

Ecclesia domestica and the role of the home in sustaining churchgoing among Catholics:
An empirical enquiry among 8- to 14-year-olds in Australia

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Abstract

Catholic teaching since the time of the Second Vatican Council has emphasised the importance of the home in the nurture of young Catholics (sometimes referred to as *ecclesia domestica*). Drawing on data from 2,131 young people between the ages of 8 and 14 years who completed surveys while attending Catholic churches as part of the 2016 Australian National Church Life Survey, this study employed multiple regression modelling to examine the effects of parental church attendance (treating mother and fathers separately) and home environment (in terms of family encouragement and religious engagement within the home) on frequency of child church attendance. The data demonstrated that parental church attendance is the strongest predictor. Young Catholics are more likely to attend church frequently if both mother *and* father come to church a lot. Moreover, after taking parental church attendance into account the home environment adds additional predictive power. Young Catholics are most likely to attend church frequently if both parents attend church and support faith within the home environment through both family encouragement and religious engagement within the home. When parental churchgoing and home environment have been taken into account, the external factors of engaging with online religious resources and of attending a Catholic school add no further positive predictive power in sustaining churchgoing among young Catholics.

Keywords: Catholic, church attendance, young people, parental influence, Australia

Introduction

Many of the key documents emanating from the Catholic Church on Catholic education from and since the Second Vatican Council have stressed the collaboration of three core agencies: the local church, the local school, and the parents or family. Among these three agencies, primacy is placed in the hands of the parents, especially in those social contexts in which non-Catholic or secular influences are strong. There in the home parents shape *ecclesia domestica*, that is the ‘domestic church’, the ‘home church’ that every Catholic family home is called to be. For example, *Gravissimum Educationis* [Declaration on Christian Education] (Second Vatican Council, 1965, 3) argued that within this ‘domestic church’ parents are the primary educators in the faith. *Lumen Gentium* [Dogmatic constitution on the Church] (Second Vatican Council, 1964, 11) argued that the parents’ responsibility in the ‘domestic church’ is to be the first preachers of the faith to their children by their word and example.

Building on such foundations, Pope John Paul the Second (1979) wrote as follows in *Catechesi Tradendae* [On catechesis in our time]:

The family’s catechetical activity has a special character, which is in a sense irreplaceable. This special character has been rightly stressed by the Church, particularly by the Second Vatican Council. Education in the faith by parents, which should begin from the children’s tenderest age, is already being given when the members of a family help each other to grow in faith through the witness of their Christian lives, a witness that is often without words but which perseveres throughout a day-to-day life lived in accordance with the Gospel. (*Catechesi Tradendae* 68)

Two years later, Pope John Paul the Second (1981) wrote in even stronger terms in *Familiaris Consortio* [The role of the Christian family in the modern world]:

Hence, parents must be acknowledged as the first and foremost educators of their children. Their role as educators is so decisive that scarcely anything can compensate for their failure in it. The right and duty of parents to give education is essential.

(Familiaris Consortio 36)

This emphasis on the role of the family in Catholic education is also found in the *General Directory for Catechesis* published by the Congregation for the Clergy (1997):

Indeed, in the same way as the Church, the family ‘is a place in which the Gospel is transmitted and from which it extends’. The family as a locus of catechesis has a unique privilege: transmitting the Gospel by rooting it in the context of profound human values. On this human base, Christian initiation is more profound: the awakening of the sense of God; the first steps in prayer; education of the moral conscience; formation in the Christian sense of human love, understood as a reflection of the love of God the Father, the Creator. It is, indeed, a Christian education more witnessed to than taught, more occasional than systematic, more on-going and daily than structured into periods. *(General Directory for Catechesis 255)*

Church life surveys

The current family of Church Life Surveys offer churches an omnibus of surveys for church attenders (both adults and children) and leaders aimed to describe local church life and health. This model of evaluating local churches was designed in Australia in the early 1990s (Kaldor et. al, 1992) and was influential in framing the design and outputs from the 2001 International Congregational Life Survey (ICLS), which was conducted in Australia (NCLS), the UK (CLS-UK), New Zealand (CLS-NZ) and the USA (USCLS). Since then, further Church Life Surveys have been conducted in New Zealand (CLS-NZ), USA (USCLS), South Africa (SA-NCLS), and the Netherlands (NL-CLS).

