

Life and Death – Supporting priests in dealing with tough questions

Council for Life survey of Ethical Challenges in Pastoral work.

An interview with Dr Berry Kiely, a member of the Council for Life, who initiated the survey.

Q. Why did the Council for Life do this survey of priests?

A. A conversation I had with a parish priest was the spark that led to this. He told me of a dilemma he had as to how best to approach the homily at a funeral he was going to celebrate the following day. It was the funeral of a child who had been born with significant disability and when the child became very ill again the parents decided this time they would not allow the child to be ventilated. He was concerned the child had died because the parents refused treatment and felt conflicted in his dealings with the family. When I mentioned the important distinction between ordinary and extraordinary means of preserving life and the fact that from an ethical standpoint there is never an obligation to use extraordinary means it helped him view the parents' actions in a different light.

This experience led to a discussion at the next council meeting on the various ethical dilemmas that could present to a priest in the course of his normal work and what resources were available to him to help resolve these dilemmas.

As you know the council was established in 2019 and needed to establish its priorities and decide what issues to focus on. Life is such a broad concept going from the very beginning at conception to the very end, and everything in between. There were so many different ideas discussed at Council meetings that it was hard to decide where best to focus our limited time and energy so the idea arose of consulting priests themselves to find out how we could best be of use to them.

Q. How did you do the survey?

A. There are two bishops on the Council – Bishop Kevin Doran who is the chair of the Council and Bishop Martin Hayes – so we began by surveying the priests in their diocese – Elphin and Kilmore. The results were interesting so they spoke about it at the next meeting of the Bishops Conference and it was decided to offer it

to all bishops so they could extend it to their priests too. The survey is anonymous and easy to complete as a google form which was sent by email inviting anyone who wished to participate.

Q. What type of questions did you ask?

A. There were just 6 questions, four in tick box format. One question gave a list of life related issues that might crop up in pastoral work and respondents were asked to tick as many boxes as they found were relevant. The list included end of life decision making, preaching at funerals of suicide victims including assisted suicide end of life decision making, contraception, morning after pill, abortion, etc.

Another question asked how often you might be faced with an ethical challenge in pastoral care while the third question asked where you might turn for advice on ethical issues. This was of interest to us to see if there were sufficient resources already available as we didn't want to waste our time duplicating what might already be readily available to people. There were also two questions that allowed for a more discursive response about preaching and for further suggestions as to what might help in dealing with ethical challenges. Finally we asked about the main place of work of the respondent: parish, hospital or other and naturally the vast majority, 86%, were in parish work.

Q. What were the standout results?

A. One of the most striking things about the survey was the fact that 76% of respondents identified preaching at funerals of suicide victims as a challenge. This was also reflected in some of the discursive answers with comments like

- *Finding the right balance at a suicide funeral between maintaining Christian hope for the deceased while not wanting to make the afterlife seem an easy escape from this life;*
- *Funerals of people who caused great*

harm in life such as abusers.

- *Preaching at a suicide including a message that suicide is wrong on so many levels. Requires great sensitivity and diplomacy*
- *In the last year there was a person who died by assisted suicide in a clinic in Switzerland, was cremated there afterwards and then the ashes returned home for burial in a family plot. The family had a funeral Mass prior to the burial of ashes.*

This challenge of combining compassion with showing that our faith points to a better way of dealing with human suffering came up in different ways in the survey. For example, combining genuine compassion for the women faced with an unwanted pregnancy or a woman who has had an abortion already and clarity as to why abortion is not a good solution to a human dilemma is not an easy thing to do and do well. This was certainly the highest response, the next closest (48%) being end of life decision making. After that came issues related to pregnancy and abortion which was ticked by 44%. Others mentioned things like organ harvesting, relationship issues, pornography, and IVF but these were not so common.

Q. What else came out of the survey?

It would be hard to do justice to the richness and variety of the responses and observations in the discursive answers, but I will say a few things that struck me. One issue was a reluctance on the part of many respondents to deal with difficult issues especially in their preaching. While in many cases it may not be appropriate to do so, the point being made was that it would not be acceptable. I got the sense that priests felt people wanted a religion that was more like a comfort blanket than a real pillar of strength in their life.

There was also the question of language. The Church's teaching has not changed but it may be couched in language that no longer resonates with people so they cannot grasp what is

being said. For example, one respondent specifically asked

Give us a credible language to use in speaking of church teaching re homosexuality and transgender issues.

Another said

We need to find new and creative ways of naming and sharing Church content, in accessible language, with love and respect and clarity and courage.

A point that was frequently raised was the challenge of preaching to a congregation that includes many good people whose lives are at odds with elements of Church teaching. This may be due to a lack of knowledge of the Church’s teaching because of poor catechetical instruction or, indifference to it. There is a real challenge of doctrine and practice here to combine elements of deeper understanding of the message of Christ with encouragement to live it out in practice. One respondent made the point that there is a need for more contemporary witnesses of the lived reality of a Christian life.

Q. What will you do now that you have the information from this survey?

A. The replies from this survey are going to set the agenda for the work of the Council for Life over the next few years. At the moment a subcommittee of the Council is working on our website and many of the issues raised can be addressed there. Resources for preaching at funerals of suicide victims is one obvious example, another would be an FAQ section addressing some of the ethical issues raised – some respondents asked specifically for this. It could be that the Council for Life website would give brief easy to access answers and also link to other websites for a fuller treatment of the topic, for example, the Anscombe Bioethics Centre deal with all the ethical issues raised in considerable detail. It is a great resource, and we can make much more use of it.

But I’m jumping ahead. Firstly we as a Council need to digest the information the survey has provided us with and then work out a plan to support priests in dealing with the issues that are relevant to them. I think it is going to be a huge help to us and enable us to be of greater service as a Council which in turn will make the work of the Council more rewarding for everyone.

