by the interviewer was intended to distinguish between the two. The following attributed aims (participants' views on what the *Ultimate Aim Actually Is*) featured in the dataset: (a) moral guidance and teaching; (b) spiritual guidance; (c) power and control; (d) helping people; (e) accepting people; (f) reaching out (maintaining and increasing the number of followers); (g) love, peace and harmony; (h) business; and (i) a final view arguing that the aim is not known or varies depending on the aspect of the Church in question.

That you have someone to follow [...] something that acts as a guide. It could be a person, it could be reading, it could be certain laws, certain principles, for you not to feel lost. I think that's the aim. And I think that everyone, even the atheist, seeks this thing. [...] Yes, to be a guide, and to obviously adapt to the times. So, I think that's important. If you're guiding people in 2020, you cannot keep thinking like 100 years ago. So if her aim is to guide people, she's guiding the people of today.

Participant 29 (Female, Tertiary, Northern Harbour, 46 years)

As I already told you, [the aim is] to unite people and guide people in the good path. As much as possible, eh.

Participant 28 (Male, Non-tertiary, North, 38 years)

In turn, the following expected aims (participants' views on what the *Ultimate Aim Should Be*) featured in the dataset: (a) moral guidance and teaching; (b) spiritual guidance; (c) influence on social issues; (d) going back-to-basics (following in Christ's footsteps, being humble and community-focused); (e) helping people; (f) accepting people; (g) love, peace and harmony; (h) reaching out; and (i) addressing suffering and existential meaning. As with the attributed aims, various arguments were advanced here, with one key difference asking for the Church to go back-to-basics, an idea that is further explored in the next subtheme. Moreover, a mix of spiritual (largely, the idea of following in Christ's footsteps) and secular discourse characterised participants' expectations, reflecting the distinction observed above in the representation of Catholicism (between universalist discourse and more traditionally religious discourse).

The aim of the Church should be not to look at religions anymore, to unite everyone together, ee, bring about unity in society, and going beyond just religion. We should [...] accept everyone, to sort of break these barriers that are popping up in society. It's like there's too much, 'This is my religion', and recently it's like everyone is coming up with their own religion, not just Catholic, Muslim: everyone. So, isn't it better to stop labelling religions and work for the same aim? To improve our societies, as I see it, for example? Because even the title itself creates division, if you're Catholic or Muslim or Buddhist. Without wanting to: we're grouping people in categories.

Participant 1 (Female, Tertiary, South, 20 years)

The main aim of the Church was, in the beginning, to follow in Christ's footsteps. But I think we're miles away from that [laughs]. I'm sorry to say this. Christ went out among sinners, all right? He had nothing. He was the son of a carpenter, I mean, and he had nothing. I know that the Church cannot just remain that way, but, I don't know. I see her as being really far away from what Christ used to do. I think her goal should be to go back to basics.

Participant 40 (Female, Non-tertiary, Northern Harbour, 61+)

Despite the similarity in general categories (between the attributed and expected aims), participants were split into the following camps: those perceiving **Alignment of the Actual & Ideal Aim**; and those perceiving **Misalignment of the Actual & Ideal Aim**. Discussions largely centred on spirituality, guidance, and a desire for the Church to go back-to-basics (following Jesus's teachings, being closer to people, etc.). More specifically, those perceiving a degree of alignment between the actual and ideal aims, saw such alignment largely in the domains of: (a) guidance; (b) spirituality; (c) help provision; (d) acceptance; and (e) the promotion of love, peace and harmony. In contrast, those perceiving misalignment, saw this largely in the domains of: (a) guidance (power [attributed] vs. forgiveness [preferred]; mentioning issues with teaching methods; & desiring consistency in practice); (b) back-to-basics (business [attributed] vs. community [preferred], formalities/ceremonies [attributed] vs. humility & consistency in practice [preferred]); (c) spirituality (too few codes); (d) Church divisions (direction of Church hierarchy vs. direction of people [the latter being preferred]). Naturally, some participants also had mixed or dialogical views, appreciating multiple perspectives and falling mid-way between the 'Alignment' and 'Misalignment' camps, or else specifying issues on which the Church is aligned and others on which it is not.

I think that if you provide—erm, not information—the teachings properly and in a way that’s interesting and creative, there don’t need to be more aims than that. Because if people go, that shows that the aim is being reached.

Participant 12 (Female, Non-tertiary, South, 26 years)

Participant: [The ultimate aim is] *to help people [...] for them to live a better and happier life, erm. Mostly, in relation with each other. Eee [...] meaning people amongst themselves. [...]*

Interviewer: *All right. And in your opinion, what should the ultimate aim of the Catholic Church be?*

Participant: *What the ultimate aim should be [pause]*

Interviewer: *Is it different than what it is? Or, is that what you think the aim is: do you think that it is different from the one it should be, or the same?*

Participant: *Basically, the same, ey. And to reach, erm, to reach more people [...] or to get people closer to it, or to get them back to it. [...] Those who distanced themselves, or, or are distancing themselves.*

Participant 42 (Male, Tertiary, South, 62 years)

Interviewer: *If you had to say, what do you think [the Church’s ultimate aim] actually is? [...]*

Participant: *What it actually is, look, look, certainly to deliver Christ’s message, supposedly, yes.*

Interviewer: *So, is that taking place?*

Participant: *Yes, I feel that, up to a point, it’s taking place, yes.*

Interviewer: *Is there any other aim that you see the Church moving toward, or is that pretty much her aim, which is also taking place up to a point?*

Participant: *Erm, no, for me, I think that’s the only aim that’s taking place, yes.*

Interviewer: *OK. And what do you think the Church’s ultimate aim should be, then?*

Participant: *So, the ultimate aim, if it were up to me, erm, would be that, as an institution, they unite society more, and kind of, they include everyone in it, and they don’t create certain partisanship, erm, you see?*

Interviewer: *OK*

Participant: *Erm, yes, I think that mostly, to try to unite society more than it’s doing so, perhaps.*

Interviewer: *Are you referring to partisanship in the political sense, or?*

Participant: *More in general, as in, between different societies, you see, as in.*

Interviewer: *Can you give me an example?*

Participant: *As in, they always create this issue of LGBTQI, obviously.*

Interviewer: *OK, OK.*

Participant: *Erm, obviously, when it comes to politicians as well. Politically, I think they create certain clashes.*

Interviewer: *In what sense?*

Participant: *I don't know, sometimes I feel that they interfere in certain things, especially politically, which I think that, erm, for them, one, it's not really good for public perception, and I think they influence badly [sic] on, on people who follow them.*

Participant 6 (Male, Tertiary, West, 21 years)

3.1.3.6 Focus or Change

Finally, participants argued that the Church should focus on or change by: (a) being more open; (b) renewing itself, addressing abuses/inconsistencies and focusing humbly on its core spiritual-communal mission; (c) collaborating more with non-Church entities; and (d) improving its communicational approach.

First, with regards to **Greater Openness (Adaptation)**, participants argued that the Church should: be more accepting (particularly toward LGBTIQ+ persons, but even toward minorities more broadly, e.g., non-conformists); adapt its teaching methods to contemporary times (in terms of method and/or the teachings themselves, making them more relevant for people's daily lives); be more open-minded and less conservative overall (this aspect encapsulated general observations mirroring the above; with only a few participants arguing that there are limits to the extent that the Church can change); and give a greater role to women.

Let us truly welcome LGBT people. I really wish that someday, there's a mass after COVID, in which everyone would be welcome, with couples, with children. Let us truly all be there. Or the majority. Come, even if it's been a while since you received the Eucharist or Confession, even if you haven't gone to Mass for a long time, don't worry, come. Come as a family. Even if you don't believe. Let's try this once. And have a good homily too. Priests who have family members who are gay: they should concelebrate. And the Archbishop can take part: not in the function itself, but to listen. To see the pain of that priest who has someone in the family; what they went through. Compared to other priests. You know, I imagine us there, on the fosos. And I don't know, there could be bands, particular bands, that are part of the LGBT community. To show that we are truly children of God, all of us. Without distinctions.

Participant 16 (Male, Tertiary, South, 28 years)

All I'm saying is that the Church should not remain antiquated and traditional like before. Nowadays, we sort of became more modern. So one has to, the Church, and people, and society as a whole, they all have to adapt to today's epoch, not remain as before. Nowadays, there are more things [...] out in the open, not like in the past when people used to hide behind their house's front door. Nowadays, there's more awareness on social media, so everyone knows everything about everyone else. So having the Church be there, and having everyone know that the Church is there, so sort of showing that everyone is included, is different [i.e., impactful], as is accepting people's diversity.

Participant 12 (Female, Non-tertiary, South, 26 years)

Secondly, participants argued for various forms of **Church Renewal**, most notable of which was the idea of going 'back-to-basics'. Here, participants advanced the views: that the Church has more important things to discuss, other than recurring public controversies (despite a split in participants' views when it came to abortion, as seen above); that the Church should focus on its spiritual aspect, and on being more present in the community (being humble and more proactive, and fostering relationships between diverse individuals); that the Church can do more to promote love, kindness and peace (whilst noting current efforts); that the Church should involve itself more in systemic social issues (particularly, by helping the poor, uniting people together, safeguarding the environment, fighting materialism and consumerism, and promoting wellbeing); that consistency and dealing with malpractice are worth pursuing; and that it is ultimately good practice that draws people to the Church.

I believe that the Church should, it needs to go back to basics. That's it, back to basics. There's a lot of pomposity that isn't doing the Church any good, and I think it's one of the reasons why it's not, let's say, popular with people today. [...] Because you cannot tell me, 'live a simple life', and then the Church itself does not live simply. Church people do not live a simple life. You start seeing, there's a difference between, they're not practicing what they're preaching. [...] So, I believe that people who don't believe have an issue with these things. I was lucky enough to have had good examples from Church people when I was young. So I was brought up, erm, looking at the good examples. So, I used to like religion, but meaning that, I used to see that if the Father is telling us, 'you must share', he was one of those who was sharing as well; so I used to see. He used to, we used to live in front of a convent [...] so, and there were the Franciscans, so you can imagine the context. But truly, they live in poverty, they live—. But yes, I believe that's what it should be like.

Participant 21 (Female, Tertiary, South, 38 years)

I think they should also speak more on people whom society does not really view in a positive light. For example, I don't know, those who do drugs, prisoners, and such. Because at the end of the day, everyone's human. They don't really speak about them much. The fact that they help them, I mean, they have services: that's good. But I think that they have to do more to deliver the message to people.

Participant 4 (Female, Non-tertiary, Northern Harbour, 22 years)

Another aspect of this recurring code concerned the nature of the mass. Besides the usual arguments for consistency and the everyday application of teachings learned during mass (and some arguments on the divisive nature of feasts), participants argued for greater accessibility and interaction during mass, with greater references to everyday life. As with other subthemes reviewed above, social divides (in terms of representing ritual and Church involvement in society) run deep, and the calls for greater openness far outweighed those for a reliance on tradition: this is a worthwhile finding in and of itself. Nonetheless, it is also worth noting that, here, a minority argued instead for greater solemnity in the spiritual domain more generally, and during mass in particular. Whilst the general gist advanced a preference for the Church to take heed of public opinion, this minority voice is worth quoting precisely for the following reason. Despite the different collective remembering processes (see Wagoner, 2015) of the more 'conservative' versus the more 'progressive' participant camps, the following quote provides a glimpse into where common ground may lie: in the view that a sense of authenticity should be retrieved. Whilst this minority voice argued for a traditional spiritual renewal, the vast majority argued instead for a social/communal renewal (see **3.2 Abductive Analysis – Findings**, particularly **3.2.2 Toward a Social Church**).

This is sort of my personal wish. That, erm, the Church addresses and re-introduces, erm, more solemnity and seriousness. I'm not saying 'seriousness' because they're not serious, mind you. But a spiritual seriousness, let me put it this way. Amongst, amongst the parishioners, the lay. The people who attend, the people who are not immersed in, in spiritual life. So, I would imagine that the majority of people do not spend a lot of hours praying. Erm, and to seek and to pray is not easy. One must really search to find these environments ["Trid iddum tfittex"]. I think the Church should make it more, the Mass should be treated with more solemnity, more seriousness. Such that one enters—I experience it in certain kinds of mass; in some kinds I'd say it's lacking, but in others one

would experience it—one enters and says, ‘Here, I’m not, here, I didn’t just enter a room, or a hall, and I’m not just experiencing any human custom, as if I went for an occasion or a gathering or a normal talk. Here, there’s something happening that’s, the Mass is the, erm, the mystery that takes place during the Mass is, erm, wholly one with God’s eternal plan’. Meaning that during the Mass, we’re experiencing the whole of divine reality.