Church Life Surveys may be able to play a role in testing the power of the *ecclesia domestica* to sustain church attendance among young Catholics. In the third wave of the Australian National Church Life Survey in 2001 (2001 NCLS) local churches were offered the option of a survey for young church attenders between the ages of 10 and 14 years. Congregations which took up 2001 NCLS Children's Survey were drawn from around half of all participating denominations, representing a good spectrum of Australian Protestant denominations and movements, including Pentecostal churches, evangelical denominations such as the Baptist Church, and older mainstream denominations such as the Uniting Church, the Lutheran Church, and the Anglican Church. Catholic parishes did not take up the option of the survey of young attenders in the 2001 NCLS (Bellamy, Mou, & Castle, 2005). The Protestant sample comprised 10,101 young people (54% female and 46% male). The issues covered in this survey included: patterns of church attendance; attitudes toward church services; Sunday schools, kids' clubs and youth groups; motivations for attendance; and matters of faith.

In their report on the findings from this survey, Bellamy, Mou, and Castle (2005) reported that the majority (82%) of Australian children in Protestant churches who participated in the children's survey 'always' or 'mostly' liked the church services that they attended and 88% 'always or mostly' liked the children's activities that they attended. The level of importance that children themselves placed on God, on Jesus, and on their spiritual lives was positively related to the frequency with which they attended church, to whether they like going to church, and to the predisposition that they had towards dropping out of church. The report also showed that parents have a central role in the development of faith. The practice of family prayer times, the encouragement of a personal devotional life for children, and parents simply being prepared to talk with their children about faith are all

aspects that are positively related to higher levels of belief and a more positive attitude toward and involvement in church life.

The 2001 CLS-UK (also referred to as the Church Life Profile) was designed for use in England under the management of Churches Information for Mission (2001), and since some of the participating denominations in England operated in Scotland and Wales as well, congregational participation also extended to these countries. The Catholic Church was not one of the participating denominations. This 2001 project included, alongside the main Attender Survey designed for completion by churchgoers aged 15 years and older, a survey for completion by young churchgoers between the ages of 8 and 14 years.

A strength of the survey used among young churchgoers in England was that it included measures of attitude toward church and indicators of appreciation of components of church services. A weakness, however, was that the survey did not include a measure of frequency of attendance. Other measures included in the survey concerned belief in God, frequency of personal prayer, experiencing closeness to God, peer group support, and (of crucial importance) three core questions concerning the involvement of parents. The first question, 'Do your parents often come to this church?', was followed by four options: yes, mum and dad both come; yes, dad does; yes, mum does; no. The second question, 'How often do you pray with your family?', was followed by four options: a few times a week or more often; once a week; not very often; never. The third question, 'Do you ever talk with your parents about God?', was followed by four options: often; sometimes; hardly ever; never. The sample comprised 10,153 young people (60% female and 40% male).

In their report on the data generated from these young churchgoers between the ages of 8 and 14 years, Francis and Craig (2006) drew five main conclusions. First, the majority of the young people who continued to attend church felt positively about church. They felt that they belonged to their local church. They felt safe and they felt happy there. At the same

time, one in four of the young people who attended church (26%) were bored by their experience of churchgoing. Second, throughout the age range, girls held a more positive attitude toward church than was the case among boys, confirming the sex difference long reported within the literature on the social scientific study of religion (see Argyle, 1958; Francis & Penny, 2014). Third, looking closely at the shifts across the age range from 8 to 14 years two main observations emerged. After the age of 10 there was a significant decline in the number of young people attending. Even among the young people who remained churchgoers, attitude toward church became progressively less positive from the age of 8 to the age of 14 years.

