

Leadership and Vitality in Local Churches

Michael Mason and Denis Fennessy¹

Overview: The Catholic Church, numerically the largest denomination in Australia, is experiencing a considerable decline in both attendance and identification.

A large-scale sample survey of Catholic church-attenders and clergy, the Catholic Church Life Survey (CCLS)² was conducted in November 1996. Among the questions responded to by parishioners was a series on their perceptions of the leadership of the parish priest.

A model which contrasted two styles of leadership of parishes by clergy was hypothesised on the basis of sociological and theological theory and previous research on this church. One of the two styles was considered likely to be more effective than the other, at present predominant style, in nurturing the 'Vitality' of the parish.

Structural Equation Modelling analysis produced well-fitting measurement and structural models which were theoretically coherent and strongly confirmed the research hypothesis. Two distinct types of clergy leadership were contrasted in their effect on six dimensions of parish life, constituting "Parish Vitality". The "Symbolic" type of leadership is shown to have more influence on "Parish Vitality" than the "Human Relations" type. This finding appears to have implications for leadership in other religious bodies and even in non-religious contexts.

The research problem driving the larger study of which this project on priest leadership styles forms the first part, is: ***What makes a parish vital?*** (In Catholic terminology, the local level of church organisation is called a parish.)³

The question is of intense practical interest to churches, since most of the older and larger denominations throughout the English-speaking world are experiencing a sharp decline in the proportion of their members who are actively involved.⁴

Nor is the issue without academic interest for the sociology of religion, since such a decline has consequences for both personal identity and social integration.

As will be further explained below, theory and previous research have led us to look at the parish itself, and to ask whether it possesses 'vitality', and what factors contribute to that vitality. To answer this question, a working definition of 'vitality' is needed as it applies to parishes.

Vitality as a property of a person or organisation means the possession of the characteristics of vigorous life--the manifestation of strong life-functions. A person may be poor, or physically handicapped, and exhibit radiant vitality. A parish may be under-resourced, yet vibrantly alive.

Vitality is not a structural reality; it is functional--a property of action. To measure it, one measures manifested life-functions. The life-functions of a parish are closely associated with those of its members. We can measure some properties of the parish directly (for instance the

¹ Michael Mason is Director of the Catholic Church Life Survey (CCLS), and Senior Researcher in the Institute for Advanced Research at Australian Catholic University, Melbourne.

Denis Fennessy, who wrote part of the explanation of SEM in Appendix B, and developed the earliest version of the model, was a Research Associate at the Institute in 1999.

² Background information on the CCLS is provided in Appendix A.

³ The 'larger study'--the Parish Vitality project--forms a central part of the analysis of the CCLS.

⁴ In the case of the Catholic Church, regular attendance is estimated to have declined from around 50% in the nineteen fifties to about 18% in recent years. Obviously the U.S. is a more complex case, with evangelical denominations making their presence felt on the political scene. But it is less of an exception than may at first appear, since it has recently been shown that in the USA, surveys have greatly overestimated the proportion of attenders in most denominations.

range of groups and activities open to members) and others indirectly and inferentially through their consequences for the quality of the Christian life of the members of the parish. The dimensions of personal and communal religious life in a parish were conceived (after Wach, Glock and Stark, Greeley, Smart, Wuthnow and others, utilising also the perspective of pastoral theology) as *Beliefs* (holding orthodox Catholic beliefs) *Values* (Catholic moral attitudes), active *Involvement* especially in *Liturgy* (as distinct from mere regular presence and passive participation): as reader, musician, special minister of the Eucharist, or other lay ministries related to sacramental life; *Community* (assigning importance in one's life to membership of the parish community, experiencing a sense of belonging to it; and *Spirituality* both personal and communal.

Parish Vitality, then, would manifest itself as a vigorous level of life in each of these dimensions. What factors influence vitality? Viewing the problem from a sociological perspective, one would expect that there would be some potential influences such as age, gender, education, standard of living, and patterns of influence from the wider society and culture which are not amenable to control, and others, such as the parish's 'pastoral practices', whose aim is the nurture of parish life, which could be to some extent altered so as to influence the outcome of vitality.

To explore the larger research problem, then, would involve measuring the level of vitality of parishes, and identifying factors that aid or impede vitality in different circumstances. Among the possible sources of influence, the leadership of the priest(s), and the strategies of ministry employed in the parish are obvious factors to consider.

This initial study confines the research problem to an exploration of the leadership of the parish priest as a source of influence on Parish Vitality across all the parishes in the sample, without as yet undertaking the further step of comparing parishes.

Theories of leadership. It is standard procedure in social science research, as in other fields, having clarified as far as possible the initial research problem, to review the literature on relevant theory and previous research so as to put the problem in its context around, to conceptualise it more broadly and deeply against the background of learning in the field. The literature on leadership is enormous; most of it deriving, in recent times, from the field of management. It is beyond the scope of this paper to undertake a comprehensive review; only the major theoretical influences on our perspective can be recounted.

Underlying many more recent theories of leadership stands a body of work, and a classification, stemming from the work of one of the founders of the discipline of sociology, Max Weber, who had a life-long interest in the sources of authority in traditional and modern societies.⁵ Weber developed a typology of *rational-legal*, *traditional* and *charismatic* authority. By extension, although in reality a leader often draws authority from more than one source, it is possible to envisage a set of types of leaders, and types of organisations, characterised by their emphasis on one of these types of authority.

Three types of leadership. The 'legal-rational' leader's authority is based on an objective order, either of legal rules, or of expert technical knowledge.⁶ Behaviour in the legal-rational

⁵ Max Weber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organisation* [1930] Oxford, 1947, pp. 324-392.

⁶ Critics have noted that Weber does not distinguish clearly here between the purely bureaucratic authority of office, and the knowledge-based authority of the professional technical specialist. Modern corporate organisations have increasingly moved in the direction of emphasising the latter rather than the former. See for example Talcott Parsons' Introduction to the edition of Weber cited above, note 4, pp. 58-60.

organisation should conform to a structure of impersonal, logically-formulated universal rules. Goals are explicitly stated and the means needed to achieve objectives are calculated. The organisational embodiment that Weber had in mind was the classical bureaucracy of his era. Various commentators have noted that the speed of change and the development of computer and communications technology have rendered the classical bureaucracy obsolete in the industrial and commercial worlds; its closest contemporary analogues are the university and the State. The post-modern technical organisation is characterised by high adaptability and a much less hierarchical structure.