Participant 19 (Male, Tertiary, North, 27 years)

Another domain where participants called for change, was that of **Collaboration & Influence**. This general code (which was relatively small compared to the other general codes in this subtheme) argued that the Church could collaborate more with government institutions or local councils (e.g., to help the vulnerable or organise activities); and could become an ally to groups who share a good cause (e.g., environmental), even though the Church and such groups may diverge in terms of overall goals. One participant argued that religion should not influence the constitution.

Finally, the general code **Better Communication** tapped notions related to (a) attracting people more, and (b) better communication overall. Concerning the former, participants argued that the Church should try to attract younger generations (particularly, Gen Z); that it should venture beyond preaching to the converted; and that the Church needs to see exactly why she is not attracting people. To this end, participants argued that more acceptance, kindness and dialogue, and less imposition, are vital—since nowadays, it is engagement with people on a level playing field that gets the message across, in any sector (rather than hierarchical dispositions).

So, she should focus on getting more people to Church, because they decreased. [...] And I think that it needs to attract young people because, erm, the older ones are still going to mass, but the younger ones decreased. Because then they start to say, erm, they start to say, ‘I don’t believe’ and ‘I don’t want to go’ and ‘it’s boring’, things like that. Erm, so I think that it needs to attract more young people. [...] Hmm, yes. I wish that, as in, when, erm, priests explain the Gospel, they tell us; there are priests who take too long. Sort of, getting to the point and, or they get lost in their story or, erm [...] when they preach, it’s like they start—not all of them eh, because there are those who are to the point, they’d say what they have to say and people get it—But there are those who take long to say what they have to say or they never get to the point, so people look at you like [laughs].

Participant 13 (Female, Non-tertiary, Northern Harbour, 28 years)

I noticed that they're [the Church] increasing their presence on social media and such, the mass. It's a good thing that they're available in more than one place, apart from television.

Participant 12 (Female, Non-tertiary, South, 26 years)

Concerning the latter (better communication overall), and echoing the subtheme **Depiction** (in *Catholic Church*), the codes on Church media were critical. At the same time, more broadly, participants argued that greater efforts at improving communication strategies, partly by listening to people more, would help the Church better achieve its goals. Finally, the idea of understanding the people's pulse, succinctly described the general mood in the subtheme **Focus or Change**.

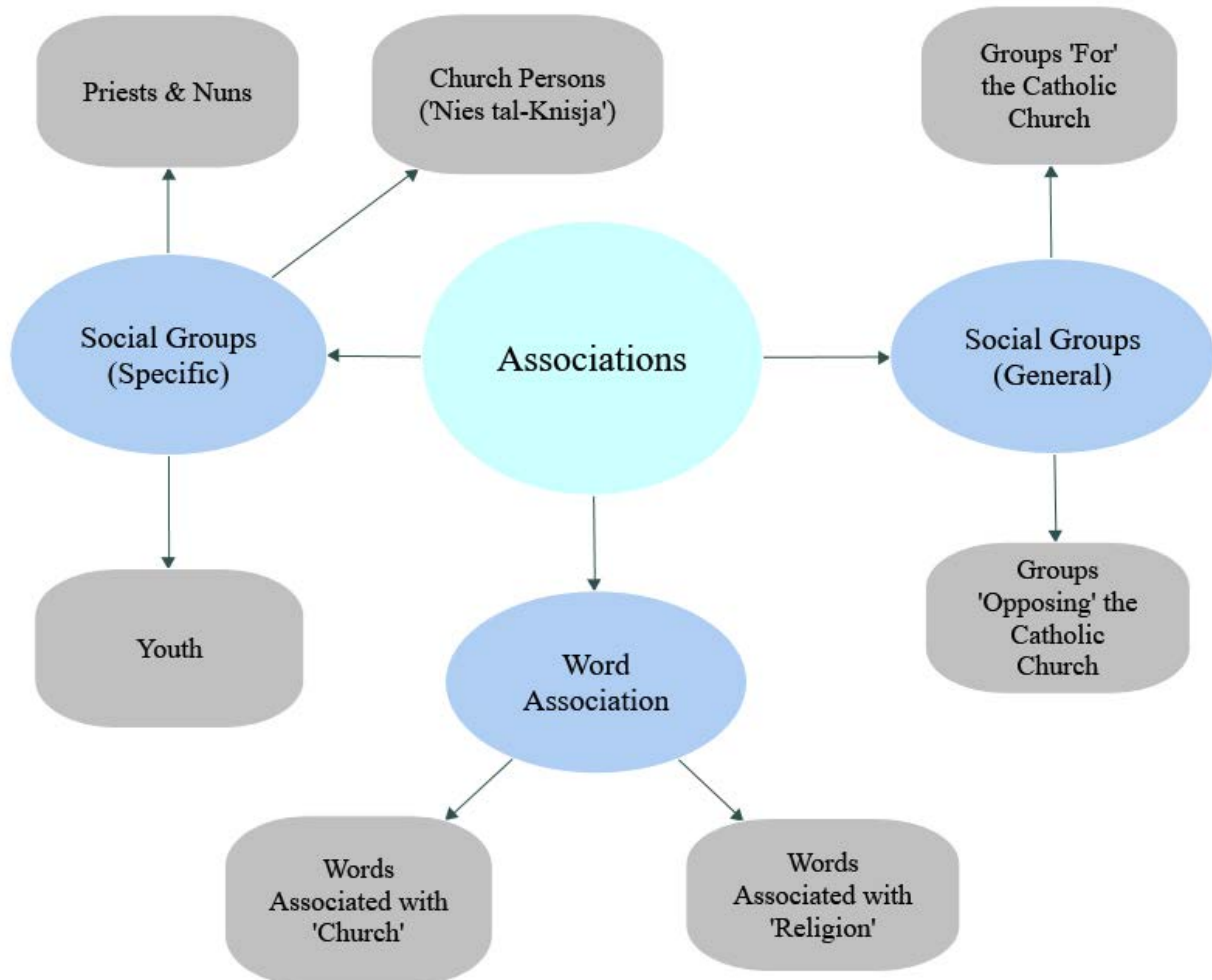
I hope that this research that you're doing ends up doing good. [...] And gets implemented. [...] Not doing all this and then leaving it on the shelf, you know. [...] What comes out of this: refer it to your superiors [...] And then they'd say, 'listen, so, these questions, the people want this or that'. [...] You get an idea of the pulse of the public. It's useless to stay on the altar and not look a bit at the people.

Participant 41 (Male, Tertiary, Northern Harbour, 82 years)

3.1.4 Theme IV: Associations

The fourth theme concerned the various Associations that people make with the Catholic Church: quick associations (with the words 'Religion' and 'Church'); associations characterising different social groups as being 'for' or as 'opposing' the Church (general associations); and associations between the Church and specific groups (Church persons, youth, and priests/nuns). This theme included the following subthemes, which are described below: (A) **Word Associations**; (B) **Social Groups (General)**; and (C) **Social Groups (Specific)** (see **Figure 4**).

Figure 4 – Theme IV: Associations – Thematic Structure



Note. **Figure 4** presents Theme IV: (a) the main theme (Associations); (b) subthemes (in blue) and (c) general codes (in grey).

3.1.4.1 *Word Associations*

At the beginning of each interview, participants were asked to mention the first thing that came to mind when several different keywords were mentioned, amongst which were ‘Religion’ and ‘Church’. The **Words Associated with ‘Religion’** fell under the following categories:

1. People (e.g., ‘humanity’)
2. Place/activity (e.g., ‘chapel’)
3. Spirituality (e.g., ‘faith’, ‘spirituality’)
4. Idea/belief (e.g., ‘ideology’, ‘ideas’, ‘one’s belief’)
5. Haven (e.g., ‘serenity’, ‘refuge’)

6. Guidance (e.g., ‘what they teach us when we’re young’)
7. Positive associations (e.g., ‘freedom’, ‘important’)
8. Descriptive labels (e.g., ‘Christianity’, ‘Catholicism’, ‘Church’)
9. Religion nowadays (e.g., ‘decreasing’, ‘not as strict as before’)
10. Nothing comes to mind (e.g., ‘I don’t know’)

In turn, the **Words Associated with ‘Church’** fell under the following categories:

1. People (e.g., ‘a group’, ‘priests’, ‘the people’, ‘us’)
2. Place/activity (e.g., ‘place where Christians/Catholics gather’, ‘candles’, ‘incense’, ‘feasts’, ‘locality’, ‘parish’, ‘architecture’)
3. Structure (e.g., ‘institution’, ‘structure’, ‘traditional’)
4. Spirituality (e.g., ‘a place for self-reflection’, ‘closer to God’, ‘God’, ‘God’s teachings’, ‘house of God’, ‘Jesus’, ‘not needed to be close to God’, ‘praying’, ‘reflection’, ‘religion’, ‘representation of Christ’, ‘Sacraments’, ‘symbol’, ‘the Cross’)
5. Positive associations (e.g., ‘a place of respite’, ‘deserving respect’, ‘freedom’, ‘life’, ‘peace’)
6. Negative associations (e.g., ‘an obligation’, ‘business’, ‘false’)

3.1.4.2 Social Groups (General)

More substantive associations characterized the relationship between various social groups (general) and the Church. Some groups were seen as being **Groups ‘For’ the Catholic Church**:

1. Church groups (e.g., CARITAS, ŽAK, MUSEUM, priests, groups for widows, groups devout to a saint, charismatic groups, Y4J, Dar tal-Providenza, Church council, Church volunteers, Focolare, groups that help families, missionary groups, Curia, parishes, youth groups, Drachma, Oratorju, RTK, Jesuits, etc.)
2. Demographic groups (e.g., adults, elderly, youth groups, pre-teen groups, children)
3. Culturally affiliated groups (e.g., band clubs, choirs, florists, musicians, feast organisers, drama groups, etc.)
4. Individual dispositions (e.g., Catholics, conservatives, altruists, etc.)
5. Groups with similar principles (e.g., groups with Catholic principles, environmental NGOs, pro-life groups, anti-divorce groups, girl guides, social camps promoting moral discourse, etc.)

6. Political groups (e.g., Nationalist party, certain political groups [unspecified], etc.)
7. Other religious groups (e.g., Islam, Jehovah's Witnesses)
8. The education sector (e.g., primary schools)
9. Governmental entities (e.g., governmental entities, law, power, local councils [particularly when collaborating with parishes], etc.)
10. The family
11. Cannot think of non-Church groups
12. Anyone

In contrast, other group categories were seen as being **Groups 'Opposing' the Catholic Church:**

1. Non-hegemonic groups/individuals within the Church (e.g., Church persons with minority views, persons who believe in the religion but not the Church, etc.)
2. Demographic groups (e.g., the youth, tertiary-educated individuals, career-focussed individuals, people in the medical field and those faced with mortality, 'half of all society', etc.)
3. Culturally distanced groups [distance may be reciprocal, or maintained either by the group in question or by the Church itself. Such groups may or may not have similar principles; the emphasis remains on different cultural milieus] (e.g., activists or activist groups, LGBTIQ+ community, the media, humanists, etc.)
4. Individual dispositions (e.g., social media commentators, people hurt by the Church [e.g., separated people], people who do not follow the Commandments, former Catholics, atheists, non-believers, etc.)
5. Groups with different principles (e.g., anti-migrant groups, pro-choice groups, pro-euthanasia groups, liberal groups, marketing and materialism, money and power, certain media and politicians, etc.)
6. Political groups (e.g., left-wing groups [e.g., socialists, communists, etc.], Labour party, youth political groups, etc.)
7. Other religions (e.g., Ex-Catholics, Atheists, sects, River of Love, Jehovah's Witnesses, Satanists, etc.)
8. The education sector (e.g., ethics classes, scientific groups teaching on reproduction)
9. Governmental entities (e.g., the government, the state)
10. No particular group (e.g., 'there are no groups, only hostile individuals', 'people are distant but not opposing', 'no group, 'never thought about it', etc.)

3.1.4.3 *Social Groups (Specific)*

Finally, three specific social groups stood out from the rest: Church persons; youth; and priests and nuns. Participants represented these groups in a variety of manners, with some discernible patterns. First, **Church Persons** ('Nies tal-Knisja') were characterized largely as members of 'a different ingroup' who are held to account for living out the values they avow. The representation of Church persons incorporated three elements concerning: (a) who they are; (b) their qualities; and (c) mutual attributions (reciprocally, between Church persons and the rest of society). Concerning point (a), Church persons were deemed to be either lay or ordained people (including lay persons, Church volunteers, Catechists, priests or nuns)—basically, those committed to the Church and its teachings in some way, and who want to spread such teachings. Alternatively, a minority view held that 'Church persons' do not exist anymore, the argument being that people go to Church as a habit. Concerning point (b), participants depicted the qualities of Church persons as resting on a series of dichotomies: as those who help others versus stereotypical depictions (old-fashioned, preachy, etc.); genuine versus hypocritical; open-minded versus closed-minded; and humble versus pompous.