Fourth, the data drew attention to the types of worship services most clearly associated with the development and maintenance of a positive attitude toward church between the ages of 8 and 14 years. Two key features emerged from the data as being of particular significance. The first feature is that young people do not like being separated out from the rest of the local church to be catered for by services designed especially or exclusively for young people. A more positive attitude toward church is maintained by being part of 'all-age' or 'whole family' forms of service. The second feature is that young people do not like being kept exclusively within the context of the adult-orientated service. The needs of the young people between the ages of 8 and 14 years seem best served by services designed for all-age worship but which also make special provision for some age-related activities for the young participants.

Fifth, the data drew attention to the influence of peers and parents on the development and maintenance of a positive attitude toward church among young churchgoers. Two important points are highlighted by the data. The first point is that having friends attending the same church is really important to young people. The second point is that parents play a crucial role through what they do and what they model outside their pattern of church

attendance. The maintenance of a positive attitude toward church between the ages of 8 and 14 years is associated with having parents who support the faith in conversation and by example at home.

Designed in light of experience from analysing data drawn from the earlier surveys in 2001, and consultation with Australian children and family ministry workers, the 2011 Australian National Church Life Survey (2011 NCLS) included the option of a new variant of the Children's Survey for use among churchgoers between the ages of 8 and 14 years. This survey included measures of frequency of church attendance, attitude toward church assessed by a modified form of the instrument proposed by Francis and Craig (2006), attitude toward Christianity assessed by a modified form of the short-form of the Francis Scale of Attitude toward Christianity documented by Francis, Greer, and Gibson (1991) and Francis, Lewis, Philipchalk, Lester, and Brown (1995), and crucially measures of parental influence and of peer influence. Parental influence was assessed by three questions: Parental religious practice was assessed by the question, 'Do your parents come to church a lot?', rated by the following four responses: yes, mum and dad come a lot; yes, only mum does; yes, only dad does; no. Parental encouragement was assessed by the question, 'Do you ever talk to your family about God?', rated on a four-point scale: often, sometimes, hardly ever, never. Parental pressure was assessed by the question, 'Do you go to church because your parents want you to go?', rated on a three-point scale: yes; mostly; yes, partly; no. Peer influence was assessed by two questions. The first question asked, 'Do you have any close friends here at church?', rated on a four-point scale: yes, lots, more than 10; yes, between three and 10 friends; yes, one or two; no, none at all. The second question asked, 'Do you go to church because you want to be with your friends?', rated on a three-point scale: yes, mostly; yes, partly; no. The sample comprised 9,631 young people (52% female and 48% male) from a spread of congregations from the Anglican Church (16%); Baptist/Churches of Christ (14%), Catholic Church (49%),

Lutheran Church (2%), Pentecostal churches (4%) Uniting Church (8%) and other Protestant churches (6%) (Hancock & Powell, 2015).

Francis, Penny, and Powell (2018) drew on these data from the 2011 NCLS to test two hypotheses advanced in the light of previous research. The first hypothesis was that parental influence will be stronger on young people's religious behaviour (frequency of church attendance) than on their religious attitudes (attitude toward church and attitude toward Christianity). The second hypothesis was that peer influence will be stronger on younger people's attitudes than on their behaviour. The basic correlation matrices published by Francis, Penny, and Powell (2018) seemed to support both hypotheses. The correlations between parental attendance and frequency of their children's attendance were stronger than the correlations between parental attendance and their children's attitudes. At the same time, the correlations between having close friends at church and attitudes were stronger than the correlation between having close friends at church and frequency of attendance. The correlation matrix, however, also suggested that matters are more complex than this, and this complexity was clarified by the regression models.