The Traditional leader bases authority on the heritage which it is the leader's task to preserve and transmit; precedent is the guide, and the office of leader has its foundation in, and is also subject to, the Tradition. In religious organisations, which in their traditional form are 'communities of memory' *par excellence*, the authority of accumulated practice and wisdom is an essential component.

The 'Charismatic'⁷ individual is perceived as set apart from the ordinary by exceptional powers or qualities usually, in religious leaders, viewed as of divine origin. Charismatic authority makes a moral demand: it 'calls' its followers and imposes a duty on them to recognise the 'signs' and accept the leader's mandate. The sense of being "out of the ordinary" extends also to the direction of the person's drive: it is in conflict with what is 'routine' or established. The leader often possesses a magnetic personality with inspired vision and dynamism. The loosely structured community which gathers around such a leader takes its direction from the leader's calling and vision.

Although Weber saw the prophets of Israel as prototypical charismatics, it would limit the utility of this type to restrict it to John the Baptist-like figures, coming in from the desert like small dark sandstorms, spitting out beeswax and grasshopper wings! The model fits most religious founders, including calmer figures like Gautama Siddhartha (Buddha), and many of their followers who achieved no fame, but whose integrity and example inspired others. It might be summed up as 'leadership from in front', a leadership that calls-on, evokes and inspires, but does not push.

Critics of Weber's analysis of leadership maintain that it presents a false dichotomy: we are forced to choose between the emotional excess and irrationality demonstrated, for example, by 'charismatic' religious hucksters on television, and the cold, objective, bureaucratic rationality which feeds the dehumanising technical processes, but is powerless to change them.⁸ Others reply that Weber never intended his 'ideal types' to represent reality, but as distillations of its essence; never found in pure form, always mixed. The range of possible mixtures is infinite, and new forms of leadership are constantly emerging.

Four functions of leadership. Sociologist Andrew M. Greeley proposes that 'humanly significant' leadership today (as opposed to objective technical control) fulfils four essential **functions** : Symbolic, Ideological, Interpersonal and Organisational.⁹ In Greeley's analysis, there is a crucial *interpretive* component in all of these functions, particularly relevant to the complex and near-chaotic contemporary environment, in which the individual deprived of understanding feels most powerless.

Every leader must deal with all four of these tasks, although particular leaders may place more emphasis on one than the others.

⁷ Note that 'charismatic', in Weber's usage, has a much broader meaning than when the same word is used to designate the 'Charismatic Movement' or the 'Pentecostal' style of spirituality which became prominent in many Christian churches in the second half of last century.

⁸ Cf. John Schaar, "Reflections on authority", *New American Review*, Vol. 8 (1970): pp. 75-77.

⁹ Andrew M. Greeley, *Unsecular Man: The Persistence of Religion*, New York: Schocken, 1979, pp. 232-236.

Symbolic leadership is exercised in the process of embodying a vision—acting out a particular life-narrative, a set of ideals for living, not only through what the leader does, but by what he or she is. This function may draw on elements of the ‘charismatic’ source, but shows itself not so much in terms of the personality traits of the shaman, but in a ‘clear, enthusiastic and articulate commitment to goals’.¹⁰

Ideological leadership articulates a framework of existential meaning, it clarifies, teaches, presents the hearers with a larger scheme of things into which their lives and actions fit, and in which they ‘make sense’.¹¹ The leader draws on the values and traditions of the organisation, not simply to inculcate them anew, but to find in them a source for the right questions to ask.

Interpersonal leadership is the forming of personal relationships—both between leader and members, and within the community of members, as they associate together. One kind of leadership may inculcate formal, distant and impersonal relations governed by hierarchy and rules, another, higher on the interpersonal component, emphasises care for the individual, the development of talent, maximising scope for personal initiative, and the management of conflict – recognising the worker as a subject, rather than an object within the industrial process.

Organisational leadership is concerned with laying a foundation of structures and processes by which the group relates and operates: it administers in a way that gains the effective consent of the participants, involving in the making of plans and decisions those whose cooperation is necessary for their implementation. It provides the framework and the necessary resources for the community or corporation to exist and act together.

All four of these functions are necessary within an organisation, and all types of leaders need to undertake them, either themselves or through others.

The ‘interpersonal’ and ‘organisational’ functions fit with characteristic emphases of the rational leadership type, and the ‘symbolic’ and ‘ideological’ functions draw more upon the resources of the ‘charismatic’ type.

Weber’s typology has not been much utilised in empirical research,¹² but is particularly applicable to contemporary religious denominations; these organisations and their leaders clearly display all three of his types.

Page¹³ following Rudge¹⁴, has suggested that in contemporary religious organisations, alongside perduring traditional and charismatic elements of leadership and the structures corresponding to them, the ‘rational’ type is represented not only by church bureaucracies, but appears in two further forms:

-the ‘human relations’ type--‘democratic’, participative, focussed inward on satisfying the diverse wants of its members--this type partly derives its rationale from psychology, and the

¹⁰ Ibid. p. 232.

¹¹ ‘Ideology’ is used here not in a pejorative sense, nor in the distinctive meanings given to the term by Marx or Mannheim, but neutrally, as used by Eriksson in his psychology of identity, where it means ‘a simplified picture of the world and one’s place in it’.

¹² But see S. Udy, “‘Bureaucracy’ and ‘Rationality’ in Weber’s Organisation Theory: an Empirical Study” in M. Meyer (ed.) *Structures, Symbols and Systems* Boston, 1971. For critiques of this aspect of Weber’s work, see M. Albrow, *Max Weber’s Construction of Social Theory*, London, 1990 and R. Tucker, ‘The Theory of Charismatic Leadership’, *Daedalus* 97 (1968): 731-756.

