

The Pastoral as Polysemic: Perspectives of Priests in Malta

The Maltese Archipelago, home to a population of around half a million persons, is a confessional state that privileges the Roman Catholic religion,

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with a majority Catholic population of 98% baptised¹ out of which about 84% subscribe² to the Catholic faith, and around four hundred priests. The split between diocesan and religious priests is around 50%. By way of introducing the country, if one were to look at the last Church's census, conducted in 2018, only 36% of the Maltese population attend Sunday mass, while around 70% attend at least once a month.³ Moreover, the census showed that only 6% and 8% of the group attending mass were within the 15–24 year-old bracket, and the 7–14 year-old bracket, respectively. The strongest cohort of mass attendees (58%) are aged at least 50 years, and the majority are females (53%).⁴ The census is but one sphere of inquiry among others when it comes to quantifying the life of a diocese. Nonetheless, it provides a snapshot of pastoral life as it was a couple of months prior to the advent of Covid-19.

The above was bound to change on 7th March 2020 as Covid-19 hit our shores, after days of media coverage of the collapse of the Italian healthcare system. Covid-19 has affected religious practice in manifold ways. Prohibition of mass gatherings, the enforcement of social distancing, and the closure of all religious places of worship has disrupted all aspects of everyday Christian practice. This has inevitably affected the Maltese priest in his 'pastoral identity.' Moreover, social change in the broader Maltese context has brought about similarly rapid shifts in the cultural resources with which communities make sense of their surroundings. This inevitably resulted, to some extent, in re-alignments in parish and other communal projects.⁵ In turn, such shifts could have led priests and parishes to adjust their pastoral response accordingly.

The aims of this research are therefore to investigate (a) how the understanding of the term 'pastoral' was challenged during the first three months of Covid-19 in Malta, and (b) the meaning of this for the future of pastoral work in Malta. The research forms part of a wider worldwide research project in which the authors participated in, as part of the Churches Online in Times of Corona (CONTOC)

¹ World Population Review, "Malta Population 2021." [worldpopulationreview.com](https://worldpopulationreview.com/countries/malta-population), 2021, <https://worldpopulationreview.com/countries/malta-population> (accessed on 1 June 2022).

² Discern, "Malta Sunday Mass Attendance Census 2017" (Valletta, 2018), <https://discern.mt/research/malta-sunday-mass-attendance-census-2017/>. (accessed on 1 June 2022).

³ Claire Caruana, "Mass Attendance Set to Collapse in the Years to Come," *Times of Malta*, 27.1.2019. <https://timesofmalta.com/articles/view/mass-attendance-set-to-collapse-in-the-years-to-come.700305> (accessed on 1 June 2022).

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Luke J. Buhagiar and Gordon Sammut, "'Social Re-Presentation For...': An Action-Oriented Formula for Intergroup Relations Research," *Frontiers in Psychology* 11 (3.3.2020): 352, <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.00352> (accessed on 1 June 2022).

international network.⁶ This ecumenical research project consisted primarily of an empirical survey tapping the development and implementation of digital practices undertaken by churches under the conditions of assembly restrictions and mitigation during Covid-19.

Methodology

The methodology behind the present inquiry involved survey research. All the clergy, including religious friars, of the Archdiocese of Malta were contacted via email by the diocese's respective secretaries, inviting them to anonymously contribute to an opt-in quantitative questionnaire with three qualitative questions. The invitation email remarked that said research was being endorsed by the bishops, and the respective units within the curia. Four reminders were also posted on a closed Facebook group for Maltese clergy, with another email being sent a few days before the closing date.

This paper shall only discuss the data obtained from the final three open-ended questions. These questions asked: (i) Where do you think increased engagement makes sense? (ii) What became less important? and (iii) What else I wanted to say? These questions were prepared by the international core CONTOC team and refer to the onset of Covid-19. In the end, sixty-nine participants answered the survey, but not everyone answered all three of the qualitative questions. Overall, 49 participants answered at least two of the qualitative questions. The three questions were analysed as one body of text; nonetheless, the analysts interpreted the statements as answers to the respective questions.

Analysis was inspired by Attride-Stirling's form of thematic analysis, which yields thematic networks as the final output.⁷ To do so, we inductively developed three classes of themes: (a) basic themes – these are the most basic themes that are derived from the data. On their own, these say little about the text, and thus

⁶ CONTOC's network is a joint project primarily between the University of Zurich, University of Wuerzburg, Swiss Pastoral Sociological Institute, Philosophical Theological University of Sankt Georgen, and Social Science Institute of the Evangelical Church of Germany. Several international partners from Europe (Sweden, United Kingdom, Hungary, Netherlands, Austria, Denmark, Finland, and Malta), the USA (Dallas, Texas, New York, Pennsylvania, and Minnesota), Latin America (Paraguay, Brazil, Argentina, and Paraguay), Australia, South Africa, and Asia (Singapore, South Korea, were invited to contribute and study their respective scenarios.