Third, point (c) concerned both the different perspectives on Church persons, and the perspectives attributed to Church persons (i.e., Church persons' views on people/the world). Participants argued: that Church persons should be tolerant and respectful to others; that Church persons are only truly Church persons if they 'help others'; that mass attendance does not imply goodness or reliability; that Church persons are not immune to making mistakes; that Church persons may face backlash when they disagree with certain behaviours (sexual behaviours, drug use, etc.); or that Church persons are obsessed with going to Church. Moreover, Church persons were depicted: as viewing non-conformists and non-believers negatively; as viewing others as God's creatures; as viewing themselves as 'sheep' and the rest as 'in the way'; as viewing others as equal human beings; as not caring when people judge them, given that they are fulfilling their duties; as seeing those who go to mass as good people; as seeing society as losing its bearings (given that faith is very important to them); as wanting the world to be better; or else as seeing the world in the same manner as other people. Overall, point (c) therefore tapped the stereotypical and prejudicial view of Church persons more directly. Some participants also problematised the term 'Church persons', refusing to generalise, and arguing that there are different people, as in every group.

Participant: So, 'Church person' [nies tal-Knisja]: it depends on the tone you say it with. It has two meanings. If you say it sarcastically, 'Because he belongs to the Church, eh!' [Għax dak tal-knisja, ta'!], there you're sending the message that the people who go to Church are hypocrites, they act as if they're saints, and then they cause havoc [jaqilbu ddinja] or else they do not really aspire toward Christian values. Whereas, the other meaning, 'a person of the Church' [bniedem tal-knisja], someone who tries their best to follow the Commandments and live according to their beliefs, practising what they believe and trying to live it out as genuinely as possible.

Interviewer: So, there are those 'Church persons' who are perhaps more hypocritical, as you said, and those who are genuine and who truly try?

Participant: That's right, that's right. But they won't necessarily be hypocrites, but they'd see them that way. They could be that. They could be hypocrites, but there are those who perceive them that way because there are those who generalise. There are those who never go near a Church, and so [for them] those who go to Church are like whitewashed tombs, ey, hypocritical people, etcetera, etcetera. [...] So, again, there are those two kinds of perspectives: there are those who are more genuine, more tolerant, open; and there are those who are perhaps more rigid and perhaps they look at those on the outside in a negative way, let's put it that way. Participant 34 (Male, Tertiary, West, 59 years)

Secondly, **Youth** were generally characterised as indifferent/lukewarm toward the Church, with participants nonetheless making nuanced arguments and also emphasising the importance of considering life stages when attributing views to youth. Overall, youth were discussed from four different angles. First, participants discussed (a) youth's spiritual orientation, as they saw it, in terms of (i) different life stages (e.g., the idea that as they grow older, they may either grow more distant or else rediscover the Church; the idea that youth are still forming, etc.); (ii) youth non-religiosity/unbelief/non-Catholicism (e.g., atheism; a sense of spiritual indifference or coldness among youth; lack of interest in the Church, etc.); (iii) different spiritual expressions (e.g., the youth as distinguishing between the Church as an institution and religion *per se*, etc.); (iv) differences among youth (e.g., the interested/dedicated vs. the uninterested/non-believing, etc.); and (v) cultural Catholicism (e.g., nominal Catholicism; Church marriage despite unbelief, etc.).

Now I'm telling you, sort of, for example, let me tell you, myself and my friends are all like that. None of my friends, kind of, go to Church, almost nobody, it's very rare. But then, sort of, if you need something he/it'll help you [ħa ngħinek (unclear referent)]. Sort of, that's

what religion is for us. Kind of, for example, I don't know, if, for example, I'm going to get married, I do not see myself getting married without the Church, for example. I will plan, in that case, to get married in the Church. But then I look at generations younger than me, they'll be worse. Because if we're 20 years old, and sort of, we don't even go to Church but we believe in this manner; then how will the generations that are being born nowadays be in the future? They won't believe at all.

Participant 3 (Female, Tertiary, North, 20 years)

Let me tell you, I'm always sceptical about youth, to be honest. Both vis-à-vis school and also vis-à-vis Catholicism. Because the youth are still forming. The cake has not been baked yet. Now, if you persist and cook it [tagħtieh in-nar], that's good. That's the crux of it all [Hemm ix-xogħol imbagħhad]. How capable he is of being formed [Kemmm hu l-hila għandu jingibed]. Because youth, don't forget, they're adventurous. The old are adventurous, let alone the youth. So, poor youth, their psyche is more delicate.

Participant 43 (Male, Non-Tertiary, North, 62 years)

Secondly, participants provided various (b) explanations for youth's views. Here, participants mentioned (i) various variables they saw as underpinning the relationship between youth and the Church (e.g., the presence of key religious people in their lives; the presence/absence of a sense of community in the parish; their upbringing and experiences with the Church, etc.). They also made various (ii) sociological observations, both on a generational level and by describing the zeitgeist (i.e., by arguing that there is decline in Catholic values, practice and mass; that parental influence plays a role; that youth are the target audience of anti-Church messages; that Church scandals leave a lasting impact on youth's views; and that youth's focus on education/careers makes them more sceptical & critical of the Church). Third, arguments from a more experiential viewpoint emphasised the importance of (iii) youth, identity and peers (e.g., the idea that some youth are shy to say they are Catholic but still pray in times of need, etc.) and of what were perceived as (iv) contemporary distractions (e.g., youth's use of social media; the Church's alienation of youth, etc.).

Well, you, you have different types. Right? [...] You have the type who see the Church as, yes, sort of, before I was telling you about, erm, this [relative of mine] [...] Erm, and we started speaking about, erm, coincidentally, there was my nephew [...] and she told him, erm, I don't know, he was doing something. Because he said that tomorrow they were going to be asleep till noon, for example. She told him—she's still 12—she told him, 'At what time

will you wake up for Mass?’ ‘Mass?’ he told her, sort of. He told her, ‘Eee, what mass?’ Sort of. She told him, ‘What do you mean, you don’t go to mass?’ This was a conversation between a girl of 12 and a boy of, well, a youth actually, he was 18. There wasn’t really that age gap. So, the thinking is different. I believe that it has to do with your upbringing. If they never saw their parents going to mass, I believe that they won’t go to mass.

Participant 24 (Female, Non-tertiary, West, 40 years)

I believe that the majority decreased a lot. They don’t look up to it as much, anymore. I don’t think so. It is very evident among altar servers. Altar servers decreased a lot. So, for the youth, I think that the value it used to hold, this religion in particular, decreased a lot. It’s not something you look up to anymore. It’s something you follow, something that’s part of your routine. I don’t know, in my case, it was Sunday evenings. So, I believe that it decreased a lot. I think that, nowadays [...] I believe that if they’re involved, it’s because of some kind of—not pressure—but let’s say, pushing, by the parents perhaps. But, then again, nowadays, the parents themselves are not really that practising anymore.

Participant 8 (Male, Tertiary, South, 20 years)

Finally, participants discussed youth’s different forms of participation in the Catholic Church, or else their distance from the Church. These notions were discussed as follows. Youth (c) participation was mentioned with regards to (i) youth groups, youth centres, youth mass and/or Christian music. Here, some participants mentioned the ideas that these are beneficial for youth, or that they help build a sense of community. Others argued that such groups need to adapt, as youth participation is lacking; and/or that youth mass attendance statistics indicate the Church’s decreased influence over younger generations. In turn, participants attributed (d) youth’s distance from the Church to: (i) youth’s views on the Church (e.g., an overall bad impression, due to conservatism, contradictions or the institution being seen as meaningless); (ii) an overall divergence between youth’s values and Church values (e.g., lifestyle differences); and/or (iii) the perceived need for the Church to communicate its message differently and act on it more (e.g., by devising better communication strategies; by being more inclusive; and by being more outspoken and active on discrimination, the environment and similar issues).

Many youth see her as antiquated. [...] Many youth see her as—‘many’: I need to stop this bad habit. ‘Some’ youth! Not ‘many’, I don’t know, I didn’t count them. [...] [laughs] It’s

in my mouth, I'm sorry. [...] Ee, there are those who see her as an imposter [sic], interfering in everything. But luckily, there are those who see her as a refuge.

Participant 25 (Male, Tertiary, Northern Harbour, 44 years)

Hmm, I feel that youth these days, they see Catholicism as kind of useless, I mean. [...] I don't need Catholicism to be a good person, you know? So, it doesn't make a difference in my life, so might as well not support it, you see.

Participant 6 (Male, Tertiary, West, 21 years)

I have never, ever, in any of the times I went to Church, heard anything about, like, conserving the environment, which, you know, I think if the Church teaches harmony, it should teach harmony not only between people, also between people and the environment. So, like, that's something that I would really be interested to hear about if it were me. Like, that's something that would make me look up from my phone if I was in Church and I was, you know, forced to go as a youth nowadays.

Participant 11 (Female, Tertiary, Northern Harbour, 26 years)

Finally, (3) the representation of **Priests & Nuns** was chiefly characterised by its diversity (vis-à-vis attributions and vis-à-vis people's personal experiences with priests). Before proceeding, it is worth noting that relatively few codes featured concerning priests and nuns (when compared to 'Church persons' or 'youth'), and that more research is needed to confirm the findings described in this specific paragraph and the following one. Moreover, this general code largely concerned priests (more so than nuns or other persons living a consecrated life). Participants basically discussed (a) priests' and nuns' roles, and saw the following as being priests' roles: (i) commitment and dedication to the Church; (ii) being there for others; (iii) promoting kindness and living exemplary lives; (iv) speaking up for the good of Church followers; (v) providing advice and encouragement; (vi) being an important guide in people's lives (point [vi] was also mentioned for nuns); (vii) fulfilling spiritual duties (e.g., delivering Christ's message, performing the Sacraments, etc.); and (viii) being the link between the human and the divine.

Moreover, over the course of analysis, various dichotomies featured in the dataset, exhibiting the thematic poles that precisely characterise the representation of priests. Thus, participants spoke of (b) different types of priests: (i) conservative vs. progressive; (ii) old vs. young; and (iii) a minority of priests whose views diverge from hegemonic Church views. This code also

featured (iv) a resistance to generalise and typify priests (more so than was the case for ‘Church persons’ above), and (v) an appreciation of characterological subtleties among priests and nuns (e.g., a greater appreciation of priests/nuns who went through hardship or started their vocations later on after living a lay life). Finally, participants (c) made various attributions to/expressed various expectations of priests and nuns, expressing (i) positive views (e.g., an appreciation of how tough their work can be, and of priests/nuns who lead exemplary lives) and (ii) negative views (e.g., abuse scandals, the sense that some priests/nuns are out of touch).

Now I can get you examples of certain priests. There are those who deliver mass very differently. There are those, for example, I am 26 years, and I go to mass and I really enjoy listening to him. But then, for example, there are priests whom I don't take any notice of, because they do it in a really traditional manner.

Participant 12 (Female, Non-tertiary, South, 26 years)

I, for example, when I was a youth, I [laughs], it's been a while now [...] Eqq, in our parish, we had, we had a famous priest, we used to go listen to his homily to have a laugh. This one used to, I mean, believe in what he said, and he used to say that all youth will go to hell, in each and every homily. That's it, he booked them a ticket, straight. [...] Now, luckily, we started, we started moving on, but still, we're still lagging behind. We're still lagging behind. [...] You still find priests like that. And unfortunately, unfortunately, you can also find youth like that now, who were indoctrinated. [...] This idea, that you either agree with me on everything, or else I'll exclude you [nkeccik]. If you consider how the world is nowadays, we can't behave like that.

Participant 25 (Male, Tertiary, Northern Harbour, 44 years)

For example, I appreciate and admire—perhaps it's not a concrete example that I myself experienced—but I appreciate people who went through the training for priests, after a certain amount of time during which they would have done certain things, like this, that or the other. And I think to myself, ‘Wow, this person went through things,’ or ‘This person had to sacrifice things,’ or ‘Listen, this person went through something similar. He can understand me.’ I'd feel more comfortable. One, with someone who can speak more on my level, in a way. But even with someone who went through certain experiences or certain suffering or whatever in his life. And you say, ‘Listen, this person is speaking on a personal level. So, there's a certain substance to what he's saying.’ So, that's something I appreciate. The idea of rolling up one's sleeves and living life with people, understanding people, what they're going through.