The regression models demonstrated that parental influence needs to be conceptualised more widely than simply through indicators of frequency of church attendance. The analysis confirmed the primary importance of parental church attendance, but indicated that the influence of their attendance was enhanced by parental encouragement as reflected in opportunities for parents and children to talk about God. There was also some warning that perceived parental pressure to attend church may be counterproductive and reduce child frequency of attendance. At the same time, there was a small indication that having close friends at church can be important too.

With regard to the religious attitudes of young churchgoers, the regression models indicated that parental practice was overshadowed by parental approaches to nurturing the

faith of their children. Parental encouragement, in the sense of offering opportunities to talk about God, was the key positive factor influencing positive attitudes. Parental pressure, in the sense of having children go to church not because they themselves want to go but because their parents want them to go, was the key negative factor influencing negative attitudes. Having friends at church also exerted a greater influence on promoting positive attitudes than on promoting frequent attendance.

Drawing on Australian NCLS data from Baptist churches in 2011 and 2016, a series of studies have been conducted based on Baptist child churchgoers. The 2011 results were used to provide an overview of the age, sex, attitudes and behaviours of Baptist churchgoers aged 8- to 14 year old (Hancock & Pepper, 2015), and results from the 2016 Children's Survey were incorporated into a generational analysis of various aspects of church health and vitality including generational participation and ministry priorities (Cronshaw 2019a; Powell, 2018) and formation, belonging and mission (Cronshaw, 2019b).

Although none of the three Church Life Survey studies in England in 2001 or in Australia in 2001 and 2011 focus specifically on young Catholics, two other recent studies in England, Scotland and Wales and in the Republic of Ireland have reported on the impact of parental example on sustaining churchgoing among young Catholics. Both surveys have drawn on data collected in schools among students aged between 13 and 15 years. Both surveys included the same five core variables. Religious affiliation of students, mothers and fathers was assessed by the questions 'What is your religion?', 'What is your father's religion?', 'What is your mother's religion?', followed by a checklist that included the option 'Catholic'. Church attendance of students, mothers and fathers was assessed by three questions 'Apart from special occasions (like weddings), how often do you/does your mother/does your father attend religious services (e.g. at church, mosque, or synagogue)?' followed by the options: never, at least once a year, sometimes, at least six times a year, at

least once a month, nearly every week, and several times a week. Parental religious identity and support was assessed separately for mother and for father by three questions: my mother/father identifies as Catholic; religious identity is important to my mother/father; I often talk about religion with my mother/father. Peer support was assessed by three questions: I have friends who are Christians; I often talk about religion with my friends; most of my friends think religion is important. Each of these items was rated on a five-point Likert scale: agree strongly, agree, not certain, disagree, and disagree strongly. Personality was assessed by the abbreviated form of the Junior Eysenck Personality Questionnaire Revised (JEPQR-A: Francis, 1996). This instrument proposes three six-item measures of extraversion, neuroticism and psychoticism. Each item was assessed on a dichotomous scale: yes and no.

The first of the two studies, reported by Francis and Casson (2019), employed data from 2,146 students who self-identified as Catholic from among 9,810 participants to a survey conducted in England, Scotland, and Wales. The second of these two studies, reported by Byrne, Francis, Sweetman, and McKenna (2019), employed data from 1,942 students who self-identified as Catholic from among 3,000 participants to a survey conducted in the Republic of Ireland. In both studies multiple regression analyses were employed to assess the predictive power of five sets of factors: personal factors (sex and age), psychological factors (psychoticism, neuroticism, and extraversion), parental religious identity (treating mothers and fathers separately), parental religious practice, and peer-related practice. The data suggested that young Catholics who practise their Catholic identity by attending church do so largely because their parents are Catholic churchgoers. Moreover, young Catholics are most likely to keep going if both mother *and* father are Catholic churchgoers, and if they discuss faith with their mother. Peer-related factors and psychological factors added little additional predictive power to the model.