Dr Berry Kiely is a member of the Council for Life of the Conference of Irish Bishops. She is a retired Senior Medical Officer with the HSE. She is a medical advisor to the Pro-Life Campaign and a governor of the Anscombe Bioethics Centre.

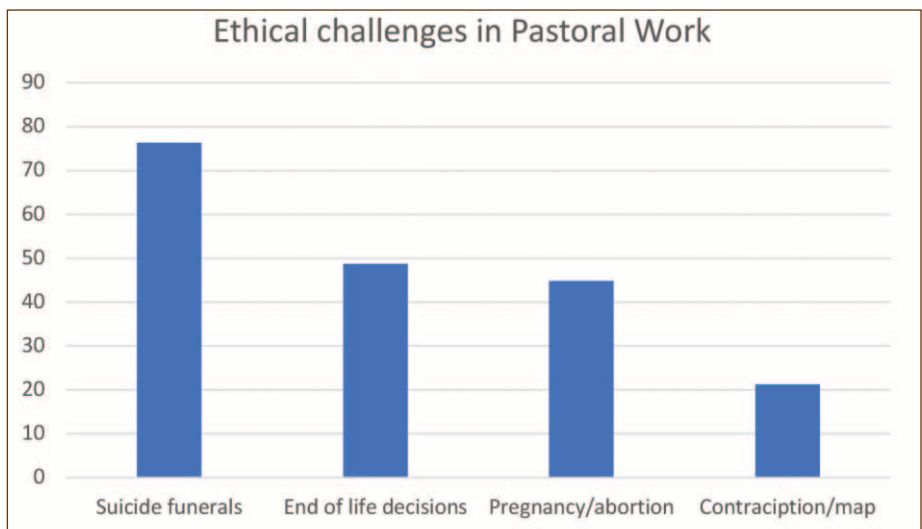
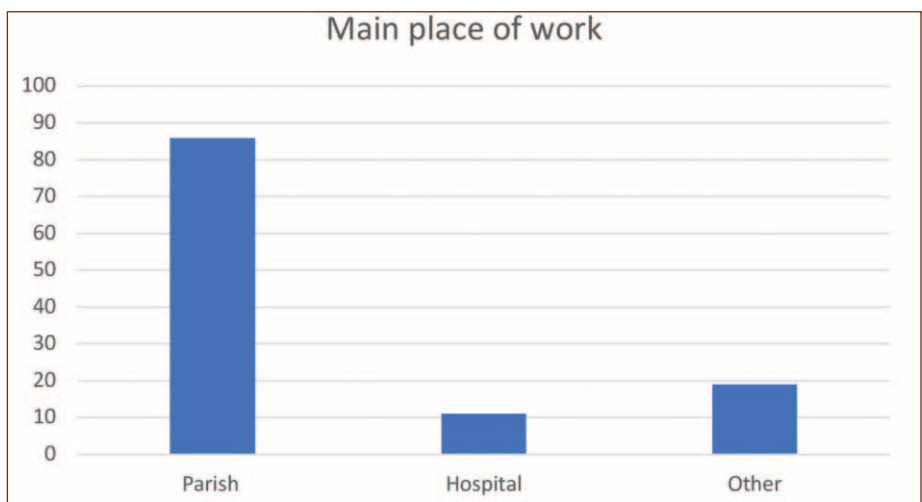
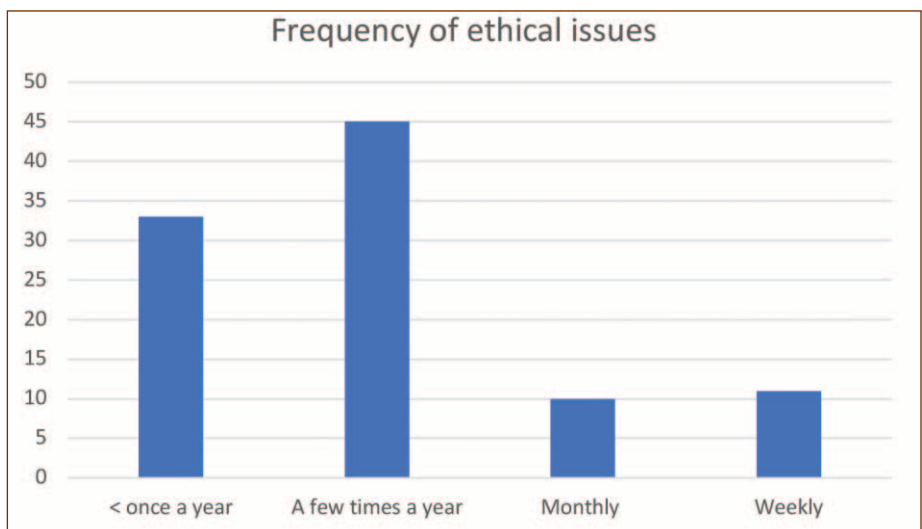


Table showing the % respondents who identified these challenges: respondents could report more than one issue.



% respondents in each place of work



Frequency of encountering ethical issues

The Council For Life is an initiative of the Irish Catholic Bishops’ Conference. This Council comes under the Commission for Pastoral Care

The objective of the Council for Life is to promote the Church’s teaching on the dignity and value of every human life from conception to natural end. The role of the Council is to advise and advocate for the Church in Ireland on a consistent ethic of life and care for those most at risk. The Council offers dioceses, parishes and members of the faithful pro-life material and resources to encourage discussion on the value of every human life.

Bishop Kevin Doran of Elphin is Chair of the Council for Life and is assisted by Bishop Martin Hayes. See www.councilforlife.ie for more information.