Participant 18 (Male, Tertiary, West, 27 years)

3.2 Abductive Analysis – Findings

Following the thematic analysis, an abductive analysis (Salvatore, 2017) was conducted, inspired by recurring observations made during the thematic analysis (see **II. METHODOLOGY**). Abductive analysis yielded the following **recurring patterns**, presented below in tabular form, together with the most significant thematic exemplars wherein such views featured. The analysis also served a synthetic role, bringing together four key elements from across the dataset. These four key elements—**I. Universalism, Perspectivism & Subjectivism; II. Toward a Social Church; III. Diversity & Ambivalence; and IV. Openness (mostly vis-à-vis LGBTIQ+)**—generally stood out across the three main themes (*Being Catholic; Catholicism; and Catholic Church*), as general patterns around which the thematic elements tended to converge. This section describes these elements, serving as a discussion of the present inquiry.

Table 3 – Abductive Analysis: Recurring Patterns

Recurring Patterns	Thematic exemplars
<p>I. Universalism, Perspectivism & Subjectivism</p> <p>A recurring motif highlighting (1) values deemed as being <i>universal</i>; (2) the importance of individuals’ <i>perspective</i> or <i>subjectivity</i>; and (3) the reduction of Catholic identity to one or some of these three aspects.</p>	<p>I. Being Catholic: A. Universalism, Perspectivism & Subjectivism + E. Relationship with Practice</p> <p>II. Catholicism: A. Substance + B. Modality of Belief + D. Relationship with Belief</p> <p>III. Catholic Church: E. Ultimate Aim</p>
<p>II. Toward a Social Church</p> <p>When speaking normatively, participants’ discourse often adopted a back-to-basics approach, highlighting the primacy of (1) action over words; (2) increased Church presence in (vulnerable) people’s lived realities; and (3) Church engagement in systemic social issues (e.g., poverty, anti-materialism, etc.).</p>	<p>I. Being Catholic: B. Catholic Faith & Values + E. Relationship with Practice</p> <p>II. Catholicism: A. Substance</p> <p>III. Catholic Church: A. Function + C. Catholic Church in Social Landscape + E. Ultimate Aim + F. Focus or Change</p>
<p>III. Diversity & Ambivalence</p> <p>A diverse set of views—and the accompanying ambivalence—about Catholicism and spirituality, generally reflecting various forms of ‘qualified belief’.</p>	<p>I. Being Catholic: C. Catholics in Social Landscape + E. Relationship with Practice</p> <p>II. Catholicism: B. Modality of Belief + D. Relationship with Belief</p> <p>III. Catholic Church: B. Depiction + C. Catholic Church in Social Landscape + D. Relationship with Catholic Church</p>

<p>IV. Openness (mostly vis-à-vis LGBTIQ+)</p> <p>Issues relating to openness—especially vis-à-vis LGBTIQ+ identities, rights and experiences—were commonly highlighted. Participants generally argued that the Church should adopt an unambiguously pro-LGBTIQ+ stance.</p>	<p>I. Being Catholic: A. Universalism, Perspectivism & Subjectivism</p> <p>II. Catholicism: C. Depictions of God</p> <p>III. Catholic Church: B. Depiction + C. Catholic Church in Social Landscape + E. Ultimate Aim + F. Focus or Change</p>
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Note. **Table 3** presents the recurring patterns in the data, as per the abductive analysis. The table includes the most significant thematic exemplars containing content pertaining to the recurring patterns.

3.2.1 Universalism, Perspectivism & Subjectivism

‘Universalist’ views featured whenever participants spoke of values that were held as being core, basic and applicable to both Catholics and non-Catholics. In turn, perspectivist and subjectivist arguments served to calibrate such views, by arguing that individuals’ subjective appraisals of spiritual issues matter, or that such issues are ultimately a matter of perspective (sometimes specifying certain ‘universal’ commonalities, and at other times omitting them).

3.2.1.1 *Universalism*

Patterns of universalist discourse mainly featured during discussions of the values and teachings constituting Catholicism and/or the Catholic identity. Participants discussed values—such as being good to others, helping others, being accepting, and reducing harm—as being at the core of Catholicism and of what makes a person Catholic (*Being Catholic: Universalism, Perspectivism & Subjectivism: Being a good person & helping others; Accepting others; Universalism [General human values]*). Moreover, such values were generally not solely attributed to Catholics, but also to other individuals who might have different religious views. This positioned Catholic values as being, in part, universal values. Indeed, participants generally found it difficult to articulate values and principles that were exclusively Catholic, and were not always able to distinguish between Catholic and non-Catholic identities. This incapability to demarcate was taken as further evidence of the universalism inherent in the representation of the lived dimension of Catholicism (*Being Catholic*) and in the realm of the thinkable surrounding *Catholicism*.

Such universal values tended to be framed as objective ideals and guides on how to live one’s life in relation to others, and were seen as being grounded in a common human nature shared by all. This either positioned Catholicism as simply one guide amongst others, or else as an ideal guide that is potentially substitutable with other religions/guides with differing levels of

success (*Catholicism: Substance: Substance in Context*). Although spiritual faith and perseverance were also mentioned, participants mostly prioritised values revolving around one's actions, which clearly took precedence over religious practices. Religious practices were not shunned completely; they were seen as tools that could aid one in enacting good deeds, with participants emphasizing that they become null if one gossips or harms others (*Being Catholic: Relationship with Practice: Church Practices vs. Being Active in Society*).

This pattern is linked to notions of transcendence. That is, overall, participants generally believed in the existence of God or some sort of spiritual entity or reality, however vaguely defined this entity was. The emphasis here was largely on how faith and belief in a spiritual reality aid humans by transmuting suffering into meaning, providing existential meaning on a broader scale, providing metaphysical answers to questions about the origins of life and the universe, and making human beings participatory in societal improvement (*Catholicism: Modality of Belief: Symbolism & Transcendence*). The emphasis on 'making sense' (of existence, of suffering, etc.), highlighted the universal nature of these shared human phenomena. Thus, the moral (universal), therapeutic (a spiritual entity 'who cares') and quasi-deistic (the idea that it is up to the subject to tap into this spiritual force, who otherwise remains in the inactivated) qualities in participants' discourse are reminiscent of Smith and Denton's (2005) *moralistic therapeutic deism*, discussed above.

Finally, universalist thought could also be appreciated when participants argued about what the ultimate aim of the Church should be, where such values (e.g., helping others, being active in society, etc.) featured highly (*Catholic Church: Ultimate Aim: Ultimate Aim Should Be*). This is elaborated further below, when discussing the move **Toward a Social Church**.

3.2.1.2 *Perspectivism & Subjectivism*

While the underlying values themselves tended to be described in universal terms, religious practices, methods of worship and specific spiritual beliefs were more likely to be described in subjectivist and perspectival terms. Some participants emphasised that whether one identifies as Catholic or otherwise is an individual choice and a matter of perspective. This mode of argumentation also promoted the idea that Catholics are a varied group of individuals who live their faith in different manners. Participants stated that, while some Catholics may focus more on religious practices (e.g., as the Sacraments, mass attendance, etc.), others may focus on their participation in society (e.g., volunteering). While greater importance was given to the latter,

participants appreciated the diversity within Catholics as a group, and the different definitions that can be assigned to the Catholic identity (*Being Catholic: Universalism, Perspectivism & Subjectivism: Subjectivism or Perspectivism*).

Subjectivism was also evident when participants, regardless of their beliefs, emphasised the importance of mutual respect between people who share different beliefs. The reason that this is being framed as subjectivism, is that this sense of respect went beyond basic respect, and was rather characterised by empathy toward the religious other and their viewpoints. The subject was therefore represented as the final arbiter on questions of spirituality (*Catholicism: Relationship with Belief: Presence of Belief; Absence of Belief*). At times, this mutual respect stemmed from the idea that country of origin, social fabric, upbringing, and personal experiences and preferences play a role in shaping religious beliefs (*Catholicism: Relationship with Belief: Contextualising Belief; Values*). Mutual respect and the appreciation of different beliefs was also upheld and justified on the basis of the universal values described above.

3.2.1.3 *Keywords*

Selection of **key words/phrases** abductively pointing toward **Universalism, Perspectivism & Subjectivism** (key words/phrases in bold type are those that featured in the dataset. Those in normal type are translations):

Universalism (Universal values)

- **Kif tghix**, How you live your life
- **Jghin/Tghin/Nghin, Ghajnuna, Help**
- **Persuna tajba, Tajjeb, Good person, Be good**
- **Kif iġġib ruhek ma' haddiehor**
- **Ma tiġġudikax, Not being judgmental, Taċċetta, Accepting**

Subjectivism or Perspectivism

- **Varjeta' ta' nies, In-nies ivarjaw**, People vary
- **Ġewwa l-persuna, Li jkun hemm ġewwa**, What is on the inside
- **Kull persuna ghandha d-definizzjoni taghha**, Every person has their own definition
- **Hsibijiet differenti, Jahsbuha differenti**, Everyone has different ideas
- **Skont x'tifhem biha inti 'Nisrani'**, Depends on what you understand by 'Christian'

- **Tiddeċiedi ghalik innifsek, Il-bniedem jiddetermina l-aħjar definizzjoni ghalih,**
You decide for yourself

3.2.2 Toward a Social Church

Using arguments flowing from the above value structures, participants made their case for moving towards a social Church. This joint project (Bauer & Gaskell, 1999) was very clearly argued for, and clearly signified the movement of collectives toward a more social Church (Buhagiar & Sammut, 2020). Overall, participants expressed their desire for the Church to continue strengthening its role in the social/community domain, particularly with those who are vulnerable, poor, excluded from society or in dire life situations. Here, it was the Church's engagement with people's lived experience—a highly pastoral view of Church-society relations—that mattered. Participants addressed this move toward a social Church, all the way from the institutional level (as Church) to the more individual and personal level.

Participants mostly emphasised the role and aim of the Church as one focused on helping the individual and society. More specifically, participants viewed the aim and function of the Church as being related to addressing social, material and spiritual needs, as well as promoting acceptance and unity (*Catholic Church: Function: Social Functions* + *Catholic Church: Ultimate Aim: Ultimate Aim Is*). When participants did not view these aims as currently being fulfilled, they posited them as ideals or as goals that the Church should aim for (*Catholic Church: Ultimate Aim: Ultimate Aim Should Be*). Such ideals addressed the set of universal values that participants often referred to throughout the interviews. Participants' discourse also pointed toward desired changes in relation to addressing society's needs, mainly by arguing that the Church could increase its presence in the community through a back-to-basics approach. This idea was fundamental. Specifically, participants expressed a deep desire for the Church to return to its humble origins, reduce formalities and enter the everyday lives of people in the community. Great emphasis was also placed on improving communication and teaching methods to ameliorate the relationship between the Church and its followers, as well as the public—the ultimate aim being, once again, Church renewal in the social-communal sense (*Catholic Church: Focus or Change: Church Renewal; Better Communication*).

Some participants also referenced Jesus' life or the Scriptures to drive their point further, thus justifying this recurring pattern on core Catholic ideas, rather than simply relying on universal general values. For example, they referred to Jesus and his teachings, as an exemplary guide

for the Church to follow. Participants here focused on ‘socio-material’, or ‘classic’, social issues (e.g., poverty, social cohesion), which were represented as constituting an essential part of the core spiritual-communal mission of the Church (*Catholic Church: Focus or Change: Church Renewal*). The need for the Church to speak up and be the voice of the most vulnerable and those who face injustice in society (*Catholic Church: Catholic Church in Social Landscape: Church Involvement in Public Controversies & Issues*), surfaced too. Here, participants qualified their arguments by specifying how and when this should be done.

This desire to move towards a social Church was not solely assigned to the Church as an institution but also to Catholics in general. When given a choice between being active in society and practising religious rituals, most participants chose the former over the latter, with relatively fewer participants problematising this division in the first place. Most participants emphasised that helping others and contributing to society was a much more impactful and meaningful way of living out one’s Catholic values and Catholic identity (*Being Catholic: Relationship with Practice: Church Practices vs. Being Active in Society*). Therefore, participants placed greater importance on using Catholic teachings as a guide and a tool to enact good deeds (*Being Catholic: Catholic Faith & Values: Christian/Catholic Values + Catholicism: Substance: Catholic Values & Living*).

