



# National Study of Catholic Priests: In-Depth Interview Questionnaire



# National Study of the Catholic Priesthood: Interview Protocol

## Version 3.9.22

*\*Note: Given the nature of qualitative research, interview questions will evolve modestly based on feedback from the field. Interviewers should generally follow this script (including prompts), but also probe for depth/clarity as the conversation unfolds in real time.*

### I. Consent to participate, record

*Email consent form in advance of the interview; confirm receipt.  
Request verbal consent to participate in the interview and record.*

### II. Introduction

Thank you again for agreeing to do this interview. Before we begin, I want to remind you that your participation is voluntary and that your answers are **totally confidential**. We won't share your name or identifying information about you. Please share your honest opinions. Also, you can skip any questions or end the interview at any time.

I'll be recording so that I don't miss things you say – is that okay? (***Begin recording***). Great, now I'm going to ask one more time just to get it on record: Is it okay to record? Thank you.

Getting started, I'll ask you about what your day-to-day life as a priest looks like these days. From there, I'll want to ask you some things about the “crisis” in the Church and how it has impacted you, your ministry, your diocese, your relationship with bishops, and the Church as a whole. Lastly, I'd love to hear your thoughts about the future. Sound good?

### III. Background and Professional Identity

Q<sup>1</sup>: Great. So, to start, can you tell me a bit about when/how you knew you wanted to be a priest?

P<sup>2</sup>: What is it about your personality, do you think, that led you into the priesthood?

Q: What does your life as a priest look like these days? For example, how does a typical week unfold for you?

P: Can you tell me what some of your favorite things are about being a priest (or, what makes for a “good day” in your life and work as a priest?)?

P: (Where) do you encounter beauty in your work as a priest?

P: What about the other side of the coin – least favorite thing(s) about being a priest, or what makes for a “bad” day?

Q: I'm curious – what do you think is the greatest challenge or problem that priests today face?

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<sup>1</sup> “Q” stands for Question.

<sup>2</sup> “P” stands for Prompt or Probe.

P: We are living in a “Covid” age – what has this meant for your work as a priest?

#### **IV. The Crisis – Origins and Personal Impacts**

Now, I want to talk to you about the “crisis” in the Church. [*+ Reminder of confidentiality and no “right” or “wrong” answers*]

Q: And, before I even ask you anything more specific about it – what comes to mind with that phrase, “crisis in the Church?”

P: Why does that come to mind?

Q: Thinking specifically about the crisis of clergy sexual abuse: In your own words, how has the crisis impacted you

P: ...personally / as a Catholic?

P: ...as a priest?

P: ...in your work as a priest?

Q: Do you think the crisis has changed how others see you as a priest? If so, how?

P: ...or how others see the priesthood, in general?

P: How do you feel about that?

Q: How hard is it to minister as a priest in the current climate of the Church?

P: Has the crisis changed your own behavior? How?

P: Has ‘burnout,’ fatigue, or exhaustion been an issue for you?

P: What about for other priests in your diocese/community (impacts/burnout)?

Q: Thinking about some of the roots of the crisis of abuse in the Church, some people talk about \_\_\_\_\_ [*probe, prompt as needed from list below if not already mentioned*]. What are your thoughts on that?

P1: “rotten apples” (just a few bad individuals)

P2: the culture of the priesthood (e.g., clericalism, a culture of silence, too much concern or reputation, “yes” men)

P3: some point to homosexuality as a cause, either among individual priests or gay subcultures

P4: policies: (e.g., poor psychological screening of priests, lack of transparency)

P5: structural issues: (e.g., mandatory celibacy; role of Vatican II)

P6: broader society: (e.g., secularization, promiscuity, pornography.)

P7: spiritual causes (e.g., devil, lack of prayer)

Q: Thinking about victims or survivors of abuse – can you tell me what kinds of interactions you have had with this group?

P: What do you think holds most promise for survivors’ healing vis-a-vis the Church?