Research question

Against this background, the aim of the present study is to draw on data provided by the children's survey included in the 2016 Australian National Church Life Survey to build on the earlier analyses reported by Bellamy, Mou, and Castle (2005), Francis and Craig (2006), and Francis, Penny, and Powell (2018) to shape the measures available within these data to explore the family-related factors that may sustain young churchgoers. Drawing on the analyses reported by Francis and Casson (2019) and Byrne, Francis, Sweetman, and McKenna (2019), the present study focuses attention specifically on the experiences of young people attending Catholic churches. The strength of the survey among young churchgoing Catholics completed in 2016 is that it includes the following suite of questions: frequency of child church attendance; parental church attendance; a four-item measure of family encouragement; and a nine-item measure of religious engagement within the home. The survey also includes an indication of attending a Catholic school, and an index of online engagement with religious resources. The availability of these measures enable the following research questions to be posed within the environment of multiple regression analysis, and relevant to the overall research problem of identifying the effectiveness of the *ecclesia domestica* and the role of the home in sustaining young churchgoing Catholics in Australia.

- Research question one: What are the effects of personal factors (sex and age) on frequency of church attendance among 8- to 14-year-old churchgoing Catholics?
- Research question two: Taking personal factors into account, what is the additional effect of parental church attendance (church attendance of mother and father considered separately) on frequency of church attendance among 8- to 14-year-old churchgoing Catholics?
- Research question three: Taking both personal factors and parental church attendance into account, what is the additional effect of home environment (family encouragement

and religious engagement within the home) on frequency of church attendance among 8- to 14-year-old churchgoing Catholics?

- Research question four: Taking personal factors, parental church attendance, and home environment (family encouragement and religious engagement within the home) into account, what is the additional effect of external factors (online engagement with religious resources and attending a Catholic school) on frequency of church attendance among 8- to 14-year-old churchgoing Catholics?

Method

Procedure

The Australian National Church Life Survey is now a well-established instrument for assessing congregational opinions and attitudes across a wide range of Christian denominations. Surveys have been conducted in 1991, 1996, 2001, 2006, 2011 and 2016, and the findings have been widely disseminated (Kaldor, Bellamy, Correy, & Powell, 1992; Kaldor, Bellamy, Moore, Powell, Castle, & Correy, 1995; Kaldor, Bellamy, Powell, Castle, & Hughes, 1999; Kaldor, Bellamy, Powell, Hughes, & Castle, 1997; Kaldor, Dixon, Powell, Bellamy, Hughes, Moore, & Dalziel, 1999; Bellamy, Cussen, Sterland, Castle, Powell, & Kaldor, 2006; Kaldor & McLean, 2009; Powell, Bellamy, Sterland, Jacka, Pepper, & Brady, 2012; Pepper, Sterland, & Powell, 2015; Pepper, Powell, Sterland, & Hancock, 2018). The 2016 National Church Life Survey included a special questionnaire styled ‘Children’s survey for 8 to 14 year olds’. Participating congregations were invited to distribute these questionnaires among young people within the target age group attending either ‘church groups for children and youth’ or ‘church worship services or mass’. Young participants were assured of privacy, confidentiality and anonymity.

Participants

The present analyses were conducted on data provided by the young people who completed the survey at Catholic churches. Of the 2,131 participants, 1,065 were male, 1,053 were female, and 13 did not disclose. In terms of age, 316 were aged 8 years, 323 were 9 years, 349 were 10 years, 330 were 11 years, 320 were 12 years, 237 were 13 years, 221 were 14 years, and 35 did not disclose. In terms of schooling, 1,482 of the 2,131 participants reported on attending a Catholic school.

Measures

In addition to sex and age, the following data from the survey are used in the analyses.

Frequency of church services or mass attendance was assessed on a four-point scale: hardly ever or never (1), some weeks (2), most weeks (3), and every week (4).

Parental church attendance was assessed by the question ‘Do your parents come to church a lot?’ rated for mother and father separately: no (0), and yes (1).