3.2.2.1 *Keywords*

Selection of *key words/phrases* abductively pointing to **Toward a Social Church**:

- **Tiehu hsieb (lill-batut)**, To care
- **Taghti ghajnuna, Tghin (lill-batut)**, To help
- **Sapport, Support**
- **Taghmel il-ġid**, Do good
- **Tkun ta’ servizz**, Being of service
- **Man-nies**, With people
- **Tintegra fis-soċjeta’**, Integrating in society

3.2.3 **Diversity & Ambivalence**

Participants’ definitions of what makes a Catholic differed, and Catholics were described as having different lifestyles (with participants either making their arguments in the first person

or else in the third person). Different ‘types’ emerged, which were naturally not clearcut, but which surfaced frequently enough to legitimate the following groups based on a family-resemblance logic: (a) those who practise Catholic rituals and the Sacraments; (b) those who contribute to society and volunteer; (c) those who pass on Catholic teachings to their children (or don’t); and (d) various combinations of the above—with ‘basic general values’ (universalism) generally traversing all groups. This diversity was simultaneously viewed as a positive aspect of Catholicism, and as a source of ambivalence and divergence.

Some participants, especially those who were non-practising, expressed ambivalence over their own Catholic identity. Here, they expressed doubts about whether simply believing in the teachings, can constitute being Catholic. While this ambivalence was at times assigned to one’s own identity as a Catholic, some participants also expressed this ambivalence about others. Being a highly diverse group, Catholics may be hard to differentiate from non-Catholics in the local context, and this partly explains this finding. This ambiguity is further compounded by the idea that Catholics and people of different religious views do not differ greatly from each other in their behaviour or lifestyles (*Being Catholic: Catholics in Social Landscape: Catholic Identity + Being Catholic: Relationship with Practice: Relationship with Church Teachings*). Nonetheless, beyond these definitional issues, the main driving force behind this ambivalence and diversity seemed to be a high degree of cognitive polyphasia (Provencher, 2011), whereby participants held beliefs that they could not always reconcile argumentatively. Examples include spiritual struggles juxtaposing the Resurrection and logical thought; personal openness toward LGBTIQ+ persons in light of one’s faith in Catholic doctrine; perennial debates such as those concerning the problem of evil; or even experiences of mortality in the medical domain (and therefore the intersection of different knowledge types).

Ambivalence was also evident when participants were asked about the symbolic versus transcendent nature of Catholic teachings. Some participants found it difficult to deny a transcendent spiritual reality, even though they did not necessarily describe it in positive (i.e., clear) terms. For example, whilst some participants did adhere to Catholic thought when describing this spiritual reality and specific figures (e.g., Mother Mary), others could not articulate aspects of the spiritual realm in substantive terms (e.g., concerning the nature of God). Moreover, some expressed difficulty in discerning between the transcendent and symbolic elements in the teachings, or else simply focused exclusively on the perceived historical basis of their faith, when faced with questions on symbolism/transcendence

(*Catholicism: Modality of Belief: Mystery & Perspective; Historical Reality*). Similarly, participants' understandings of different life events and how these calibrate one's faith, together with their relationships to their Catholic upbringing, varied throughout the dataset (*Catholicism: Relationship with Belief: Contextualising Belief*).

Participants also expressed ambivalence when describing the Catholic Church as an institution. Some viewed it as a multi-faceted institution with its good and bad angles, which make the Church hard to define as a whole unit, quite naturally (*Catholic Church: Depiction: Nuances & Complexities*). This difficulty was also evident in the different ways in which the Church was depicted. Here, diversity and ambivalence featured both *across* and *within* participants. Concerning the former, for example, representations of the Church as distanced and detached from people and their realities, clashed with representations of the Church as present and in tune with the needs of the community. Similarly, a fundamental representational divide concerned conservatism versus progressivism within the Church. The divide lay between those who represented the Church as more closed and resistant to change, and those who represented the Church as becoming more open to social diversity over time.

Concerning diversity and ambivalence *within* participants, while participants expressed a desire for the Church to open up and welcome diverse individuals, some participants also simultaneously argued that the Church should not abandon its traditions and teachings, thus implying the need for the Church to strike a delicate balance between the two (*Catholic Church: Depiction: Comparisons & Tensions*). Others simply demanded a change toward greater openness without facing this conflict, prioritising the need for change over doctrinal concerns. In some participants, the difficulty in reconciling the desire to practise and follow the religion, with experiences that challenge those beliefs, was strong. Two key examples concerned situations involving LGBTIQ+ issues (where the doctrine was felt as unempathetic or restrictive), and difficult life experiences (*Catholic Church: Relationship with Catholic Church: Tensions*).

A diversity of views also featured when participants discussed specific figures in the Church; for example, consider the overall positive depiction of Pope Francis particularly vis-à-vis his open stance toward diverse individuals (*Catholic Church: Depiction: Politics & Leadership*). On a more local level, interestingly, participants disagreed on whether the Church's charity work with the poor and vulnerable is good enough or insufficient (*Catholic Church: Depiction:*

Comparisons & Tensions). Similarly, ambivalence was present when participants discussed the Church's involvement in debates, discussions or controversies that arise in the public sphere. While some participants expressed overall agreement or disagreement with the Church's position on social issues, the majority took a more case-by-case approach, especially when discussing the Church's role within public discourse. Most participants agreed that the Church has a right to express itself (weighing its words carefully when doing so) and should speak up to defend vulnerable individuals (e.g., those in poverty). However, they clashed when it came to specific issues, especially those related to personal matters (e.g., abortion), and the remit of Church expression (*Catholic Church: Catholic Church in Social Landscape: Church Involvement in Public Controversies & Issues; Church's Position on Social Issues*).

Finally, diversity and ambivalence characterised the various tensions that stemmed from participants' relationship with the Church. While some participants felt very close to the Church and considered it to be an important part of their life, others held a more distant relationship. Of the latter, some expressed occasional closeness, and others distanced themselves completely. Some also made a distinction between Catholicism and the Catholic Church, by adhering to the core teachings and universal values whilst personalising religious practices (e.g., prayer) (*Catholic Church: Relationship with Catholic Church: Tensions*). Ultimately, the presence of a whole spectrum of belief (*Catholicism: Relationship with Belief: Presence of Belief; Absence of Belief*) indicated that the view that "there is little or no space for atheism in Malta" (Tabone, 1994, p. 295) does not hold. The situation is also more nuanced than that. That is, more concretely, *spiritual ambivalence and polyphasia* seems to be a more apt phrase for describing the current scenario. An alternative to this interpretation could be that universalist moral discourse (3.2.1), coupled with diversity and ambivalence, simply signifies a religion that 'leaves the door open', not unlike a mercantile disposition that expresses openness toward evolving market niches. This observation would accord with Martin's (2013) view, explored above, that 'thin' expressions of religiosity ultimately serve capitalist interests, at least in part by virtue of the absence of radical relationality and engagement with the social.

3.2.3.1 *Keywords*

Selection of *key words/phrases* abductively pointing to **Diversity & Ambivalence**:

- **Grey area** [with regards to Catholic identity]

- **Skont il-kuntest**, Depends on the context [with regards to Church involvement in public controversies]
- **X'imkien fuq spectrum**, Somewhere on a spectrum
- Kunflitt f'moħħi, **Conflict in my head**
- **Hemm ċertu 'question marks'**, There are some questions
- **Jiguk hafna dubji**, You experience a lot of doubts [with regards of negative life events and faith]
- **Jiddependi xi jkun il-kas, Il-kuntest**, It depends on the case, The context [with regards to when the Church should speak up about issues]

3.2.4 Openness (mostly vis-à-vis LGBTIQ+):

Acceptance and being non-judgmental were two values that were emphasized by participants as belonging to a set of fundamental values that one should adhere to, as described above (*Being Catholic: Universalism, Perspectivism & Subjectivism: Accepting Others*). That is, participants emphasised the importance of a Church that is more open and welcoming to different individuals and minorities of various kinds. Here, perhaps the fundamental pattern of argumentation concerned the primacy of love (e.g., between two human beings) and empathy toward different lived experiences, serving to legitimate LGBTIQ+ relationships and rights and to position Catholic doctrine as mistaken. The desire for the Church to change how it relates to LGBTIQ+ people was deep, and the reactionary view that such critical views of the Church could be dismissed as a trivial 'sign of the times' is mistaken (*Catholic Church: Focus or Change: Greater Openness [Adaptation]*). Rather, sociologically speaking, having established the primacy of love, empathy and openness, participants held the Church to account, seeing it as straying away from a universalist moral ethic.

Interestingly, participants diverged in that some emphasised that the Church is becoming more open when it comes to accepting LGBTIQ+ individuals, while others emphasised that the Church still requires major improvements, both in terms of communication about LGBTIQ+ issues (i.e., greater understanding and the avoidance of anti-LGBTIQ+ arguments to avoid harming people), and in terms of how it relates with LGBTIQ+ individuals (*Catholic Church: Depiction: Comparisons & Tensions*). This call for better communication was coupled with a call for action, ranging from passive arguments for greater acceptance to active arguments arguing directly for a pro-LGBTIQ+ Church that favours LGBTIQ+ rights (e.g., marriage)

(*Catholic Church: Catholic Church in Social Landscape: Church's Position on Social Issues*). Participants also posited this openness as one of the Church's desired aims, more broadly (*Catholic Church: Ultimate Aim: Ultimate Aim Should Be*). Interestingly, this critique of the Church did not influence participants' view of God. God was generally retained as the 'repository' of all that is good and sound. For instance, participants described God as being accepting and loving towards LGBTIQ+ individuals, the idea being that all creatures are loved equally by God (*Catholicism: Depictions of God: God as Relational*). This provided a theological basis for participants' arguments for greater openness. This finding is all the more significant when considering that this topic did not constitute a core part of the interview guide; rather, participants simply mentioned LGBTIQ+ issues on their own initiative, and frequently. Finally, the drive toward greater openness was also expressed vis-à-vis the Church's relationship with youth, non-conformists, women and pedagogy, among other groups/domains.

3.2.4.1 *Keywords*

Selection of *key words/phrases* abductively pointing to **Openness (mostly vis-à-vis LGBTIQ+)**:

- **Taċċetta, Accept, Acceptance**
- **LGBT, LGBTIQ, Gay, Persuni trans, Trans people, Omosesswali, Homosexuals**
- **Iktar miftuħa, More open, Iktar open**
- **Tilqa' fi hdanha, Welcomes**
- **Taddatta għaž-żminijiet, Adapts to the times**

IV. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This qualitative study mapped the representation of Catholicism in Malta, emphasising the *lived* dimension (**Being Catholic**), the *realm of the thinkable/belief* dimension (**Catholicism**), the *institutional/project* dimension (**Catholic Church**), and the *intergroup* dimension (**Associations**) surrounding Catholicism. The findings largely concurred with previous work by DISCERN involving qualitative research with parishes (Mifsud Inguanez et al., 2021) and quantitative research with youth in Malta (Buhagiar et al., 2021).

In the parishes study, participants had argued for a bottom-up Church where lay voices matter (Mifsud Inguanez et al., 2021). This corresponds with the abductive findings of the present inquiry, highlighting the move **Toward a Social Church**. Moreover, the youth study had quantitatively indicated that, whilst Catholic youth state they give importance to faith ($Mean = 7.05/10$; $SD = 2.13$), they barely include a transcendent dimension in their belief system on average ($Mean = 0.24$ [on a scale from -10 to 10]; $SD = 2.34$) (Buhagiar et al., 2021). Similarly, tensions in people's relationship to Catholicism had characterised a previous study by DISCERN (Inguanez & Gatt, 2015). These patterns accord with the above findings highlighting **Universalism, Perspectivism & Subjectivism**, and **Diversity & Ambivalence**. The above findings also make the following contribution: the current representation of Catholicism demands more **Openness (mostly vis-à-vis LGBTIQ+)**. By charting the contemporary representation of Catholicism in Malta, this study presents findings of a historical significance, and contributes to local ecclesial and parish contexts by delivering pointers for further reflection. The implications of this study are further explored below.

In general, most findings had their contraries. For instance, for the view that Catholicism should largely be seen in symbolic terms, there was the view that Catholicism largely signifies a transcendent reality. Whilst such findings can be deemed 'obvious' (since they cover a spectrum of possible ideas and positions), this was to be expected, as the study primarily concerned social representations (the realm of the thinkable). What was interesting in such findings was "the excitement of finding the familiar becoming transformed in its meaning" (Berger, 1971, p. 32): for instance, *in the ways that participants made their case*. Moreover, some omissions were analytically interesting too. For instance, no mention was made of indulgences, and little mention was made of heaven and hell. These omissions or rare mentions shed light on what is *not* a salient aspect of the representation of Catholicism in Malta.

