

Survey finds discontent among Australian Catholic priests

by [David Crampton](#)

April 11, 2011

Sydney, April 5 (ENInews)--Many of Australia's 3000 active and retired Catholic priests are critical of their bishops and admit they do not believe crucial church teachings, according to a survey to be released this week.

Dr. John O'Carroll, a communications lecturer at Charles Sturt University in Bathurst and colleague Chris McGillion, who coordinates the university's journalism program, sent the survey to 1550 active and 160 retired priests, and 542, or about 32 percent, responded. They conducted 50 face-to-face interviews and are publishing the results in a book, "What Australian Catholic Priests Really Think About Their Lives and Their Church."

"You've got a very representative group of mainstream priests responding," McGillion told the Sydney Morning Herald. A former Herald journalist and author of two previous books on the Australian church, McGillion says the priesthood crisis is professional, rather than vocational.

While most clergy find fulfillment in the priesthood, many say they are overworked, poorly managed and feel constrained in their religious vocation by bureaucracy and parish administration. Nearly half of the surveyed priests consider their bishops as "an exclusive group and one far too subservient to Rome," the book says.

One priest described the Vatican as a "bully-boy," adding, "I want no part of it." A younger priest, age 47, wrote, "given the state of the church today, I look forward to the night when I go to sleep and just don't wake up again."

Brian Coyne, editor of the independent Catholic website Catholica, believes bishops, while aware of priestly dissatisfaction, choose to remain silent and not address the issues. "We have firm evidence of what the priests are actually thinking. It brings out into the open what people have suspected for a long time. But Cardinal George Pell

and the bishops are blind and deaf to all of this." Pell is archbishop of Sydney, writes regularly for religious and secular publications and has appeared on television and radio. He declined to comment on the book.

In the survey, almost 70 per cent of priests thought abortion was always a sin and priestly celibacy should be optional. Several volunteered their sense of frustration that some married Anglican priests have been accepted into the Catholic priesthood in recent years. About 40 percent said pre-marital sex was sinful, and just 19.2 percent thought it sinful for married couples to use birth control. Several priests admitted they were in long-term committed relationships with women. One priest said he learned more about God from Alcoholics Anonymous meetings than the Catholic Church.

McGillion says that while most find the priesthood satisfying, "there is still a worrying minority that we uncovered that are locked in this situation. They talk about depression, alcoholism and so forth," he told Australian television. The general secretary of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, Fr. Brian Lucas, said he has not seen the book.