⁷ Jennifer Attride-Stirling, "Thematic Networks: An Analytic Tool for Qualitative Research," *Qualitative Research* 1, no.3 (7.12.2001): 385–405, <https://doi.org/10.1177/146879410100100307> (accessed on 1 June 2022).

always need to be interpreted within the context of other basic themes that act as (b) organising themes. Organising themes are formed of clusters of basic themes that summarise the principal assumptions and ideas of the collection of themes. Finally, a (c) global theme is a macro-theme encompassing the principal metaphors in our analysis.⁸

This research therefore aimed to unearth the themes salient in the text, while presenting a thematic network to facilitate the structuring and depiction of these themes. In line with Attride-Stirling, we devised a coding framework through which we segmented the text. As themes were abstracted from in vivo codes, we refined and identified the organising themes. Themes were then rearranged and placed into the thematic map based on their level (basic, organising or global).

At the same time, the epistemological approach of ‘pragmatic eclecticism,’ as advocated by Johnny Saldana,⁹ was adhered to, as the ultimate aim was to answer the research questions explored above. More so, in our interpretations, we acknowledged the importance of recurring patterns.¹⁰ In line with our constructivist approach,¹¹ we prioritised an inductive approach to coding and used an open coding frame. As researchers, we adhered to a descriptive analysis of the data. It was our orientation that the thoughts, feelings and experiences of respondents were a reflection of the respondents’ personal states.¹² In grouping the thematic network, we adhered to Braun and Clark’s interpretation of Patton’s ‘dual criteria for judging categories:’¹³ that is, we described themes in a way that ensured they were internally homogeneous and externally heterogeneous from each other.¹⁴ NVIVO was used to code the data.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Johnny Saldana, *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*, ed. Jai Searman, 3rd ed. (London: SAGE, 2016), 70.

¹⁰ Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, *Successful Qualitative Research: A Practical Guide for Beginners* (London: SAGE, 2013).

¹¹ Hannah Frith and Kate Gleeson, “Clothing and Embodiment: Men Managing Body Image and Appearance,” *Psychology of Men & Masculinity* 5, no.1 (2004): 40.

¹² David Byrne, “A Worked Example of Braun and Clarke’s Approach to Reflexive Thematic Analysis,” *Quality & Quantity*, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11135-021-01182-y> (accessed on 1 June 2022).

¹³ Michael Quinn Patton, *Qualitative Evaluation and Research Methods* (Poland: SAGE, 1990).

¹⁴ Braun and Clarke, *Successful Qualitative Research*.

Findings

Preliminary Analysis

During our first stage, we queried a text search for the word ‘pastor’ and its stemmed words. This only resulted in 8 references. A word frequency query was then generated. After removing common stop words, the following words emerged as the five most frequently used: people (23), time (18), community (12), work and faith (11), and church and digital (10). Running the same query with synonyms rendered: people (32), work (29), makes (25), personal (24), time (24), and community (20). Interestingly, from the initial stages of the analysis, the notions of ‘people’ (people, personal, community) and ‘work’ (work, makes) were already hinting that the Maltese priest seems to be focused on working among his people.

Thematic Map

As codes were analysed and grouped, a thematic network with four distinct quadrants emerged. All themes, irrespective of their level, emerged inductively after the observations were synthesised into themes. The aim of the thematic analysis was to identify the salient themes in the corpus of data. A web-like figure (thematic map) is offered to facilitate both the structuring and the presentation of the inducted themes.¹⁵ Since we used a bottom-up approach, we categorised the data in basic themes, and traversed inwards to form the four organising themes and finally the global theme, which we labelled as: Pastoral Work: Being versus Doing.

While many respondents failed to discuss their responses in terms of ‘pastoral work,’ this notion emerged as a global theme through which the Maltese priest reflects. Hence, pastoral work, rather than being the cause of one’s activity, was in effect the effect of different combinations of activities, which we have divided into four quadrants, each representing an organising theme: A) priest identity/self-reflection, B) sentiment toward digital tools, C) theological/spiritual work, and D) psycho-social worker. Each organising theme is directly or indirectly related with other organising themes: B and D are both sociological in nature, whereas A and C tend to be more spiritual. That completes a horizontal reading of the graph. Vertically speaking, however, A and B have to do more with being, whereas C and D have to do more with doing. All organising themes, however, incorporate elements of both being and doing; accordingly, the global theme

¹⁵ Attride-Stirling, “Thematic Networks: An Analytic Tool for Qualitative Research.”