In turn, other findings were more interesting, in that they demonstrated a clear pattern, representing Catholicism *for* one issue or another (cf. Buhagiar & Sammut, 2020). This could largely be seen in the abductive analysis, where a discernible drive toward a more open Church that is socially oriented, and whose value structure is grounded in principles framed in transferable language, was evident. Though such results are not tapping the unfamiliar *per se* (cf. Berger, 1971), they serve to indicate clear representational trajectories, as follows:

1. The *Lived dimension* (Being Catholic) is characterised by universal-values discourse (cf. Smith & Denton, 2005), cognitive polyphasia (Provencher, 2011), and a fundamental reliance on the subject's perspective (see **3.2.1 Universalism, Perspectivism & Subjectivism** and **3.2.3 Diversity & Ambivalence**).
2. The *Belief system* (Catholicism) is characterised by various dichotomies (cf. Provencher, 2011), substantively Catholic notions and positive depictions of God. This representational repository serves to legitimate preferred joint projects (Buhagiar & Sammut, 2020) by bridging the universal (help provision, acceptance, etc.) with the institution's doctrines/practices (the intermediary nature of this representational dimension tapped **all abductive patterns**).
3. In turn, the *Institutional dimension* (Catholic Church) is characterised by a variety of projects, as indicated in the tensions constituting the third theme. Nonetheless, a dominant joint project (Bauer & Gaskell, 1999; Buhagiar & Sammut, 2020) favoured the shift toward greater openness, a back-to-basics approach prioritising service to the community, and the prioritisation of action over internal belief (**3.2.2 Toward a Social Church** and **3.2.4 Openness [mostly vis-à-vis LGBTIQ+]**).

Of the above, *Being Catholic* was particularly important, in that the other representational dimensions simply served to concretise aspects of being Catholic, but on the philosophical/spiritual or institutional levels. Participants' clear preference for a society *with* the Catholic Church (**3.1.3.3 Catholic Church in Social Landscape**), despite the multiple creative tensions characterising the dataset, further served to indicate that, inherent within the representation of Catholicism, is *the desire for a shift in project*. That is, the data points toward both *dialogical* and *metalogical* dispositions (Sammut & Gaskell, 2010). Despite creative

tensions with the Catholic Church, participants expressed a general willingness to either discuss their viewpoint whilst holding to a preferred view (dialogicality), or else expressed a sense of openness highlighting the possibility of different truths, thus contextualising their own and the Church's view as being a subset of possible truths (metalogicality). Only a minority of participants expressed *monological* views, holding their own view as being exclusively true (Sammut & Gaskell, 2010). All of this indicates that a shift in joint project is seen as preferable over full-on ingroup-outgroup antagonism with the Catholic Church.

Moreover, apart from the above discussion (largely on the basis of the abductive findings) concerning the uniting thread across the *lived dimension*, the *belief system*, and the *institutional dimension*, there is also a clear pattern across particular subthemes in the thematic structures. Despite various participant camps, there seems to be common ground, as follows: the Universalism, Perspectivism & Subjectivism inherent in *Being Catholic* (3.1.1.1) is mirrored, in *Catholicism*, by the more substantive and overall positive Depictions of God (3.1.2.3), and the fact that participants generally adopted a Modality of Belief (3.1.2.2) that, as a minimum, did not exclude the transcendent realm. In turn, in *Catholic Church*, most participants argued that Society is Better Off With the Church (3.1.3.3), whilst overwhelmingly arguing for Focus or Change (3.1.3.6) in terms of Greater Openness (Adaptation) and Church Renewal (back to basics). This set of subthemes points toward a dominant Social Re-presentation *for* Project P [*an open, social Catholic Church*], of/as Object O [*Catholicism, understood in both universal and/or distinctly religious terms*] in Context C [Malta] (see Buhagiar & Sammut, 2020, p. 8).

Naturally, the above simply points toward the dominant representation. There is an inevitable intergroup dimension to social representations, which was not captured by this study. Although Church persons, priests/nuns and the relationship between the Church and youth was explored during the interviews, there are bound to be different factions that re-present Catholicism differently, together with different joint projects, however major or minor these may be. Accordingly, whilst the findings point toward the natural points of debate and desired actions (the thematic dichotomies mentioned above, the abductive patterns, etc.), future research would do well to consider how *different groups* in society advance re-presentations for/against Catholicism. Apart from this limitation, the fact that DISCERN is the research institute of the Archdiocese of Malta could have influenced participants' responses (e.g., whereby participants express more positive views, due to social desirability). However, care was taken to avoid this limitation. Indeed, despite the inevitable attributions levelled by participants toward

researchers in all scenarios (cf. Vallone et al., 1985), the tensive nature of the data above suggests that our aspiration toward objective, valid data has been reached, and that a positive skew was largely absent. Other limitations include the inevitable interpretative nature of qualitative research (this was mitigated by adopting a horizontal organisational structure, a constant re-analysis of each other's work, systematic analysis, and reciprocal and open discussions); and self-selection bias (this was addressed by offering 20EUR for participation; therefore, the sample was not limited solely to those prone to social desirability).

4.1 Recommendations

In conclusion, this study made a historical contribution to the study of Catholicism in Malta. More concretely, the following recommendations (which emerge directly from the analysis presented above) serve to aid future decision-making in ecclesial and parish contexts:

1. **Reflection on the relationship between spiritual ambivalence and general values** (cf. Diversity & Ambivalence; Universalism, Perspectivism & Subjectivism), with a view to ameliorating communication and understanding changing spiritual orientations.
2. **Sustaining the move toward greater openness**—toward LGBTIQ+ individuals and other minorities—where it is present, and **introducing it** where absent (cf. Openness).
3. **Achieving greater presence in the community** by focusing on people's lived realities and practical service (e.g., anti-poverty) at the grassroots (cf. Toward a Social Church).
4. **Future research** can adopt a quantitative approach to the study of representations of Catholicism, based partly on the findings herein. The representational tensions inherent in this dataset can inform meaningful survey questions, aimed at better understanding the statistical patterns underpinning representations of Catholicism. Applied longitudinally, quantitative research would elucidate representational change over time.

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VI. APPENDIX

5.1 Interview Guide in English & Maltese

Objective	#	Question
Instructions		<i>Inform participants that the study is about views on Catholicism, that they can elaborate on any aspects they wish, and that the expected duration is that of 1 hour.</i>
		Normal type = English; Bold type = Maltese ; <u>Bold & Underlined = Key Questions</u> Interview type = semi-structured; Probes were optional
Breaking the ice + Media sources	1	Let us start with a small icebreaker before we go straight to the topic. What is the first thing that comes to mind when I say?: Moon, Identity, Language, Society, Religion, Computer, Church Ejjew nibdew b'icebreaker żghir qabel immorru dritt ghas-suġġett. X'inhi l-ewwel haġa li tiġi f'moħħok meta ngħid?: Qamar, Identita', Lingwa, Soċjeta', Reliġjon, Kompjuter, Knisja
<u>General view</u> <u>on Catholicism</u>	2	If you had to tell me, what is Catholicism to you? Kieku kellek tgħidli, x'inhu l-Kattoliċizmu għalik?
Who/What is CC	3	And, in a nutshell, what is the Catholic Church to you? U, fi ftit kliem, x'inhi l-Knisja Kattolika għalik?
Perceived roles of CC	4	In your view, what does the Catholic Church do in society? Probe: explore limits of duty/ What is not the duty of the Church (as a thinking aid) Fil-fehma tiegħek, x'taġħmel il-Knisja Kattolika fis-soċjetà? Probe: esplora l-limiti tad-doveri/ X'mhuwiex id-dover tal-Knisja (bħala għodda għall-hsieb)
Perceived 'Allies' [quick]	5	In a nutshell, which groups in society do you associate with the Church? Probe: Which groups or entities in society do you see as being allies of the Church? If Church groups are mentioned, specify: non-Church entities Fi ftit kliem, liema gruppi fis-soċjeta' tassoċja mal-Knisja? Probe: Liema gruppi jew entitajiet fis-soċjeta' tara bħala alleati tal-Knisja? Jekk jissemmew gruppi tal-Knisja, speċifika: entitajiet mhux tal-Knisja
Perceived 'Other'	6	And which groups do you see as taking an opposite stance to the Church?

[quick]

Probe: Which groups or entities do you see as being opponents of the Church?

U liema gruppi tara li jieħdu pożizzjoni opposta għal dik tal-Knisja?

Probe: Liema gruppi jew entitajiet tara bħala avversarji tal-Knisja?

Attributed
ultimate goal(s)

7 When all is said and done, what would you say is the ultimate goal of the Catholic Church?

[If needed, state: Stick to what it actually is. What it *should* be is explored later]

Fl-aħħar mill-aħħar, x'taħseb li hu l-iskop ewlieni tal-Knisja Kattolika?

[If needed, state: Stick to what it actually is. What it *should* be is explored later]

Preferred
ultimate goal(s)

8 And, in your opinion, what *should* be the ultimate goal of the Church? Why?

Probe: Are the actual goal and the ideal goal in line with each other?

U fl-opinjoni tiegħek, x'għandu jkun l-iskop ewlieni tal-Knisja? Għala?

Probe: L-għan veru tal-Knisja u l-għan ideali huma 'in line' ma' xulxin?

Positioning: +/-

9 Would society ultimately be better off with the Catholic Church or without it? Why?

Probe: Considering everything, is the Church a force for good or a force for evil?

Is-soċjetà fl-aħħar mill-aħħar tkun aħjar bil-Knisja Kattolika jew mingħajrha? Għala?

Probe: Meta tqis kollox, il-Knisja hija forza għall-gid jew forza għall-ħażin?

Lay spiritual
orientation

10 Let's now turn to the views of Catholicism. Would you say that Catholic teachings are symbolic or is there an actual spiritual reality behind them? Why do you think so?

Probe: In your view, is the idea of God symbolic or does God exist in reality?

Probe: Are Catholic teachings metaphorical, or do Jesus, the Virgin Mary, the Holy Spirit, Satan, etc., really exist?

Probe, if relevant: The relationship between science and religion

Ejja nduru lejn il-fehmiet tal-Kattoliċizmu issa. Kieku kellek tgħid, taħseb li t-tagħlim Kattoliku huwa simboliku jew hemm realtà spiritwali vera warajh? Għaliex taħseb hekk?

Probe: Fil-fehma tiegħek, l-idea ta' Alla hija simbolika jew inkella Alla jeżisti ta' veru?

Probe: It-tagħlim Kattoliku huwa metaforiku, jew Ġesù, il-Madonna, l-Ispirtu s-Santu, ix-Xitan, eċċ., jeżistu ta' veru?

Probe, if relevant: Ir-relazzjoni bejn ix-xjenza u r-religjon

- Moral discourse/ authority** 11 Do you consider the Catholic Church to be an authority/guide when it comes to values?
Għala?
Tikkunsidra lill-Knisja Kattolika bhala awtorita'/gwida fejn jidhlu l-valuri? Għala?
- Moral discourse/ authority 12 **Follow-up:** Apart from the Church, which institutions or organisations would you consider to be authorities/guides when it comes to values?
Follow-up: Minbarra l-Knisja, liema istituzzjonijiet jew organizzazzjonijiet tikkunsidra bhala awtoritajiet/gwidi fejn jidhlu l-valuri?
- Catholic identity + Lived Catholicism** 13 In your view, what does it mean to be Catholic nowadays?
Probe: What does the Catholic do? Who is the good Catholic? What distinguishes the Catholic from the person who is not Catholic?
Fl-opinjoni tiegħek, xi tfisser għalik li tkun Kattoliku illum il-ġurnata?
Probe: X'jagħmel il-Kattoliku? Min hu l-Kattoliku t-tajjeb? X'jiddistingwi l-Kattoliku minn dak/dik li mhuwiex/mhijiex?
- Ritual and/or Community 14 **Follow-up:** What is more important, to observe Church practices (e.g., the mass, sacraments, prayer, etc.) or to be active in society (e.g., helping others, etc.)?
Probe: For example, some people say that you can be Christian but not follow the Church. Others say that you cannot be Christian without the Church. What do you think about this?
Follow-up: But is X (the option which is not preferred) still important? In what way?
Follow-up: X'inhu l-iktar importanti, li tosserva l-prattiċi tal-Knisja (eż., il-quddies, is-sagramenti, it-talb, eċċ.) jew li tkun attiv fis-socjeta' (eż., li tgħin lil haddiehor, eċċ.)?
Probe: Per eżempju, hawn min jgħidlek li tista' tkun Nisrani imma ma ssegwix il-Knisja. Ohrajn jgħidu li ma tistax tkun Nisrani mingħajr il-Knisja. X'tahseb fuq dan?
Follow-up: Imma X (l-ghażla mhux ippreferuta) xorta importanti? B'liema mod?
- Attributions to 'Church people'** 15 How do you think that 'committed Catholics' view others and the world?
Probe: What is their outlook on people or the world?
If not explored: And what do you understand by 'committed Catholics'?
Kif tahseb li 'n-nies tal-Knisja' jaraw lil haddiehor u lid-dinja?
Probe: X'tahseb li hi l-veduta tagħhom fuq in-nies jew id-dinja?