Family encouragement was assessed by a four-item scale concerning the frequency of ‘anyone in your family’ engaging in the following activities: have discussion with you about God or the Christian faith; read the Bible or pray; ask you what you have learned about at church; talk with you about doubts or worries about Christian faith? Each item was rated on a three-point scale: never (1), sometimes (2), and often (3).

Religious engagement was assessed by a nine-item scale concerning the frequency of religious activities that may reflect religious engagement at home: pray on your own; read the Bible on your own; say thank you to God or Jesus; say sorry to God or Jesus; ask God or Jesus to help others; ask God or Jesus to make the world better; talk to your school friends about God or Jesus; read Christian stories or books; listen to Christian music (outside church). Each item was rated on a three-point scale: never (1), sometimes (2), and often (3).

Religion accessed online was assessed by a checklist of five items preceded by the question ‘In the last month, have you used your computer, tablet or phone to do any of these

things?’ The five things were: read the Bible on a screen; listen to people talk about God or Jesus (e.g. podcast); listen to Christian music; watch videos about God or Jesus; connect with others from this church (e.g. on Facebook). The score, ranging from 0 to 5 comprised the number of activities endorsed.

Catholic schooling. Participants were invited to identify ‘what sort of school do you go to?’ from the following list: a public/state school; a Catholic school; an Anglican, Lutheran or Uniting Church school; another Christian school or church school; other independent school (e.g. Steiner, Montessori); home school.

Data analysis

The data were analysed by the SPSS package, using the frequency, reliability, correlation, and regression routines.

Results and discussion

- insert tables 1 and 2 about here -

The first step in data analysis explores the overall responses of the 2,131 8- to 14-year-old participants who completed the NCLS Children’s Survey within Catholic churches as part of the 2016 National Church Life Survey. Table 1 presents the self-reported frequency of church or mass attendance among these young participants: over half of them attended every week (54%) and over three quarters attended at least most weeks (79%). Clearly the majority of young people attending Catholic churches are committed to regular practice. Nonetheless, this leaves more than one in five young participants (22%) who stand more on the margins of church life. This account of frequency of church or mass attendance needs to be read alongside the age profile of the participants (as reported earlier). There were considerably fewer 13- and 14-year-olds among the participants than those aged from 8 to 12 years of age.

Table 2 presents the assessment of the young participants concerning the extent to which their parents could be said to ‘come to church a lot’. These data show that 81% of the young people were supported in church attendance by their mother and 62% were supported by their father, with 56% being supported by both parents. When only one parent attended it was much more likely to be mother (25%) than father (6%). This left 12% of the young participants in Catholic churches who felt that neither of their parents came to church a lot.

- insert table 3 about here -

In order to assess the influence of family beyond the example of church attendance, the survey included the newly constructed four-item Scale of Family Encouragement. The psychometric properties of this instrument are presented in table 3 in terms of the alpha coefficient (Cronbach, 1951), the correlations between the individual items and the sum of the other three items, and the percentage of participants endorsing the ‘often’ response. These data demonstrate that the four-item scale records good internal consistency reliability. Around half of the young participants reported that someone in their family often prayed or read the Bible (48%) and over a quarter reported that someone in their family often had discussions with them about God or Christian faith (28%). The proportions fell to 19% who reported that someone in their family often asked them what they had learned about at church, and to 15% who reported that someone in their family often talks with them about doubts or worries about Christian faith. These statistics demonstrate that families may be more comfortable engaging in religious ritual (like prayer) with their children than engaging in conversation about the faith.