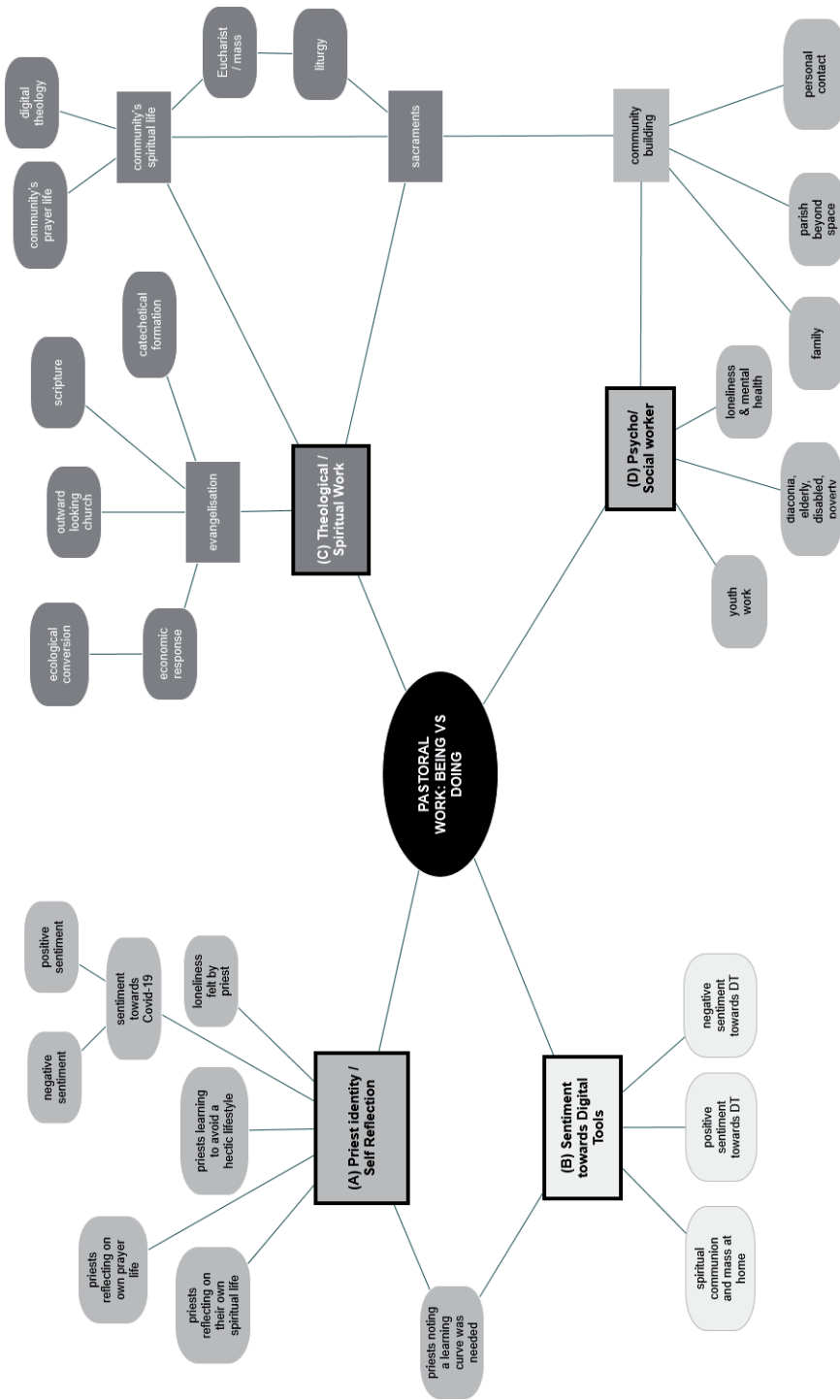


Figure 1. The Global theme is *Pastoral Work: Being versus Doing*. Organising themes are depicted by rectangles with a bold border, while basic themes by rounded rectangles. Rectangles without a border are basic themes which are connected to three or more other themes.

that encompasses these 4 quadrants, was labelled, as indicated above, Pastoral Work: Being versus Doing.

In what follows, we described these four organising themes in more detail. Whenever basic themes feature, these are noted by underlying the terms denoting them (the underlined terms do not always correspond directly to the basic themes in Figure 1, but refer to the same axiomatic patterns per theme). When relevant, quantitative findings are briefly mentioned to further contextualise the qualitative data presented below.¹⁶ All quotes are presented verbatim.

Priest Identity/Self-Reflection

Interestingly, the organising theme related to the priest's self-reflection emphasised the spiritual side. From our reading, it seems that Covid-19 served two purposes: fostering a deeper relationship with Christ through (a) prayer and (b) discerning one's lifestyle. As priests reflected on their spiritual life, they realised that they found "more time for prayer and personal reflection," (P59) and "more time to read spiritual works" (P54). Priests also noted that, at times, the liturgy they celebrated privately was more meaningful. The time for more and/or deeper spiritual reflection emerged from the realisation that their hectic lifestyle was negatively impacting their spiritual identity.

Priests noted that their hectic lifestyle was ridden with "faffing about" (P12) and, in general, most felt in sync with P8 who suggested that, despite priests' lives being "hectic and fast," their roles are seen as irrelevant by society; thus, priest should do their best to amend this chaotic lifestyle. Others discerned and reflected that "frivolous issues [such as the] festa," were "taking so much of our time" (P61). Similarly, in the spiritual field, priests reflected on their interior life, with P64 summing it up: "Having passed through this period of isolation I am more conscious of the need to integrate and communicate a contemplative understanding of our faith-experience."

As priests reflected on their identity, they expressed diametrically opposed sentiments towards Covid-19. These partly stemmed from the above-mentioned heightened self-reflections. All but one priest expressed positive sentiments towards the pandemic at some point. The single respondent (P40) who discussed the pandemic from an almost exclusively negative lens, still positively remarked that Covid-19 offered "a new way to face things. Families could return together."