Jekk mhux esplorata: U x'tifhem b' 'nies tal-Knisja'?

- Attributions to youth** 16 And how do you think that the youth look at Catholicism?
Probe: Christian music/ Youth mass
U kif taħseb li ż-żgħażaġh iħarsu lejn il-Kattoliċiżmu?
Probe: Christian music/ Youth mass
- Social issues** 17 What are your views on the Church's stances on social issues? Can you give me any examples?
Probe: For example, I don't know, when it comes to poverty, the environment, migration, women, work, etc. Whatever you want. Pick your main issue.
 How does this effect your relationship with the Church?
X'inhi l-opinjoni tiegħek fuq il-pożizzjoni tal-Knisja fejn jidhlu kwistjonijiet soċjali? Tista' tagħtini xi eżempji?
Probe: Per eżempju, jien naf, fejn jidhlu l-faqar, l-ambjent, l-immigrazzjoni, in-nisa, ix-xogħol, eċċ. Li trid. Aghżel il-kwistjoni prinċipali.
Din kif taffettwa r-relazzjoni tiegħek mal-Knisja?
- Public debate 18 Do you think the Catholic Church should take a public position on matters of controversy or should she remain silent? Why?
Taħseb li l-Knisja għandha tesprimi ruħha pubblikament fuq kwistjonijiet kontroversjali jew għandha tibqa' siekta? Ghala?
- Desired change 19 In your view, what can the Church focus on more or else change?
Fl-opinjoni tiegħek, fuq xiex tista' tiffoka iktar il-Knisja jew inkella tbiddel?
- Final question 20 Is there anything else you wish to add?
Hemm xi haġa oħra li tixtieq iżżid?
- Thank you / Thank you for your time.
-

5.2 Codebook

Table X – Codebook

Label (Theme/Subtheme/Code)	Description	Files	References
I. Being Catholic		44	373
A. Universalism, Perspectivism & Subjectivism	Includes: Being a Good Person & Helping Others (Files: 21, References: 30); Subjectivism or Perspectivism (Files: 15, References: 38), Universalism (General Human Values) (Files: 14, References: 39); Accepting Others (Files: 6, References: 7)	32	106
B. Catholic Faith & Values	Includes: Christian/Catholic Values (Files: 22, References: 32); Spiritual Faith (Files: 11, References: 22); Humble Engagement (Files: 5, References: 11); Higher Pursuits vs. Worldly Indulgence (Files: 4, References: 4)	30	65
C. Catholics in Social Landscape	Includes: Positioning Catholics (Files: 12, References: 25); Catholic Identity (Files: 6, References: 12)	16	36
D. Distinctions	Includes: What a Catholic is not (Catholic vs. Non-Catholic) (Files: 11, References: 17); Ingroup-Outgroup (Files: 3, References: 7); Christian vs. Catholic (Files: 2, References: 5); Different Catholics (Files: 2, References: 3)	16	30
E. Relationship with Practice	This subtheme delves into the participant's relationship with Church teachings and Catholic rituals. It also describes arguments on the importance of Church practices and being active in society.	44	177
01. Church Practices vs. Active in Society	Includes: Being Active is More Important (Files: 29, References: 79); Both Practices and Being Active are of Equal Importance (Files: 15, References: 34); Church Practices are More Important (Files: 3, References: 8)	42	117
02. Relationship with Church Teachings	Includes: To be a good Catholic you don't necessarily have to follow Catholicism or the Church to the letter (Files: 12, References: 20); Being Catholic is following the Teachings and Engaging in Rituals (Files: 7, References: 18); To be Catholic, one has to follow Church Practices and be Active in Society (Files: 4, References: 10); Obstacles to Follow Teachings (Files: 4, References: 6)	22	54

Label (Theme/Subtheme/Code)	Description	Files	References
03. Catholic Rituals	Includes: Rituals not equal to being a Good Catholic (Files: 7, References: 11); Catholics as those who Engage in Rituals (Files: 3, References: 6); Listens to the Word of God and Mass (Files: 1, References: 1)	9	18
II. Catholicism		44	463
A. Substance	Delves into belief, faith, Catholic values, and existential meaning. Also describes substance in context.	40	154
01. Catholic Values & Living	Includes: Catholicism as a Way of Life (Files: 16 References: 20); Catholicism as Principles, Values and Teachings (Files: 11, References: 20); Catholicism as Charity, Love and Social Wellbeing (Files: 10: References: 11)	25	49
02. Belief & Faith	Includes: Catholicism as Faith & Spirituality (Files: 15, References: 19); Catholicism as Belief (Files: 11, References: 13); Catholicism and Vocations (Files: 4, References: 9)	24	40
03. Substance in Context	Includes: Contextualising Catholicism [Religious Context] (Files: 13, References 27); Universalism, Subjectivism & Perspectivism [Personal Context] (Files: 5, References: 13); Catholicism and Social Issues [Social Context] (Files: 3, References: 3)	16	43
04. Text, Institution & Ritual	Includes: Catholicism and the Catholic Church (Files: 8, References: 10); Views on the Bible (Files: 6, References: 8); Sacraments (Files: 2, References: 2)	15	20
05. Catholicism & Existential Meaning	Includes: Catholicism as Meaning and Direction (Files: 7, References: 10); Catholicism and Truth (Files: 3, References: 3)	9	13
B. Modality of Belief	Different orientations toward spirituality (symbolism vs. transcendence)	44	158
01. Symbolism & Transcendence	Includes: Mostly Transcendent (Files: 35, References: 73); Mostly Symbolic (Files: 13, References: 42); A bit of Both (Files: 8, References: 17)	43	125
02. Mystery & Perspective	Includes: Difficult to Say (Perennial Question) (Files: 7, References: 22); Answer depends on the Person's Beliefs (Files: 6, References: 14).	12	36
03. Historical Reality	Includes: Historical Reality (Files: 6, References: 8)	6	8
C. Depictions of God	Different depictions of God	17	77
01. God as Relational	Includes: Jesus' Attributes (Files: 10, References: 22); God's Perspective and Concerns (Files: 4, References: 13); God – Humanity and Divinity (Files: 2: References: 4); God as Gift-Giver (Files: 2, References: 2); God as Relational (Files: 2, References: 2); God as Love (Files: 1,	14	44

Label (Theme/Subtheme/Code)	Description	Files	References
	References: 2); God the Father (Files: 1, References: 1); God as Refuge (Files: 1, References: 1).		
02. God as Other	Includes: God as Telos (Files: 3, References: 8); God as Perfect (Files: 3, References: 5); God as Creator (Files: 2, References: 6); God as Source of Values (Files: 2, References: 4); God – Humanity and Divinity (Files: 2; References: 4); God’s Source eludes Definition (Files: 2, References: 2); God as Ultimate Reality (Files: 1; References: 1)	10	30
03. God & Church	Includes: God is the Founder and Leader of the Church (Files: 2, References: 4); Separation of Church and God (Files: 2, References: 2).	4	6
04. Unfair or Unreal	Includes: Biblical Depictions of God (Files: 1, References: 1); God as Unreal (Files: 1, References: 1)	2	2
D. Relationship with Belief	The presence or absence of belief; contextualisation of belief; belief and values	25	71
01. Contextualising Belief	Includes: Upbringing, Acculturation and Raising of Children (Files: 6, References: 10); Belief and Practice (Files: 5, References: 6); Belief in Social Landscape (Files: 4, References: 9); Life Events and Belief (Files: 3; References: 5)	14	28
02. Values	Includes: Relationship with Catholic Values (File: 8, References: 12); Universalism, Subjectivism, Perspectivism (Files: 4, References: 6); Relationship with Sacraments and Sacramentals (Files: 2, References: 2)	13	20
03. Presence of Belief	Includes: Belief (Files: 11, References: 18)	11	18
04. Absence of Belief	Includes: Unbelief (Files: 5, References: 7); Deconversion (Files: 1, References: 1)	5	7
E. Science and Religion	Includes: Complementarity (Files: 9, References: 19); Opposition (Files: 4, References: 12)	10	31
III. Catholic Church		44	1544
A. Function	Delves into the spiritual, religious, social, moral, or didactic functions of the Catholic Church	44	369
01. Moral/ Didactic Functions	Includes: Other Groups, Entities and/or Institutions providing Moral Guidance (Files: 36, References: 77); Church as a Guide (Files: 31, References: 75); Teaching and Guidance Functions (Files: 20, References: 38); Church Authority and/or Guidance as Dwindling (Files: 18, References: 46); Church as an Authority (Files: 11, References: 21); Guidance with Caveats (Files: 9, References: 20); Church as Both Guide and Authority (Files: 2, References: 2).	44	260

Label (Theme/Subtheme/Code)	Description	Files	References
02. Social Functions	Includes: Help-Related Functions (Files: 27, References: 50); Unity Functions (Files: 5, References: 8); Social Functions (Files: 5, References: 7); Love and Acceptance (Files: 2, References: 4); International Relations (Files: 1, References: 1)	32	64
03. Spiritual/ Religious Functions	Includes: Spiritual Functions (Files: 17, References: 32); Religious Functions (Files: 9, References: 17)	24	49
04. Lost or Unknown (Miscellaneous)	Includes: Lost Functions (Files: 2, References: 5); Don't know (Files: 2, References: 2); Not a Function (Files: 2, References: 2)	6	9
B. Depiction	Depictions of the Catholic Church	43	290
01. Nuances & Complexities	Includes: Church as Institution, Church as People (Files: 13, References: 23); Depictions emphasising Complexity (Files: 13, References: 21); Natural Fallibility (Files: 11, References: 15); Culture and Tradition (Files: 4, References: 16); Depictions of Mass (Files: 2, References: 16)	28	89
02. Comparisons & Tensions	Includes: Conservative vs. Progressive (Files: 13, References: 29); Closeness vs. Distance (Files: 7, References: 16); Perceived Inconsistencies (Files: 4, References: 8); Relevance vs. Irrelevance (Files: 4, References: 8); Church and Other Religions (Files: 2, References: 4); Christianity and Catholicism (Files: 2, References: 3)	22	66
03. Spiritual Depictions	Includes: Overall Positive Spiritual Depictions (Files: 18, References: 33); Metaphors for the Church (Files: 7, References: 7).	20	55
04. Politics & Leadership	Includes: Political Depictions (Files: 9, References: 21); Church Leadership (Files: 9, References: 17); Church and Media (Files: 3, References: 12).	16	50
05. Positive vs. Negative	Includes: Help-related Depictions (Files: 11, References: 25); Abuse-related Depictions (Files: 5, References: 9); Corruption or Malpractice (Files: 3, References: 7); Anti-Church Depictions (Files: 3, References: 6)	16	46
C. Catholic Church in Social Landscape	The Church's role in society & its position vis-à-vis public controversies & social issues	44	507
01. Society Better Off With vs. Without the Church	Includes: Society better off with the Church (Files: 35, References: 93); It depends – Whether society better off with or without Church (Files: 5, References: 25); Society better off without the Church (Files: 5, References: 21); It is not a question of better off with or without (Files: 1, References: 3).	44	140