¹³ Thomas More Page, ‘Managing and Planning Change in Religious Institutes’, *Review for Religious* 13/3 (May 1972), pp. 386-401.

¹⁴ Peter F. Rudge, *Ministry and Management*, London, 1968.

massive popularisation of the ‘therapeutic’ perspective.¹⁵ It might be summed up as ‘leadership from alongside’, with the figure of the ‘counsellor’ as its image; -and the ‘organic’ form: purposive – aimed at achieving some change in its environment; flexible, adaptable, non-hierarchical, the members may be professional peers. Managerial studies and systems theory have contributed more to the development of this type, and the small high-tech company demonstrates the prototype.

From the time of the Second Vatican Council in the early sixties, Catholic life has undergone many momentous changes. Not the least significant of these has been the change in the relationship between priests and people. The rapid increase in the educational level of younger parishioners has raised their status, and the sharp decline amongst the baby-boomers of respect for authority and tradition has lowered the prestige of the traditional type of clergyman. In Australia perhaps more than elsewhere, the response of the clergy has been to adopt a style which is more in the ‘human relations’ mode.

I have argued elsewhere,¹⁶ on theological as well as sociological grounds, that this style of leadership, ‘rational’ in Weber’s sense, is inadequate for the role of a *religious* leader in that it seems not be well adapted to the task of providing ‘spiritual nurture’. As will be shown in the next section, there is reason to believe that just such a lack is critical in parish life at the present juncture. In secular contexts, as a style of management, the ‘human relations’ model has been much criticised (as an appropriate *dominant* style) for its inward focus and weak orientation towards the goals of the enterprise.

Previous research on non-church-attending Australian Catholics who were among respondents in the National Social Science Survey¹⁷ did not support the widely shared view that ‘alienation from institutional religion’ was the major reason for non-attendance.¹⁸ Far too high a proportion of these respondents showed quite positive attitudes to the church, to priests, and to church services and sermons remembered from the past, for ‘alienation’ from the institution to serve as the predominant cause of falling away from attendance.

Their reasons for non-attendance tended rather to point towards busy weekends in families where both parents are employed full-time during the week, with housework to do, children to chauffeur to activities, etc. They were reluctant to give weekend time to church attendance. These reasons were strongly confirmed in the survey of priests which was part of the CCLS, in which clergy were asked, in cases where they *knew* the reason, why people had ‘dropped out’. Often enough, people accuse themselves of ‘laziness’, or remark that they ‘just got out of the way of attending’. Instead of simply taking these self-blaming explanations at face value, it should be noted that they have a common underlying theme: church attendance has a lower priority than formerly, and there are more competing priorities. Given the frequency with which people (not by any means only teenagers, and including some of those who continue to attend) say that they ‘don’t get anything out of it (any more)’, the question arises whether worship services themselves, and the broader set of activities of which they form part—i.e. participation in the life of the parish, may have changed in ways

¹⁵ Philip Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic*, New York, 1968.

¹⁶ Michael C. Mason, ‘Pastoral leadership for tomorrow (Part II)’ *The Australasian Catholic Record* 76/2 (Apr., 1999): 131-143.

¹⁷ Directed by Prof. Jonathan Kelley, Research School of Social Sciences, ANU. The size of the national sample varies from year to year; in 1993 there were over 4000 respondents, 1100 of whom identified their religious denomination as Catholic. The majority of these were not church attenders.

¹⁸ Michael C. Mason, ‘Catholics and Church Attendance’ unpublished MS, 1995.

that make them *unappealing and unsatisfying* to a much larger number than formerly. Hence they lose in the competition for time against other weekend activities.

A later component of the research program will pursue one avenue opened by these reflections by analysing recent data from both ‘active’ and ‘inactive’ Catholics on ‘religious experience’.

In the present study, we maintain the focus on the parish by comparing two different kinds of leadership exercised by the Parish Priest: a ‘Human Relations Leadership’ style, and a contrasting style we called ‘Symbolic Leadership’. The former is close to Weber’s ‘rational’ type, and emphasises the ‘interpersonal’ and ‘organisational’ functions; the latter is closer to Weber’s sense of ‘charismatic’, and emphasises the ‘symbolic’ and ‘ideological’ functions. These two styles are compared to discover which appears more closely associated with the Vitality of the parish. The following hypothesis is proposed.

Hypothesis: Parish Vitality will be shown to be influenced by the leadership of the parish priest, as perceived by the parishioner. “*Human Relations*” leadership is already known to be the style more often utilised; but the other main type, “*Symbolic*” leadership, will be found to be more strongly supportive of Parish Vitality.

Data: The data for this study were collected as part of the Catholic Church Life Survey (CCLS), a large-scale survey of Catholic church-attenders conducted in late 1996. A two-stage¹⁹ probability sample of parishes in all dioceses was drawn, with a balance of urban and rural parishes. Within each parish, all attenders received questionnaires. The response rate varied between 70-90% of those present. Elderly attenders were under-represented in the achieved sample, especially because of eyesight, comprehension and literacy obstacles. Although translations of the principal questionnaire into the five most common (Catholic) community languages were undertaken, ethnic attenders should also be considered under-represented.²⁰

Two-thirds of the Saturday evening / Sunday attenders at Mass in each parish in the sample completed the relevant questionnaire: a total of 106,300. A subsample of 10,082 of these respondents was utilised in this analysis.²¹

Application of the hypothesis in the survey: In the main CCLS questionnaire,²² completed by two-thirds of the attenders in each parish, parishioners were asked eleven questions on their perceptions of the leadership of the parish priest. The Weberian types and the various functions of leadership were embodied in these questions, which were intended to support two constructs: ‘Human Relations Leadership’ and ‘Symbolic Leadership’. The remainder of the questionnaire was devoted to obtaining the usual demographic characteristics of the respondent, and to questions designed to make up the six constructs representing the dimensions of parish life. (Table 1). Two dimensions of the spirituality of parishioners were

¹⁹ Within every diocese, parishes were divided into urban and rural, using the same criteria as ABS uses for communities; within each of these strata, a random sample of parishes was drawn. All attenders were asked to complete a questionnaire; 20 different questionnaires were utilised, each type going to a random sample of attenders (without replacement).