¹⁶ For a more detailed exposition of quantitative data see, Matthew Pulis et al., "A Pastorally-Oriented Heart: The Maltese Catholic Priest during Covid-19," in *CONTOC International Volume*, eds. Thomas Schlag et al. (Zurich: Springer Nature, 2023).

The absolute majority of respondents exhibited positive sentiments towards Covid-19. Some respondents commented on the fact that times of crisis help to resuscitate values that had been ignored, while others commented on the fact that material things became less important. Sprouting from self-reflection, priests noted that the mass itself gained importance both personally and also communally. Specifically, P32 noted that he “had couples tell [him] that they paused the Mass after the homily and discussed it with their children, and then continued to follow the Mass until its end.” In sum, this positive sentiment finds its roots in a spiritual retrieval of Christian identity and values. P1 summarised this aptly: “COVID helps us to discern what is truly important in our pastoral work: fostering a relationship with Christ. We tend to focus way too much on sacraments in a vacuum and tend to forget fostering the journeying with Christ.”

Priests also battled loneliness which seems to have created “havoc” (P43) in them too. Perhaps the strongest cry came from P59 who recounted: “I was left on my own for three long months serving as priest amongst refugees, [migrants], solitary, elderly, beggars. It was psychologically stressful but humane and spiritual.”

Encouragingly, the use of digital tools lead to pastoral work (as with all quadrants) but it also stems from the priest’s self-reflection. A number of priests noted that a learning curve was needed in order for them to become accustomed to social media, even though in the quantitative data, they answered that on average they are somewhere between ‘average’ and ‘rather adept’ in digital communications ($M = 3.54, SD = 0.96$).¹⁷ Interestingly, one of the respondents noted that this was “a conversion” (P35) that he does not regret. Another respondent noted that it “has been a tremendous learning experience for both shepherd and sheep” (P16). The positivity with which they discussed the learning curve might indicate that resorting to digital tools was an act of resignation amidst a total loss of control, but possibly also an attempt at convincing oneself and others of one’s – and the Church’s – relevance in society. P41 captured this precisely: “This [Covid-19] is an opportunity to focus on what is more essential and to reach out to listen to others outside our usual groups.” Thus, the priest’s self-identity was here contextualised as being moulded by, and as unfolding within, a particular social group (a Catholic milieu) – one that is itself positioned

¹⁷ To the question ‘Are you personally rather adept or rather inexperienced in handling online-based communication?’, respondents’ overall mean was $M = 3.54, SD = 0.96$ ($N=69$). Split as ‘under 50s’ ($M = 3.77; SD = 0.96$) and ‘over 50s’ ($M = 3.34; SD = 0.94$), there were no significant differences between groups, $t(67) = 1.89, p = 0.06$. This question was scored as follows: 1 = very inexperienced, 2 = rather inexperienced, 3 = average, 4 = rather adept, 5 = very adept, 6 = don’t know. A significance level of 0.05 was used for all quantitative analyses.

within the broader landscape of social groups in diversified Malta. This reflects a more dialogical stance toward the other.

Sentiment towards Digital Tools

Linked to identity and self-reflection — but also distinct enough so as to merit their own organising theme were priests' sentiments toward digital tools. The data exhibited a stronger positive sentiment, among priests, towards the digital, when compared to the negative sentiment. Data suggest that the pandemic and its associated threats did lead, however, to more self-reflection. It seems to have been a learning curve for a number of priests, which further highlights a certain discrepancy between personal and communitarian discernment, but which indicates that the ideal of digital acculturation has not yet been lost.

Data from the quantitative section of the same survey suggest that the Maltese priest oscillates between undecidedness and seeing the digital in a somewhat positive light, when asked whether they are willing to continue using online services post-Covid-19.¹⁸ This feeling can be further supported in the qualitative data, where a number of respondents acknowledged the positive aspects of the online. This positive sentiment was perhaps best summed up by P17: “Digital technology can usefully mediate and accompany our relationships.”

Interestingly, respondents often discussed digital platforms in terms of tools, rather than as builders of culture. More so, despite the overwhelming positive outlooks exhibited in the data, priests promptly mentioned the problems associated with a pastoral approach that is exclusively online. These three quotes further assert our claims: “Today’s Church must exploit the use of digital communications so as to expand the parameters of its pastoral care” (P67); and more emphatically: “Though digital media and services are helpful and can be a good pastoral tool and so should be developed, it cannot replace the face-to-face pastoral work and liturgical celebrations” (P8; emphasis added), and “This leads me to believe that even when we get back to ‘normal’ (whatever that will be) we can look for ways in which we can offer - if not the Mass itself - then homilies and teachings (not necessarily by ordained clergy) online to help families keep up the spirit of discussing and breaking together the Word of God” (P31).