Label (Theme/Subtheme/Code)	Description	Files	References
02. Church involvement in Public Controversies & Issues	Includes: Church should express itself on Public Issues (Files: 30, References: 95); Depends – whether Church should express itself on Public Issues (Files: 27, References: 74); Church should not express itself on Public Issues (Files: 12, References: 32); Church involvement in Social Issues (Files: 4, References: 9).	42	192
03. Church's Position on Social Issues	This general code describes various degrees of agreement and disagreement with Church on social issues and the resulting relationship. Delves into specific issues (macro and micro) and Church dialogicality.	37	215
i. Specific Issues	Includes: LGBTQ+ (Files: 12, References: 41); Poverty & Social Justice (Files: 12, References: 24); Reproductive Issues (Files: 12, References: 24); Environment (Files: 7, References: 14); Migration (Files: 6, References: 20); Divorce or Separation (Files: 6, References: 16); Politics (Files: 3, References: 4); Women (Files: 2, References: 2), Cannabis (Files: 1, References: 5); Education (Files: 1: References: 1); Euthanasia (Files: 1: References: 1)	33	147
ii. Church & Dialogicality	How flexible or otherwise the Church can/should be in relation to social issues	11	39
iii. Relationship with Church	Relationship with Church in light of its position on social issues	9	17
iv. Macro vs. Micro	Distinction between 'systemic' issues (e.g., poverty, environment) and 'identity/individual' issues (e.g., LGBTQ+, abortion)	5	13
v. Overall Agreement with Church	Some participants' overall agreement with the Church's position on social issues.	4	4
vi. Overall Disagreement with Church	Some participants' overall disagreement with the Church's position on social issues.	3	4
vii. Case-by-case agreement/disagreement with Church	Some participants' agreement or disagreement with the Church, which mainly depended on the social issue in question.	3	3
D. Relationship with Catholic Church	Participants' relationship with the Catholic Church	18	48
01. Tensions	Includes: Distance from Church (Files: 9, References: 16); Upbringing in the Church (Files: 7, References: 9); Attack vs. Defence (refers to criticisms towards the Church as expressed by the public and reactions of defence from the participants) (Files: 3, References: 11); Closeness	18	48

Label (Theme/Subtheme/Code)	Description	Files	References
	to Church (Files: 3, References: 4); Relationship with God not Church (Files: 2, References: 5); Divergences (Macro) – Church, State and People (Files: 2, References: 4)		
E. Ultimate aim	Actual versus Desired Aim of the Church; Alignment or Misalignment between the two	42	231
01. Ultimate aim Actually Is	Includes: Spirituality (Files: 13, References: 8); Guidance (Files: 12, References: 21); Help (Files: 10, References: 18); Love, Peace and Harmony (Files: 9, References: 10); Power (Files: 6, References: 12); Maintaining and Increasing Faithful (Reaching out) (Files: 3, References: 12); Acceptance (Files: 3, References: 6); I do not know (Files: 3, References: 3); Business (Files: 2, References: 7); Variety or Role (instead of Aim) (Files: 2, References: 2).	40	104
02. Ultimate Aim Should Be	Includes: Guidance (Files: 10, References: 18); Help (Files: 8, References: 15); Maintaining and Increasing Faithful (Reaching out) (Files: 8, References: 13); Acceptance (Files: 8, References: 12) Spirituality (Files: 6, References: 15); Back to Basics (Files: 6, References: 12); Influence vis-a-vis Social Issues (Files: 4, References: 17); Love, Peace & Harmony (Files: 4, References: 8); Addressing Suffering (Files, 2; References: 5); No room for new role (Files: 1, References: 1)	35	102
03. Misalignment of Actual & Ideal Aim	Aims mentioned here are ideal aims that are not being fulfilled. Includes: Guidance (Files: 7, References: 14); Back to Basics (Files: 4, References: 9); Actual and ideal aim are not aligned (Files: 2, References: 2); Different parts of the Church hold different, opposing aims (Files: 2, References: 2); Spirituality (Files: 1, References: 2)	13	27
04. Alignment of Actual & Ideal Aim	Aims mentioned here are ideal aims that are being fulfilled. Includes: Guidance (Files: 6, References: 8); To Help (Files: 2, References: 2); Acceptance (Files: 1, References: 1); Actual and Ideal Seem to be in Line - Not Sure Completely (Files: 1, References: 1); Love, Peace & Harmony (Files: 1, References: 1); Spirituality (Files: 1, References: 1)	12	13
F. Focus or Change	Participants' views on how the Church should improve	43	236
01. Church Renewal	Includes: Greater Involvement in Community (e.g., action over words; encounters with periphery) (Files: 9, References: 17); Changes in Feasts (Files: 4, References: 14); Consistency & Addressing Malpractice (Files: 4, References: 8)	32	114
02. Better Communication	Includes: Attract People More (Files: 15, References: 32); Better communication (discourse & media) (Files: 11, References: 33)	21	65
03. Greater Openness (Adaptation)	Includes: Changes related to Mass (Files: 16, References: 31); Greater involvement in Society (e.g., poverty, anti-materialism, social wellbeing) (Files: 14, References: 21); Back to Basics (Files: 12, References: 26); Accepting others more (mostly LGBTIQ+) (Files: 11, References: 26)	20	59

Label (Theme/Subtheme/Code)	Description	Files	References
	20); Teaching Adaptations: (Files: 10, References: 16); Become more Open (Files: 9, References: 24); Changes related to Women (Files: 3, References: 5)		
04. Collaboration & Influence	Includes: Collaboration with Other Entities (Files: 3, References: 5); Limiting Church Influence (Files: 2, References: 2)	5	7
IV. Associations		44	874
A. Word Association	Words associated with 'Religion' and with 'Church'	43	99
01. Words associated with 'Church'	Includes: Church & Spirituality (Files: 15, References: 17); Church as Place & Activity (File: 14, References: 15); Church as People (Files: 8, References: 9); Positive Associations (Files: 5, References: 5); Church as Structure (Files: 3, References: 3); Negative Associations (Files: 3, References: 3); Descriptive Labels (Files: 1, References: 1).	42	51
02. Words associated with 'Religion'	Includes: Religion as Spiritual (Files: 16, References: 16); Descriptive labels (Files 12, References: 12); Religion as an Idea or Belief (Files: 7, References: 7); Religion as People (Files: 4, References: 4); Positive associations (Files: 3, References: 3); Religion as Comforting (Files: 2, References: 2); Religion as Guidance (Files: 2, References: 2); Religion Nowadays (Files: 1, References: 2); I do not know (Files: 1, References: 1); Religion as Place & Activity (Files: 1, References: 1)	42	48
B. Social Groups (General)	Groups positioned by participants as being 'for' or as 'opposing' the Catholic Church	44	252
01. Groups 'For' the Catholic Church	Includes: Church Groups (Files: 34, References: 70); Demographic Groups (Files: 12, References: 19); Groups sharing Similar Principles (Files: 10, References: 11); Political Groups (Files: 8, References: 11); Culturally Affiliated Groups (Files: 7, References: 9); Governmental Entities (Files: 5, References: 15); Cannot think of, or there aren't, non-Church Groups (Files: 5, References 7); Individual Dispositions (Files: 44, References: 12); Other Religions (Files: 2, References: 2); Anyone (Open Question) (Files: 1, References 1); Education Sector (Files: 1, References: 1); The Family (Files: 1, References: 1).	44	151
02. Groups 'Opposing' the Catholic Church	Includes: Groups having Different Principles (Files: 15, References: 24); Other Religions (Including Nones) (Files: 13, References: 20); Culturally Distanced Groups (Files: 10, References: 16); Demographic Groups (Files: 7, References: 13); Individual Dispositions (Files: 7, References: 12); Cannot think of, or there aren't Opposing Groups (Files: 7, References: 11); Political Groups (Files: 4, References: 5); Non-Hegemonic Groups or Individuals within Church (Files: 2, References: 2); Education Sector (Files: 1, References: 3); Governmental Entities (Files: 1, References: 2)	44	104

Label (Theme/Subtheme/Code)	Description	Files	References
C. Social Groups (Specific)	Views on Church persons, priests/nuns, and youths (in relation to the Catholic Church)	44	529
01. Church Persons (Nies tal-Knisja)	Views on Church persons. Interview guide asked about this	42	162
i. Who They Are	Includes: Lay People, Church Volunteers (Files: 12, References: 17); Church People want to spread Catholic Teachings (Files: 7, References: 12); Those Committed to the Church and its Teachings (Files: 5, References: 5); Priests, Nuns, Catechists etc. (Files: 4, References 6); Church People as Both Ordained and Lay People (Files: 2, References: 2); Church Persons don't exist anymore (Files: 1, References: 1).	23	41
ii. Their Qualities	Includes: They are Different (Refuse to Generalise) (Files: 14, References: 29); Genuine vs. Hypocritical (Files: 9, Reference: 20); Open-minded vs. Close-minded (Files: 7, References: 16); Humble vs. Pompous (Files: 7, References: 13); Those who Help Others (Files: 5, References: 10); Extreme, Stereotypical Church Person (Files: 4, References: 7).	27	89
iii. Mutual Attributions	Includes: How Church People view Others (Including Church Person themselves) (Files: 15, References: 29); Different Perspectives on Church People (Files: 8, References: 12); Church People's Perspectives on the World Around Them (Files: 6, References: 8) Expectations of Church People (Files: 4, References: 4).	23	49
02. Priests & Nuns	Views on priests/nuns (mostly on priests). Emerged organically	33	171
i. Attributions, Expectations and Public Image	Includes: Changes Related to Priests (Files: 11, References: 33); Expectations of Priests & Nuns (Files: 7, References: 22); Positive Attributions (Files: 6, References: 11); Priests and Public Image (Files: 5, References: 10); Negative Attributions (Files: 4, References: 10); Priests, Abuse & Offences (Files: 4, References: 6); Priests & Marriage (Files: 3, References: 5); Priest's Perspective (Files: 2, References: 4).	21	93
ii. Roles	Includes: Priests' (& nuns' & laity's) roles & duties (Files: 9, References 22); Priests as Human (Files: 6, References 10); Priests, Church and the Divine (Files: 6, References: 9); Scarcity of Priests, Nuns etc. (Files: 1, References: 1)	19	42
iii. Divergences	Includes: Variations among Priests & Nuns (Files: 9, References: 18); Conservative vs. Progressive Priests (Files: 7, References: 14); Old vs. Young Priests (Files: 3, References: 3); Relationship with Priests (and Implications for Relationship with Church) (Files: 2, References: 5); Some priests have views that Diverge from Church (Files: 1, References: 2).	16	41
03. Youth	Views on youth in relation to Church. Interview guide asked about this	43	207

Label (Theme/Subtheme/Code)	Description	Files	References
i. Youth's Spiritual Orientation	Includes: Youth Non-Religiosity, Unbelief or non-Catholicism (Files: 17, References: 24); Differences Among Youth (Files: 12, References: 21); Youth and Life Stages (Files: 7, References: 7); Youth and Various forms of Spirituality (Files: 4, References: 4); Youth and Cultural Catholicism (Files: 2, References: 2).	31	54
ii. Explanations for Youth's Views	Includes: Variables seen as Underpinning Youth-Church Relationship (Files: 10, References: 14); Sociological Observations (Generational and Temporal) (Files: 8, References: 14); Youth as Distracted (Files: 4, References: 12); Youth Identity and Peers (Files: 4, References: 5).	20	42
iii. Distance	Includes: Youths' views on Church (Attributions) (Files: 16, References: 38); Church Values, Action and/or Communications not Working or Needs to Change (Files: 9, References: 27); Divergences between Youth and Church Values (Files: 8, References: 18).	22	78
iv. Youth Participation	Includes: Youth Groups, Youth Centres, Youth Mass and/or Christian Music (Files: 19, References: 36); Youth and Mass Attendance (Files: 10, References: 18).	24	53

Notes for **Table X**

- The 'Files' column refers to the number of participants who spoke in relation to the theme or sub-theme specified in the 'Label (Theme/Subtheme/Code)' column.
- The 'References' column refers to the number of times participants spoke in relation to the theme or sub-theme specified in the 'Label (Theme/Subtheme/Code)' column.
- Rows in **dark blue** represent Themes (Level 1). Rows in **light blue** represent Subthemes (Level 2). Rows in **green** represent General Codes (Level 3). Rows in **turquoise** represent General Codes (Level 4).
- All codes that follow "Includes:" in the 'Description' column, pertain to a level lower than the row in which they are present. E.g., "Includes: Being a Good Person & Helping Others (Files: 21, References: 30) [...]" refers to General Codes (Level 3), as they are present in the row "A. Universalism, Perspectivism & Subjectivism" (Level 2).
- Being Catholic* was more straightforward, in terms of the substantive direction of the codes. On the other hand, *Catholicism* and *Catholic Church* were characterised by a wider variety of dichotomies which, in and of themselves, were not substantively clear (e.g., poles along the lines of 'positive vs. negative' do not explain much). Accordingly, the codebook above delves, in each case, into the appropriate level at which the substantive meaning of codes is clearer to the reader.
- Participants' input within themes, subthemes and general codes varied. Double coding was carried out sometimes; this was rare.
- All participants featured at Level 1, given that parts of their transcripts were coded at the lower levels; hence, all Level 1 themes have 44 Files. Given the fact that participants could feature across multiple Level 4, Level 3 or Level 2 subthemes/codes, the total number of Files and References per Level (e.g., Level 3) was generally greater than that at the higher level (e.g., Level 2).