²⁰ See Appendix A.

²¹ The construction of this subsample is discussed in Appendix B.

²² The full text of all questions in Questionnaire A is included in Appendix B: Research Methodology and Statistics. There is insufficient space to include this lengthy Appendix in the present publication. Instead, it has been made publicly available on the Internet at: <http://dlibrary.acu.edu.au/research/ccls/pub/aasr/> The filename is ‘AppendixB.doc’.

distinguished: one more communal, expressed in attending Mass, listening to sermons, participating in what the parish provides for the person's 'spiritual needs'; the other dimension more individual and personal: relationship with God, private prayer and reflective reading, and growth in faith.

Table 1. Constructs formed from Items in Questionnaire “A”.

Title of construct	Variable name	Questions (from Questionnaire A) making up the construct
SPIRITUALITY— COMMUNAL	SPIRNEED	Q. 37 Spiritual needs being adequately met in this parish
BELIEFS	MASSSTR	Q. 27 Do you feel that attending Mass strengthens you spiritually
	PREACH	Q. 34 The preaching in this parish helpful in everyday life
	BGOD	Q. 19 Ideas of God
	BVIRGM	Q. 17 The Virgin Birth
VALUES	BEUCHR	Q. 18 Eucharist /consecration
	MPREMAR	Q. 25 Premarital sex
	BCHAUTH	Q. 21 Teaching authority of the Church
INVOLVEMENT— ESP LITURGY	MABORT	Q. 24. Abortion
	LITS34	Q. 33 Special Minister, reader, or involvement in parish liturgy or music group
	PARR45 PARG45	Q. 32 Catechist, sacrament preparation group; RCIA team, min leadership Q. 31 Participation in group prayer, scripture or faith discussion, or adult faith-education.
COMMUNITY BELONGING	OUTREACH	Q. 30 Involvement in community service, welfare, social justice or evangelisation groups.
	IMPPAR	Q. 41 Importance of parish community in your life.
	PARGROW BELONG	Q. 42 In the past year, grown in unity and strength as a parish community Q. 35 Strong, growing sense of belonging to this parish community
SPIRITUALITY— PERSONAL	CLFRIEND	Q. 36 Close friends in this parish?
	IMPGOD	Q. 14. Importance of God in your life
	FAIT345 PRIVDEV	Q. 13 Over the past year, grown in Christian faith Q. 15 Frequency of prayer, meditation, reading the Bible alone.
SYMBOLIC LEADERSHIP	PPVISION	Q. 47 Parish Priest man of vision, close to God, inspiring leader.
	PPCHAR	Q. 53 PP makes decisions based on his own prayerful and inspiring vision of what God wants.
	PPEXP	Q. 46 PP especially gifted at explaining Catholic beliefs.
HUMAN RELATIONS LEADERSHIP	PPACPAR	Q. 49 PP welcomes the active participation of the people in parish life. He listens to their ideas and takes note of their advice.
	PPCE4	Q. 52 PP's style of celebrating Mass warm and personal—emphasis on involving all in communal celebration.
	PPENCOUR	Q. 50 PP especially gifted at encouraging people to use their gifts and talents.

Analysis: The task of analysis was first, to examine whether parishioners' responses confirmed the difference in styles of leadership expressed in the research hypothesis. Next, their responses to the questions on the six dimensions of parish life were analysed, to discover whether these were associated with the parish priest's style of leadership as perceived by parishioners. A description of the structural equation modelling (SEM) technique utilised in the analysis, together with details of the parameter estimates and fit statistics, are presented in Appendix B.

Findings: preliminary issues.

1. Weber's 'Traditional' type: this particular category did not 'work' well in the analysis. In a question about the kind of priest who 'remained faithful to the traditions of the past, doing things the way they have been done' the responses showed that 'tradition' was mostly interpreted in a pejorative sense as equivalent to old and out of date, and few positive outcomes were associated with this characterisation. In hindsight, the questions on this type were defective. The one quoted above should perhaps have read: "the Tradition" rather than the 'the traditions', and avoided evoking the stereotype of meaningless repetition.

2. Interestingly, despite the predominance in the profile of the 'Symbolic' leader of notes like seriousness and personal piety (which are also part of the traditional image of the priest), these individuals were not perceived as 'traditional'. This is just as Weber's theory implies it should be.

3. The constructs 'Human Relations' and 'Symbolic' leadership fitted the data well. Nonetheless there were some difficulties in separating them. The relationship of parishioner to parish priest, as portrayed by our respondents, is one in which affection, trust, admiration, gratitude and loyalty usually play a strong part. Hence respondents were often indiscriminating in rating their parish priest 'high' in every capacity, even when the question sought to uncover the *relative* (perceived) strengths of his capacities, or the emphasis he placed on one or the other of two different, even incompatible, approaches to leadership.²³

This tendency produced a correlation between the two leadership constructs which presented some difficulty in the analysis. This problem and its resolution are discussed in Appendix B.

4. The constructs delineating the personal and corporate dimensions of Catholic parish life, Communal Spirituality, Beliefs, Values, Involvement in Liturgy, Community Belonging and Personal Spirituality, also fitted well, confirming the validity of their *a priori* conceptualisation.