¹⁸ To the question, ‘Do you want to continue online services Post-Covid-19?’, respondents’ overall mean was $M = 3.45$, $SD = 1.12$ ($N=69$). Split as ‘under 50s’ ($M = 3.71$; $SD = 1.04$) and ‘over 50s’ ($M = 3.24$; $SD = 1.15$), there were no significant differences between groups, $t(67) = 1.78$, $p = 0.08$. This question was scored as follows: 1 = not at all, 2 = rather no, 3 = still unknown, 4 = rather yes, 5 = yes, absolutely.

In contrast, the negative sentiment towards digital tools was only shared by a small minority. Even so, while commenting on the negative implications of the digital, priests also teased out opportunities. P18 summarised best this cohort's sentiment: "Virtual means should only be resorted to in extreme cases, such as a pandemic, or complementing the 'normal' direct experiences in person."

Although in small numbers, some priests also discussed the ideas of spiritual communion and mass at home through the lens of digital tools, and generally, again, from a positive light. P17 noted that he thinks that the Church "during Covid-19 learnt what it means [sic] Spiritual Communion." Moreover, P31 "learnt that people (especially young families with young children, but also teenagers etc.) seem to relish the opportunity to follow the Mass from a comfortable and safe space like their home." P45 offered a lengthy description of how he attempted to share the mass with his community of elderly people in a retirement home, their relatives and his friends. The anguish with which he described the situation is palpable:

My biggest disappointment was in the fact that the staff tried to show my Mass through Facebook, but the quality of sound and vision was very poor. Some of my friends [abroad] even tried to follow me, over 50 at first, but they gave up since the reception was poor. I begged them to improve the quality, a better server, stronger WiFi, etc, but to no avail, leaving me very disappointed, to say the least.

Theological/Spiritual Work

This quadrant hinged on three notions that presented themselves repeatedly across the basic themes: evangelisation, the community's spiritual life, and sacraments. These three influenced how the pastoral theme 'One Church One Journey' is lived out.¹⁹ Interestingly, data suggest that notions related to evangelisation are often disconnected from themes related to the community's spiritual life and sacraments (see Figure 1). More so, the latter is the bridge through which the priest merges his psycho-social worker (see the fourth organising theme below) and theological identities. Evangelisation, spirituality and sacraments are now discussed in more detail, showing how the pastoral was represented as theological/spiritual work.

¹⁹ *One Church One Journey* is the official document for a "process for Ecclesial Renewal" in the Archdiocese of Malta. It is a hopeful vision of the Church and offers concrete steps for communitarian renewal. See Archdiocese of Malta, "One Church, One Journey" (Malta, 2020), <https://journey.church.mt/welcome/> (accessed on 1 June 2022).

In discussing evangelisation, priests opted to debate the role of the Church in the *polis*. In discussing the Church's economic response to Covid-19, priests noted that the increased engagement post-Covid-19 should be with individuals who have experienced unemployment. As Malta's economy was booming,²⁰ unemployment was on a sharp decline,²¹ but this changed with the onset of the pandemic, a fact which priests strongly commented on. Priests also noted that an ecological conversion is necessary in the Maltese ecclesial paradigm. In line with other research conducted by some of the authors,²² priests acknowledged that diaconal work should not merely involve helping out the poor; rather, diaconal work should also scientifically discern the root needs of people with different backgrounds. Priests also noted that "more time scrutinising Scripture" (P28) is necessary. More so, they suggested that the Word of God should not only be reflected upon but also lived. They also discussed the need for catechetical formation, to have "a deeper understanding of the Sacraments" (P19). It is interesting to point out that the basic themes discussing evangelisation were extremely sparse in the data corpus. That said, respondents who tackled the theme were clinical in their assessments, as exhibited by P50 who charged the Church with the task of being an outward looking church: "In the society we are living in, we cannot expect people to come to us. We have the onus of looking for those who are living a decent life."

The community's spiritual life was discussed by participants in terms of both prayer life and digital theology. In discussing prayer life, a small minority of priests commented that Covid-19 has unravelled an increased need in "personal prayer and encounter with the Living God who is Love" (P12).

In theologising the role of the digital in the spiritual life of the community, priests noted that the digital allows a "pooling of resources and talents" (P54), offers unfathomed pastoral opportunities, and enhances and facilitates communications, while allowing for "a deeper understanding and more extensive use of these modern technologies" (P67). Having discerned the opportunities of the digital, P31 is led to believe that:

²⁰ Mark Harwood, "From Euroscepticism to Euro-Enthusiasm: How Malta Weathered the Eurozone Crisis," *South European Society and Politics*, April 17, 2020, 1–22, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13608746.2020.1746542> (accessed on 1 June 2022).

²¹ Gabriel Busuttil, "An Econometric Analysis of the Dispersion in the Unemployment Rates in the EU" (University of Malta, 2019), <https://www.um.edu.mt/library/oar/handle/123456789/48016> (accessed on 1 June 2022).

²² Pulis et al., "A Pastorally-Oriented Heart."

Even when we got back to ‘normal’ (whatever that will be) we can look for ways in which we can offer - if not the Mass itself - then homilies and teachings (not necessarily by ordained clergy) online to help families keep up the spirit of discussing and breaking together the Word of God. Also, further reflection on how our Masses (in churches) can offer some kind of opportunity for group reflection and sharing.