#### **V. The Crisis – Diocesan Impacts**

Thank you so much for sharing. Now, I want to ask you some questions about your diocese [religious community] and relationship with your bishop [Major Superior].

Q: Let's start with a more general question. How would you describe the overall climate [culture] in your diocese at this time?

P: What issues are on the front-burner?

P: What is changing now in your diocese?

(P: priest shortage; alternative leadership models inc. women's roles; parish closures; supersized parishes)

Q: Thinking again about the crisis, what changes have transpired in your diocese as a result of the crisis (whether positive or negative)?

Q: I want to better understand your relationship with your bishop [Major Superior]. Can you tell me about a recent interaction you had with your bishop?

P: What made that interaction positive, negative, or neutral?

Q: Can you recall the last informal, perhaps social event you shared with your bishop? Tell me about it.

P: How often do informal, social events happen with your bishop?

P: Do you think your bishop enjoys spending time with priests?

P: Do you feel as though you could bring a personal problem to your bishop?

Q: What about other priests in your diocese/community – do you spend time together?

P: How would you describe the level of trust and camaraderie among priests in your diocese/community?

Q: How much would you say that you agree or disagree with your bishop on matters related to the Church or Church in the world?

P: Where have you disagreed?

P: How does your bishop handle disagreement (your own or that of others)?

Q: How much trust would you say that you have in your own bishop when it comes to managing the abuse crisis?

P: What about trust in your bishop when it comes to other matters, or overall?

P: (If applicable) How does your bishop's response to the crisis compare to that of prior bishop(s) in your diocese?

## **VI. The Crisis – Church Response**

That's really helpful, thank you. I'm also curious to hear more about what you think regarding the Church's response to the crisis.

Q: You've told me some about your own bishop...what about other bishops [including any former bishops]? Would you say that you trust them?

Q: How do you feel about the ways that the bishops overall have responded to the crisis of abuse in the Church?

P: What do you think has “worked” / been effective in the ways that bishops (individually or on the whole) have responded to the crisis?

P: What about what’s not worked – are there things you’d point to that have “failed” in responding to the crisis?

Q: I want to ask you more specifically about policies. For example, in 2002, the USCCB introduced its “zero-tolerance policy,” demanding permanent removal from ministry, and, in most cases, laicization, for a justified allegation of sexual abuse of a minor.

P: Can you tell me some of your own thoughts about this policy?

P: Do you agree with this approach, or not?

P: How effective (or how effectively implemented) do you think it is?

P: Do you know any priests who have been accused of abuse?

P: How do you think through concerns regarding credibility or degree of allegations?

Q: Are there any other policies that come to mind that you want to mention or react to?

(P: e.g., holding bishops accountable; extending concern to vulnerable and non-vulnerable adults; boundary violations; addressing child pornography; papal statements)

Q: Thinking about the financial pieces of this, can you tell me how you feel about abuse-related lawsuits or other financial fallout related to the crisis?

P: How has this impacted your diocese?

## **VII. Looking Ahead**

Thanks so much. We have one last section to go as we wrap things up. I’d love to hear some of your thoughts about the future – for you and for the Church.

Q: What do YOU think is needed in terms of a long-lasting, effective response to the crisis in the Church?

P: What role do priests play in this process, do you think?

Q: What will it take to restore trust between bishops and priests?

P: ...between Catholic laity and Catholic hierarchy?

Q: Is the crisis “over”?

P: Why or why not?

Q: Is there another “crisis” on the horizon? If so, what might it be?

Q: Back to you, personally -- what keeps you going?

P: What kind of support systems do you have in your personal and professional life?

P: What additional supports would you like to have?

Q: If you were to advise a young man considering the priesthood, what would you say/suggest?

P: What makes this path worthwhile (or not)?

### **VIII. Last Comments**

Okay. Thank you so much for all of that. We've reached the end of this interview. But...

Q: I recognize that I don't always ask the right questions. Is there anything I've missed? Do you have anything you'd like to add or clarify?

### **IX. Thank you!**

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