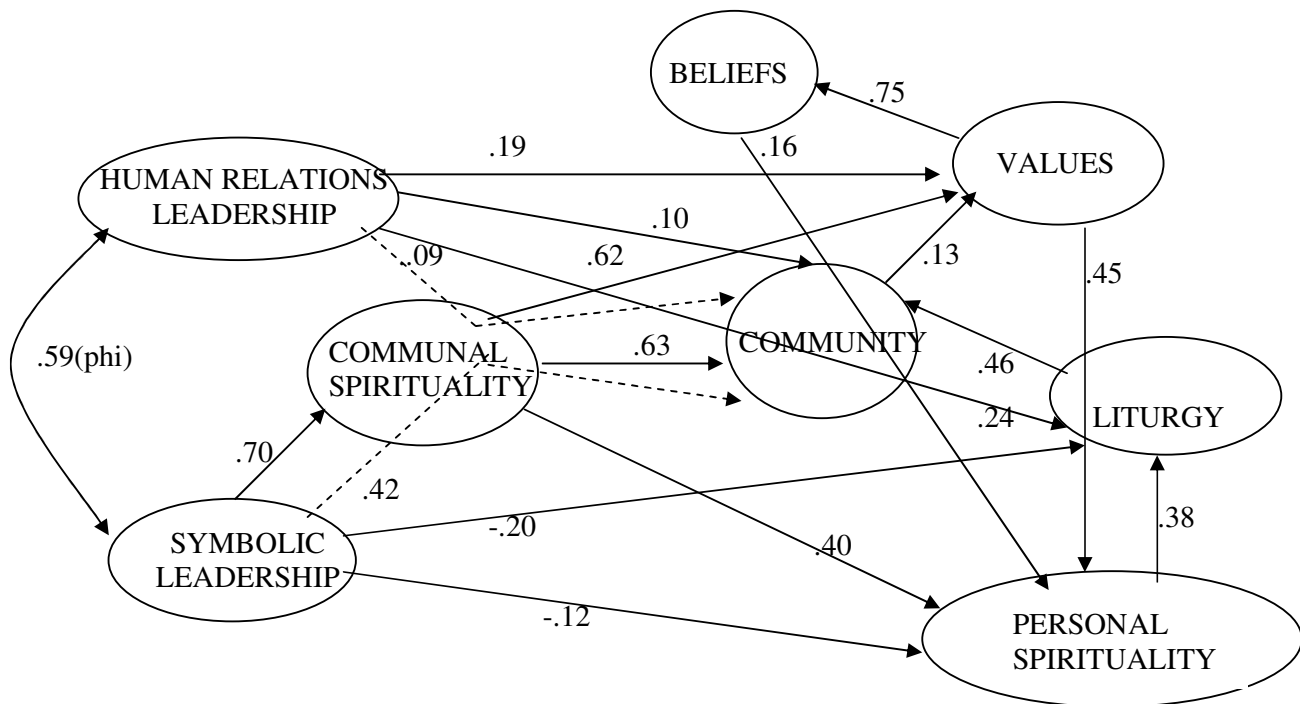
6. The path diagram in Figure 2 shows, in the continuous arrows with numbers attached, the 'direct effects'²⁴ of the two types of leadership, and also those among the dependent variables. The network of indirect effects is not shown, except for one particularly significant contrast: the two dashed lines running from each type of Leadership, through Communal Spirituality, to Community.

The covariance structure of the 26 observed variables was explored using the Lisrel Structural Equation Modelling program and analysed to test the fit of the hypothesised structural model. The path diagram summarising the results is shown in Figure 2. The reader will find it helpful to place the path diagram side by side with Table 1, which lists the items making up the eight constructs. Items (responses to individual questions) are not simply added together; they are combined in a weighted mode according to the part they play in the construct. Some have less 'weight', others more. No item is used in more than one construct.

²³ We cannot blame the respondents; this shows a lack of discriminating power in the form of the question asked.

²⁴ Statistically, the 'effect' of one variable on another is a prediction that, given one unit of change in the variable behind the arrow, a change equal in magnitude to the coefficient shown will occur in the other variable, and that this would occur by chance only five times in a hundred trials. Leaving aside the hotly debated issue of whether social science can demonstrate true causality, and acknowledging the additional limitation on conclusions that can be drawn from a survey representing only one point in time, additional substantive interpretation is given to the notion of effect, and we can justify it here only in a cursory fashion.

Figure 2: PATH DIAGRAM SHOWING STANDARDISED DIRECT EFFECTS and two indirect effects of special interest



Principal finding: The research hypothesis is confirmed. Symbolic Leadership has a much stronger positive influence on several key dimensions of Parish Vitality than does Human Relations Leadership.

Neither variety of leadership has any direct influence on the strength of Community. Any such influence is mediated through the variable Communal Spirituality, which is seen to play a crucial part. Whereas Symbolic Leadership has a strong direct relationship with Communal Spirituality (path coefficient .70),²⁵ Human Relations Leadership has no relationship. Communal Spirituality, in turn, is strongly related to the variable Community Belonging (.63).

Two indirect relationships are shown as dotted paths between the two types of leadership and community. This is their effect on Community, as mediated through Communal Spirituality. Human Relations Leadership shows a very small and barely significant indirect relationship (.09), whereas Symbolic Leadership has a relationship of .42.

Neither form of leadership is strongly associated with the other dimension of parishioner Spirituality: Personal Spirituality. This dimension of spirituality is influenced by Values, Communal Spirituality and Beliefs. Personal Spirituality also has a moderate (.38)

²⁵ All paths shown are statistically significant at the .05 level or below.

relationship with active involvement in Liturgy. Human Relations Leadership also has a positive relationship with Involvement in Liturgy (.24). This and its positive impact on Values are its only clear outcomes.

The crucial influences on Community Belonging turn out to be Communal Spirituality (greatly influenced by Symbolic Leadership) and Active Involvement in Liturgy. Although Human Relations leaders often see the building up of community as their primary goal, it seems rather to be leaders of the Symbolic type who, whether or not it is their direct intention, have more effect on this and other crucial dimensions of Parish Vitality.

Subsidiary findings: As well as being the principal form of involvement of active parishioners, participation in liturgical ministries appeared strongly associated with involvement in those other parish activities which require commitment of time over and above weekly Mass attendance, and the development of skills: sacrament preparation programs and RCIA, groups which meet for prayer or adult faith education, and parish activities of service to the wider community. Those who scored high on this cluster of observed variables constitute the group of actively involved parishioners who deserve to be called the 'Core' of the parish.

The two dimensions of spirituality were related, but also varied independently of each other to a sufficient extent to form two distinct constructs. Communal Spirituality seems the more fundamental of the two: impacting on Community Belonging, Values and Personal Spirituality.