Discussions of the Mass took a turn that is somewhat controversial in the local context: priests commented that Covid-19 challenged them to rethink the number of masses they celebrate: “Having many masses for production’s sake” (P19) and “celebrations with little or no pastoral fruit” (P20). Moreover, priests emphasised that the liturgy can neither be celebrated in a vacuum, nor be too rigid. Specifically, P1 noted that the local Church tends “to focus way too much on sacraments in a vacuum and tend to forget fostering the journeying with Christ.” Here, the pastoral and the liturgical emerged as the related processes of getting people back on the right track, in terms of a relationship with Christ.

On a related note, discussions of sacraments highlighted their role as bonding agents of the Christian community. That said, respondents warned that “Church liturgical services are important but personal contact is a must especially looking for those who are no longer churchgoers” (P50). Here, the non-church goer was represented as someone with whom dialogical engagement should also be supplemented by personal contact.

Psycho-Social Worker

The last quadrant is the one with the strongest support and focuses squarely on the priest’s role within the community. Discussions of community building were related in content to notions explored in the previous quadrant concerning the liturgical and communal role of the sacraments. Community building was also portrayed as the main playground of the pastor’s doing of priesthood. Priests highlighted the need to deepen personal faith *and* community building, and to do this through “forging real relations with each other” (P19). In fact, commenting on the pastoral role of the Maltese priest, P46 noted that “as pastors we have to continue building the Christian community.”

Personal contact was mentioned strongly here. Priests highlighted the importance of pastoral presence within and amongst their community, and some also hailed digital tools as an enhancement for such a presence. Others, such as P1, noted that when accompanying others on both human and spiritual journeys, it is important to have a “mixture between the analogue and the digital, especially in areas of one-to-one, where people may feel much more at ease to

open up their issues prior to moving for a more intimate face to face.” Specifically, P16 noted that the personal encounter is paramount “because persons matter.” Summarising his peers, P30 emphasised that “personal relationships remain essential in our engagements.”

This theme introduces the reader to an emerging concept in the local Church: the parish beyond space. Covid-19 has prompted a minor share of the respondents to begin reflecting about the possibility of their own community spanning beyond physical boundaries. Priests noted that this would be part of exercising the mission of an outward looking Church (see the organising theme ‘Theological/spiritual work’). Others also commented that the digital allows their parishioners, especially the youths, to remain part of their community, considering “the fact that many of them travel (for instance, for Erasmus programmes and similar) and often find themselves bereft of their faith community” (P31).

Priests strongly highlighted the need to invest in family ministry. They noted that the Church can only grow through smaller clusters of faith, primarily surrounding families or small community gatherings (P33). A strong majority noted that this ministry ought to have an increased engagement, while helping families to learn to pray and live together. This emphasis on family ministry, smaller community nodes and prayer, evinces an understanding of the pastor(al) as a facilitator of community building – one whose concerns with personal encounters (micro-level) and extending parishes beyond space (macro-level) merge into one.

Respondents noted with interest the loneliness and mental health issues which can ravage communities, and which were especially highlighted by Covid-19. It is evident in the data that the Maltese priest has a discerning eye to the psychological needs of his flock, and thus, respondents believe that this diaconal area should be given special importance. The issues mentioned were unemployment, depression, traumas, and isolation and loneliness. The latter achieved the highest level of mentions and priests highlighted the need to support “people [to] cope with the situation so as to avoid isolation and mental health issues” (P29). This pastoral attention is also backed by scientific data, since a recent study showed: (a) that 90% of the Maltese felt lonely during the pandemic; (b) an upsurge of almost 40% in severe or very severe loneliness for those under 19 years of age; and (c) a spike of 43% for those in the 20-24 age group.²³

²³ Marilyn Clark, Jamie Bonnici, and Andrew Azzopardi, “Loneliness in Malta: Findings from the First National Prevalence Study,” *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* 38, no.9 (September 2021): 2751–271, <https://doi.org/10.1177/02654075211020120> (accessed on 1 June 2022).

Another strongly mentioned notion concerned *diaconia* among the elderly and the disabled, and in relation to poverty. Priests noted that the digital offers new ways for how to integrate (using online means) elderly people, the homebound, and people with reduced mobility, with the rest of the (physical) community. Other priests noted that an increased engagement is needed in this area. In fact, P13 noted that “in a certain sense, this Covid-19 made our church more proactive and responded to people’s needs effectively and without bureaucratic delay. That’s the positive side of the situation.” Another respondent, P29, emphatically noted that “as a Roman Catholic, human support in all its various forms (youth work, care for the elderly, work with poor people etc.) forms as much part of being Church as any liturgical service.” Finally, priests also briefly and sporadically mentioned the need for an increased pastoral work with youths.

Discussion

From the data, two related patterns emerged: (a) five distinct definitions of what is understood by the word ‘pastoral’; and (b) an incongruence between the *being* and *doing* dimensions that were strongly highlighted in the thematic map. These are explored below, along with other reflections on the analysis presented above.