The main focus of interest in the construction and analysis of this model was the comparison of the two types of Leadership. There are other relationships among the dimensions of Parish Vitality in the model, not immediately pertaining to Leadership, which are not yet fully developed, and will be explored in a separate analysis.

Significance of the principal finding for the Church: Analysis of responses on leadership style from priests themselves showed that almost two-thirds of Australian priests (62%) could be classified as having a clear preference for one or other of the two leadership styles. The remaining 38% were either low on both styles or middling on both.

Amongst those who clearly preferred one of the two styles, it was more than twice as likely that this was the Human Relations style (44% of all priests) rather than the Symbolic (18%). Age makes a difference: priests under 60 were more likely to favour the Human Relations Style by a ratio of 3:1. The over-sixties favoured the same style, but less overwhelmingly: 1.5:1.

Our main finding was that this predominant style of leadership has less influence on the Communal Spirituality of parishioners and on their identifying with, and acting as part of, a parish Community, than the contrasting Symbolic Leadership style.

The obvious and intriguing question is: why then was the Human Relations style adopted by such a high proportion of priests?

In 'pastoral' writing since the Second Vatican Council on the contemporary parish and the role of the priest, one finds it repeated almost as an article of faith that the expectations of contemporary Catholics, except for the most conservatively inclined, were for a more democratic leadership style from their clergy, one more open to the participation and initiative of parishioners, and to their sharing in decisions concerning the life of the parish community.

This is certainly true of a vocal elite, among whom priests themselves were largely numbered. For these it was apparently more a conviction flowing from their own principles concerning the relationship of individuals to the ‘institutional church’ and its authority, rather than a result of empirical observation of the actual desires of the majority. The warrant for this conclusion lies in the finding from the Catholic Church Life Survey data, which show with startling clarity that most parishioners were not interested in active participation in, for example, the making of important decisions in the parish. If they were invited to take part, they mostly preferred not to do so; if they were not given the opportunity, they professed themselves unconcerned. It was not only the older, more traditionally-minded parishioners who showed a low level of interest and participation; in fact, those over age 40 were almost twice as likely to participate in parish decision-making, given the opportunity. It was the group under age forty, who were thought most eager for change in this direction, who were the least interested in participating.

Ironically, it seems to have been most of all extreme conservative groups who pushed hardest, and sometimes with considerable success, for the right to participate in parish decision-making, with the intent of reversing what they considered undesirable changes.

TABLE 2. INVOLVEMENT IN IMPORTANT DECISIONS IN THE PARISH, BY AGE GROUPS

			AGE GROUPS			Total
			1 15-39	2 40-59	3 60+	
INVOLVEMENT IN IMPORT. DECISIONS	1 No, & not happy about it.	Count	1130	1668	987	3785
		% within AGE GROUP	4.9%	4.8%	3.7%	4.5%
IN PARISH: HAVE YOU BEEN GIVEN OPPORTUNITY	2 No, & it doesn't worry me	Count	9628	10400	8863	28891
		% within AGE GROUP	41.8%	29.8%	32.9%	34.1%
	3 Yes, but usually not involved	Count	10447	18011	13972	42430
		% within AGE GROUP	45.4%	51.7%	51.9%	50.1%
	4 Yes & often participate	Count	1801	4789	3077	9667
		% within AGE GROUP	7.8%	13.7%	11.4%	11.4%
Total		Count	23006	34868	26899	84773
		% within AGE GROUPS	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

It is often asserted that many who have ceased attendance in recent years did so out of disappointment at limited opportunities for more active participation; but the evidence does not support this as a cause of disaffection. 73% of the remaining parishioners, younger as well as older, considered their Parish Priest ‘very gifted’ or ‘does well’ at welcoming the active participation of lay people in the parish, and another 18% considered his efforts in this direction as ‘fair enough’. Similar proportions approved the Parish Priest’s ‘encouragement of parishioners to use their gifts and talents’.

It seems that some of the convictions motivating the adoption of the more ‘democratic’, and also more ‘rational’ and ‘secular’ leadership style, were not shared by most practising Catholics.

A second, and most ‘pastoral’ reason for the adoption of the Human Relations mode has been the belief that it is likely to be more effective in the Parish Priest’s task of ‘pastoring’ – gathering of the scattered flock into the unity and strength of a parish Community.

This belief is informed by the theological insight that the parishioner does not exist in a vacuum of individuality, but is a member of a ‘saved and saving people’ in the sacramental body of the Church. In Catholic theology, this community is not the mere gathering together of those to whom, as individuals, God has given the grace of Saving Faith; it is precisely in and through the Church, the presence in the world now of Christ’s body, through the Word proclaimed and the sacraments administered there, that individuals come to share in the life of the Spirit and to respond with faith and hope and love.

And it is informed by the sociological insight that the community has changed – lost the ‘automatic’ solidarity of a mono-ethnic Irish-Australian immigrant, working-class, anti-establishment and significantly oppressed community and become a diverse, mainstream, multicultural and largely middle-class group strongly identifying with the values, and the individualism, of the enviroing Australian culture, and strongly influenced by its secularism. The maintenance of Catholic beliefs and values, and continuing active involvement in worship, in such an environment, is obviously closely related to belonging to a faith-community. Hence the upbuilding of such a community has come to be seen, for these apparently perfectly good and insightful reasons, as one of the primary tasks of priestly ministry. How then has it come about that the adoption of a style of leadership aiming explicitly at community-building as its primary task, has turned out to be less effective at doing so?

I suggest that, with characteristic Australian ‘directness’ and ‘practicality’, this change in priestly leadership style, with its emphasis on the novel elements of democratic participation and community building, and its more ‘rational’, ‘everyday’ or ‘secular’ tone, in contrast to the ‘sacral’ components of the priest’s identity and role, was adopted without fully understanding the complex system in which the intervention was taking place, and without anticipating the consequences that would tend to flow from those components of the role which were now de-emphasised.