A Vague Dichotomy

The social dimension (right side) of this graph indicates that the tasks previously done by priests are now being professionally done by other licensed professionals, which raises questions not only of relevance but also of competence. More so, when one looks at how the themes were engaged with, one notices a great diversity around themes related to doing. In fact, one can outline a number of basic themes which form part of the general doing dimension: diaconal work, engaging the *polis*, meetings, family ministry, spiritual accompaniment, community building and psychological accompaniment. On the other hand, when discussing the *being* dimension, priests mostly spoke about pastoral presence – being present with the other (see Figure 1).

These two indications, when taken together, raise the question: has the perceived irrelevance of the priesthood by society made the priest’s task clearer: that is, the offering of spiritual and theological – rather than simply psychological and social – work? On the one hand, the emphasis on helping others and on building communities remains strong; on the other, these are not necessarily

spurred on by theological and spiritual motivations. Rather, priests could be motivated to help others or to seek social justice. Suffice it to note how different participants echoed pastoral concerns related with their psycho-social work. P29 highlighted this as follows:

From my part as a Roman Catholic, human support in all its various forms (youth work, care for the elderly, work with poor people etc.) forms as much part of being Church as any liturgical service.

Three Dimensions of the Pastoral

As priests discussed their views on how Covid-19 has affected their way of ministering, and as they discerned the emergence of a post-Covid-19 Church, three main patterns emerged: (a) how the priest lived his ministry online; and (b) whether his ministry is a profession (doing) or (c) a vocation (being). As evidenced in the data, at times the Maltese priest appreciates his pastoral identity through its enactment; at other times, the preference is clearly for *doing* rather than *being*.

Pastoral Identity Through Online Communication

As Covid-19 hit our shores, the Maltese priest tried his best to migrate his pastoral work digitally. This can also be confirmed in the quantitative part of the study, where a strongly positive perception of social media emerged. Qualitatively, this sentiment emerged as well. In fact, P4 described the digital as “the gift of communication,” while P35 stated that he is “one of the recently-converted to Facebook which [he does] not regret.” Furthermore, priests agreed that *diaconia*, spiritual accompaniment, and the extension of one’s presence benefitted from this migration to the digital. As many vulnerable persons became isolated, the extension of one’s presence was seen as a blessing. The fact that the digital, despite its limitations, allowed some type of ministering, was thus interpreted as a blessing. Hence, in general, one could discern a very positive sentiment among the priests, and this is perhaps best summarised by the following line: “during these times we have come to realise the great potential of our online presence notwithstanding the limitations” (P5). The intertwining of the pastoral self with the digital self, and their conceptualisation as ultimately inseparable (at least at present), presents the pastoral as a process/encounter that is interoperable across different platforms, both physical and virtual: what matters is pastoral presence and action.

Pastor as Enacting a Profession

In comparison to the priest living his vocation, this representation of the pastor garnered double the interest. Most data were organised around the organising theme ‘Psycho-Social’. Thus, in his reflections, the Maltese priest seemed to prefer discussing *who he is* through what he does. That said, these data suggest that the pandemic was a positive crisis for the priest since he realised that a chunk of his daily routine was essentially “faffing about” (P12). In fact, a majority response to the question concerning what became less important, was related to the present “need for life to be hectic and fast” (P8). Priests acknowledged that their daily routine was unsustainable and was often more focused on the performing – even at times the liturgy itself, without giving the necessary importance to the relationship with Christ.

In fact, priests highlighted how the priest is victim to day-to-day maintenance work, trivial issues, frenetic work, and mismanagement: a creeping bureaucratisation of the priesthood. Interestingly, a minority view discussed the number of masses “for production’s sake” (P19), indicating that priests realised that the liturgical “celebrations [were rendering] little or no pastoral fruit” (P20). Data further suggest priests realised that badly organised meetings were “wast[ing]” (P54) their time, and this has prompted the priest to look at digital tools to help them better organise their professional life. Having said that, P30 warned of the risk of easing a hectic lifestyle with digital tools: “I feel the more we complicate [our life] even with social media, the less we can see God’s work in our ministry.”

The realisation of this problem, and the wish to work more on their hectic lifestyles, suggest possible reasons as to why Maltese priests looked positively at Covid-19. The pandemic may have allowed them to reflect on their lifestyle, discern their relationship with God, and develop their talents. As per P50’s observation, the pandemic was a “challenging period but [it] rather gave me chances to experience and develop new talents. Also gave me a new sense of how to perceive the word community” (P50). Perhaps the best summary of how priests re-evaluated their work and transformed the hardships of the pandemic into a time of self- and spiritual-reflection would be P54’s:

As a minister, I found more time to read spiritual works I really wanted to delve into. I read hundreds of pages ... with no small profit! I missed liturgy in the Church, although I still was celebrated the liturgy (at times, more meaningfully) at home. I, sort of, pressed the reset button. I committed myself to re-organise my haphazard timetable and became more self-disciplined. Early to bed, early to rise ...I also found the time to appreciate literature, as well as spending more quality time with family members.

In essence, the above quote therefore positions the pastoral as that which involves laborious engagement and ancillary duties. Such duties used to consume time which became freed during the pandemic, allowing for other (presumably non-pastoral) activities and encounters.