Konrad Lorenz has written:

Scientific enlightenment tends to engender doubt about the value of traditional beliefs long before it furnishes the causal insight necessary to decide whether some accepted custom is an obsolete superstition or a still indispensable part of a system of social norms.²⁶

The change under discussion could well be a case in point, since, in the same stream of ‘pastoral’ writing and discussion referred to above, there has been, besides the emphasis on the democratic ethos that should characterise the parish, and the community-building strategy for priestly leadership, an accompanying theme of discomfort with the ‘sacral’ components of the role, and the strong suggestion that they are ‘irrelevant’ and somewhat repellent to the younger generation of Catholics whose participation was both lowest, and most sought after.

The theological history of this question is as long as Christianity’s tussle with Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment thought; but it has not been at all a salient

²⁶ *King Solomon’s Ring*.

theme in Catholic practice, especially in Australia, until the last thirty years. The Bultmannian controversy and the 'Death of God' debate left ordinary Catholics, as distinct from theologians, unperturbed. But the fracturing of the unity of the Australian Catholic Church in the seventies along the fault lines of liturgy, catechetics and Vietnam-era politics, left it open to powerful currents of modern thought from which it had previously been insulated, and particularly to one characteristically Australian challenge.

Australian culture, and in tune with it, ministry by Australian Catholic clergy, is marked by a strong tendency to 'personalise' the 'impersonal' and to 'informalise' the 'formal'.²⁷ Now, a certain kind of 'impersonality' and 'formality' are integral to effective symbolisation. Not the impersonality which is cold and uninterested, but which rather is universal, applicable to *all* persons, and so not intimately specific to only some; and which beckons towards self-transcendence through a loosening of the bonds of the everyday self. And not the kind of formality which is lifeless repetition, or the adoption of a 'high' cultural style, (for example formality as "putting on a posh accent") but rather culturally evolved expressive forms, enacted communally or privately, apt for mediating an awareness of and openness to ultimate Transcendence.²⁸ Symbolic leadership has some features in common with 'ritual performance' and thus flies in the face of the 'personalising' and 'informalising' motifs in the Human Relations style. The Human Relations leader is ill at ease with the element of 'otherness' in the symbolic, and believes, (correctly, in a sense,!) that everyone will be more comfortable if symbols are reduced to their plainer literal dimensions. His style is thus antithetical to, and deliberately reductive of, the symbolic. What is thereby lost is the "overplus" of meaning and feeling that the symbol functions to convey, and which comprise the indispensable content of nurture for Spirituality.

Primary reliance has been placed by 'Human Relations' leaders on an approach to the building-up of the local church community much as one might gather a community of any kind, without sufficient attention to the "spiritual" character which gives that community its distinctiveness. In the past, such communities appealed to Allport's 'extrinsically religious' type, who described themselves as attending for social or other 'non-religious' reasons. Nowadays, particularly in the case of women who work outside the home, the appeal of churchgoing as a social activity appears to have greatly diminished.

In summary, then, the significance of the principal finding for the Catholic Church is that a preferred, and deliberately chosen, way of exercising leadership in the role of Parish Priest is actually less effective for its intended purpose of forming a vital community than the less often chosen Symbolic style.

The importance of this finding is magnified by the additional discovery that it is the development of Communal Spirituality which leads people to commit themselves to a community, and which mediates the influence leadership has on Community.

Since the strength of the sense of community appears to be a by-product of parishioners' Spirituality, the most effective course for priests would seem to be to direct their efforts towards enhancing Personal and Communal Spirituality, rather than at "building community". The benefit of a stronger community tends strongly to flow from an increase in personal and communal Spirituality.

²⁷ Michael Mason, "Yesterday's failure of nerve and today's fear of flying," *Compass Theology Review* 23/4 (Summer, 1988):15-20.

²⁸ This defines "ritual", but that word is subject to the same misinterpretation as 'formality'.

Spirituality plays an even more powerful role than anticipated among the dimensions of parish life. A respondent with a high score on the construct Communal Spirituality is one who has reported:

- My spiritual needs are being adequately met in this parish (high on a scale of 1-7);
- I feel that attendance at Mass strengthens me spiritually (1-4);
- The preaching I hear here is helpful to me in everyday life (1-5).

This variable seems to capture well the person's sense of spiritual well-being; if Communal Spirituality is 'strong', the sense of the importance of the parish Community, and of belonging to it, and a positive view of its movement of growth, will also tend to be strong.

Although this simple 'recursive' (one-directional) model shows the direction of influence as being from Communal Spirituality to Community, it is likely also that membership of the parish community or its sub-groups enhances one's sense of Communal Spirituality. In measures made at a single point in time, there is no way of deciding the true direction of influence. It may even flow in different directions at different times.

The same is true of the direction of all relationships shown in the path diagram. It is even conceivable in principle that Spirituality and the other constructs influence the person's perceptions of the style of leadership of the parish priest. However, parishioners' perceptions of leadership style are validated by the self-assessments of the priests themselves; thus leadership style is more likely to be a genuinely 'independent variable', influencing parishioners and the vitality of the parish as a whole.

Directions for future research: The findings so far suggest several ways in which the present research should be expanded. Although active parishioners include far fewer than a representative proportion of the population of Catholics under the age of fifty, it can be expected that age will interact with both forms of leadership in their effects on parish vitality. But it is by no means clear that this interaction is likely to favour Human Relations rather than Symbolic leadership. We should also test for the effects of gender, educational attainment, and socio-economic status.

In a separate project, these findings will be linked with an exploration of the data on religious experience collected from a smaller sample by means of a separate questionnaire. It is anticipated that this may well uncover even more powerful evidence that the rapid decline in church attendance and participation in the local church over the last thirty years is attributable to a "lack of spiritual nourishment", rather than primarily to "alienation from the institutional church" or dissatisfaction with the mode of exercise of church authority, or with conservative Catholic moral positions on sexual or reproductive ethics, or church policies on the role of women.

Yet another major study, this time on priests (both parish priests and others) is under way, and can be expected to reveal the shaping influences which lead them to adopt particular leadership styles.

Conclusion: A changed style of leadership on the part of parish clergy has gradually been widely adopted within the Catholic Church, both in Australia and overseas. There is reason to believe that other Christian churches of a liberal stripe have gone even further in the same direction. But this 'Human Relations' model of leadership is less effective than the 'Symbolic' style at fulfilling the pastoral aim of building up the unity and strength of the parish community. The change of style has been adopted as one means of dealing with the crisis of decline. Mostly likely, it is inculcated upon seminarians during their formation. Yet even in the face of evidence of its ineffectiveness, the Human Relations style seems to be

held to as a matter of conviction, and is reinforced by the strong value placed on 'personal', informal, 'democratic' relationships and processes in contemporary Australian culture. In contrast, the Symbolic style, with its emphasis on the priest as "sacrament" -- leadership more by "inspiration" than "collaboration", tends still to be eschewed by most clergy as 'irrelevant' to younger Catholics. Worse, although it has never been highly developed in Australia, and would actually constitute quite a radical innovation in leadership, the 'Symbolic' style may be mistaken for a relic of the past.

It is hoped that the fruits of the current research may encourage a reconsideration of the issue.

Appendix A. The Catholic Church Life Survey²⁹

How the Catholic Church Life Survey came about

In 1991, a National Church Life Survey (NCLS) of church attenders was conducted amongst a large proportion of the Protestant and Anglican churches in Australia. The group of church leaders who organised the first NCLS planned to repeat it in 1996, and approached the Australian Catholic Bishops' Conference to invite the Catholic Church to join in. The Bishops saw the value of such a survey, and welcomed the opportunity for ecumenical cooperation. They also saw that it would be necessary to formulate from the ground up a survey design and questionnaires adapted to Catholics. This was entitled the **Catholic Church Life Survey (CCLS)**. Of course, comparisons with the other churches were also of great interest, and many questions were the same as those used in the NCLS distributed in August 1996 to Anglican and Protestant churches.

This first major pastoral-sociological survey of the whole Australian Catholic Church, collected its data in November, 1996. This date was chosen so as to keep as close in time as possible to the NCLS, and to the Population Census conducted by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), which, like the NCLS, took place in August 1996.

Objectives

The survey is basically client-oriented research. It has been funded by the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference (ACBC), which gathered resources from a variety of church agencies, notably the State Catholic Education Commissions. As such, its principal objectives are as follows:

Parish Vitality Project. The central focus of the client-oriented research program is the Parish Vitality Project. A survey instrument was administered to every attender in each parish. It is believed that the data will permit inferences from the level of 'vitality' discovered, to the pastoral practices in use in the parish, and thus ground recommendations towards 'best pastoral practice'. It is intended to report back to every parish in several stages, offering information that the parish can utilise for its own review of life, and for guidance in its planning for the future.

Profile of the contemporary Australian Church. Of even greater interest to diocesan and national church leaders is the profile of the church at diocesan, state and national levels. They seek a current description of the active attenders, their demographic characteristics, beliefs, values, practices, attitudes to social-moral issues; the structures and functioning of parish and diocesan communities. They desire a renewed and closer study of the influences promoting the widespread continuing decline in attendance rates. If it seems optimistic to aspire to a comprehensive causal explanation of this decline, it is nonetheless reasonable to attempt to generate a set of more specific and better-grounded hypotheses than we have at present.

Research on Catholic Education. Other Church agencies with research interests were those involved in Catholic education, from the National Catholic Education Commission to diocesan Catholic Education Offices. These were the principal partners, with the ACBC, in funding the CCLS and the closely allied National Catholic Census Project. Education agencies took a major role in the development of two special questionnaires: one on

²⁹ For a more detailed account, see Michael C. Mason, "The Catholic Church Life Survey, 1996." *Compass Theology Review* (Melbourne) 31/1 (Autumn, 1997) pp. 25-35.

educational issues which was answered by the general parish church-attending population, and another sent (in most but not all dioceses) to the parents of children attending the parish primary schools and (in Victoria and Western Australia) Catholic secondary schools.

Small Research Projects on behalf of Church agencies. Beyond this general profile, several Church agencies (mostly at the national level), with the assistance of the research team, developed research frameworks and small sets of questions oriented to their particular interests.

Major issues in the Sociology of Religion. While the clients' concerns obviously took precedence in the formulation of the research program, the project is not so immersed in pragmatic detail as not to embrace the opportunity for the exploration of some major topics in current academic sociology of religion. The data offer scope for the pursuit of several such issues, closely related to the client's focus--e.g. religion and ethnicity, 'secularisation' in modern Western societies and the alleged contemporary processes of 'resacralisation'; theory and measurement issues in the exploration of religious experience, etc..

Research Design

Built-in to the CCLS are seven distinct major research projects, each with its own specific aims and content: Parish Vitality; Spirituality and Religious Experience; Catholic Education; Priests working in parishes; Pastoral Associates, the Participation of Women in the Church, and the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA).

Method of the survey

On a chosen Sunday in November 1996, the survey questionnaires were administered to all church attenders present at all Masses (or some other type of service in the absence of a priest). This took place in the parish church and all other Mass centres, in 397 parishes throughout Australia--nearly one third of the 1400 or so parishes in the nation. At around the same time, parents of children in Catholic schools in many of those parishes received questionnaires through the school.

Since it was far too big a task to survey all of the three-quarters of a million or so Catholics who are at Mass each Sunday, a scientific sample of 281 parishes, stratified by diocese and urban/rural location, was drawn from every diocese in Australia. Any other parish that applied could join in, and over a hundred more did so. They are not treated as part of the sample, but receive reports based on their data in comparison with those of the sample.

The sample is statistically representative of all Catholic church-attenders in Australia, and also of priests and parishes. That is to say, findings based on the sample of Catholics, or priests, or parishes, can, with appropriate limitations, be claimed to apply with a high level of probability to the whole of the Catholic Church in Australia.

In all, respondents numbered a hundred and seventy-five thousand Catholic lay people, five hundred and eighteen priests, and two hundred and forty Pastoral Associates (unordained parish workers who may be members of a religious order, (usually female) or single or married laity).

Analysis

The analysis is being conducted by Director of the Survey, Rev. Dr. Michael Mason C.SS.R., at the ACBC / ACU Office of Pastoral Research within the Institute for the Advancement of Research at Australian Catholic University, Melbourne.