Pastor as Living a Vocation

As Maltese priests discussed their pastoral vocation, three main notions emerged: spiritual life, accompaniment, and dealing with the daily hardships. These were reflected in several organising themes (and their constituent basic themes). Priests understood that they are to be primarily men of prayer, as summarised by P27: “(m)ore time scrutinising Scripture. More time for prayer and personal reflection.” In fact, as noted above, priests appreciated the fact that the pandemic forced them to slow down and make space for “personal prayer and encounter with the Living God who is Love” (P12).

Secondly, priests noted their accompanying role in the discipleship journey of others, with P30 highlighting how “personal relationships [remain] essential in our engagements.” Priests were very creative in finding ways to accompany others: phoning, processions with the Blessed Sacrament around the towns, hybrid rosaries in the different hamlets, communal prayer from balconies, and even a chaplain going around a retirement home whilst playing the flute to entertain the residents and share his artwork.

These vocational elements do not unfold in a psychological vacuum. That is, loneliness was also felt by the celibate priest, even though this was a minority view. The general sentiment expressed within this category can be summarised by P43’s poignant statement: “loneliness can create havoc in us too.” Moreover, one can also refer back to P59’s melancholic citation in caps lock presented earlier (see the organising theme ‘Priest identity/self-reflection’).

The picture that emerges is one which – contrary to the professionalisation of the pastoral – presents the priest as a solitary individual silently carrying out his vocational duties. The tensions between this third dimension of the pastoral and the preceding one is only apparent. Whether the pastoral is understood in vocational or laborious terms would probably fluctuate across different phases in one’s life: this ambivalence remains a matter for future research.

Forward Looking

The above three dimensions indicate the strong pastoral heart of the Maltese priest. While at times he may involve himself in a lot of work, which can or

cannot be considered as strictly ‘pastoral,’ the general sense is that he is interested in serving his ‘community’ and his ‘people.’ While at times he may engage in more work which should be better left to other professionals, data suggest that the priest does this out of his pastorally-oriented heart. In fact, times such as the pandemic help the priest close the gap of the dichotomy between *being* and *doing*, as stated by P11:

That we can find ourselves in circumstances never dreamt of, sometimes even surreal. But we in the families are to work even in dire circumstances and ask God to assist us and all those affected. I learned that what was undreamed of [sic] could be an opportunity to make us evaluate our mode of living and help us rediscover lost values, help us know that we are not self-sufficient, God is our all, that we can do away without superficial commodities, pleasures, that we need God.

The challenge is, therefore, twofold. The first part is to link spiritual and theological work with the self-reflection that has been done during this period. If in the latter there is an emphasis on rediscovering what is essential, in the former the essential is wished for. Accordingly, it follows that the Maltese Church needs to map out how to incentivise work that is rooted in a clearly defined Evangelical identity, simultaneously reconciling the vocational and professional commitments inherent in being and doing the pastoral.

The second part is to open the digital to the community. This wish seems to already be indicated by a few sporadic participants, with P1 suggesting that:

In a digital culture, we ought to have a mixture between the analogue and the digital, especially in areas of one-to-one, where people may feel much more at ease to open up their issues prior to moving for a more intimate face to face.

Only then is digital acculturation made possible. Data suggest that the Maltese priest has pastoral work at heart. Evidently, he is ready to embark on learning curves in order to be present amongst his flock. Yet, most of the respondents seem to have failed to acknowledge that digital culture is not merely using digital tools but, in a McLuhanian sense, the tools themselves define the culture. By extension, learning digital tools to enhance one’s pastoral presence and action does not simply make one a better pastor – it also changes the geography within which the pastoral itself unfolds, thus changing Church culture(s) accordingly.

Hence, we believe that priests, attuned to the Ecclesiological vision,²⁴ should be encouraged to invest their will to be present among their flock, and thus, as pastors, take the plunge into embracing digital culture and also be key players in

²⁴ Archdiocese of Malta, “One Church, One Journey.”

a culture in need of meaningful in-person encounters. By doing so, priests would truly *be present* and not simply do pastoral work. This would enable them to walk and accompany the human being across different realities, both interpersonally and in terms of different platforms.

On an academic level, we believe that follow-up research on the liminal space of the Maltese Catholic priesthood, is paramount. This research could take the form of an analysis of their discourse to study how priests live the apparent tension of doing and being. It may seem paradoxical to speak of the liminal space of the priesthood (perhaps the archetypal post-liminal role), but the tension between *being* and *doing* surely warrants investigating this further.

Ethics

The voluntary opt-in research was anonymised and as country correspondents we had access only to the Maltese aggregate details. Survey data was stored in a secured data centre at the University of Zurich which together with the University of Hannover) guaranteed the compliance with data protection guidelines in Switzerland and Germany. Data collection, storage, processing and evaluation was done in compliance with relevant data protection regulations, particularly: European DSGVO, the Federal Data Protection Act (BDSG), the Data Protection Act of the EKD (DSG-EKD) and relevant data protection laws of other countries and churches.

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