- insert table 4 about here -

In order to assess the influence of religious engagement at home, the survey included the newly constructed nine-item Scale of Religious Engagement. The psychometric properties of this instrument are presented in table 4 in terms of the alpha coefficient

(Cronbach, 1951), the correlation between the individual items and the sum of the other eight items, and the percentage of participants endorsing the ‘often response’. The data demonstrate that the nine-item scale records good internal consistency reliability. At least half of the young participants often say thank you to God or Jesus (59%), often ask God or Jesus to help others (52%), and often say sorry to God or Jesus (50%). At least two fifths of the young participants often ask God or Jesus to make the world a better place (43%), and often pray on their own (40%). The proportions drop to 24% who often read Christian stories or books, to 17% who often listen to Christian music (outside church), to 13% who read the Bible on their own, and to 12% who talk to their school friends about God or Jesus.

- insert table 5 about here -

In order to assess the influence of online religious activities, the survey included a checklist of five items, preceded by the question, ‘In the last month, have you used your computer, tablet or phone to do any of these things?’ The data presented in table 5 demonstrate that at least one in five of the young participants had in the last month used such devices to watch videos about God or Jesus (30%), to listen to Christian music (25%), or to read the Bible on a screen (20%). The proportions drop to 16% who had listened to people talk about God or Jesus (e.g. podcast), and to 12% who had connected with other members of their church.

- insert table 6 about here -

The second step in data analysis explores the bivariate correlations among the core variables: sex, age, church attendance, mother’s church attendance, father’s church attendance, family encouragement, religious engagement, online activities, and Catholic schooling. Five main features of the data presented in table 6 merit discussion. In view of the sample size only correlations reaching the one percent level of probability will be interpreted as significant. First, in terms of significant sex differences, girls were more inclined than boys

to engage with religious activities and to access religious resources online. Second, in terms of significant age differences, older children are likely to report more frequent attendance but less engagement with religious activities. This finding has to be interpreted in association with the smaller number of older children (aged 13 and 14 years) being present in church to complete the survey. The implication is that some less frequent attenders may have ceased to attend at all after the age of 12 years. Third, in terms of parental church attendance, there are significant positive correlations between the attendance of mother or father and child church attendance, family encouragement, religious engagement, and online religious activities. Fourth, in terms of family encouragement, there are significant positive correlations between family encouragement and both religious engagement and online religious activities. Fifth, in terms of schooling, attendance at a Catholic school is significantly positively correlated with online religious activity and significantly negatively correlated with frequency of church attendance.

- insert table 7 about here -

The third step in data analysis employs multiple regression to explore the incremental effects of personal factors (sex and age), parental example (mother and father), home environment (parental encouragement and religious engagement), and external factors (online activities and attending a Catholic school) on frequency of child church attendance. Table 7 presents the way in which these four sets of factors have been entered sequentially into the regression model. The table also draws together the bivariate correlations from table 6 to be read alongside the beta weights. The increases in the proportion of variance accounted for by each of the four steps in this model indicate that by far the most significant predictor of sustaining church attendance among young Catholics is parental church attendance, but that what happens in the *home* in terms of family encouragement and religious engagement adds significantly to the effect of parental example. Close examination of the beta weights in the

fourth step of the regression model confirms the following observations. First, the parental example of mother's church attendance and of father's church attendance are of primary importance. The attendance of both mother and father makes an independent contribution, and the effect is greater when both parents attend. Second, what goes on in the home environment adds further predictive power after taking into account parental church attendance. Family encouragement and engagement with religious activities within the home both make an independent contribution to sustain church attendance among young Catholics, and the effect is greater when both are present in the home environment. Third, within this model sex carries no predictive power, and age continues to be associated with higher frequency of attendance. The young Catholics who persist with church attendance as they reach the teenage years are those who are engaged in frequent attendance. Fourth, when parental example and home environment have been taken into account, external factors seem to have no significant effect as sustaining church attendance among young Catholics. Neither online engagement with religious resources nor attendance at Catholic schools seems to add further predictive power to the model.

Conclusion

Drawing on data from the children's survey included within the 2016 Australian National Church Life Survey the present study was designed to address the overall research problem of identifying the effectiveness of the *ecclesia domestica* and the role of the home in sustaining churchgoing Catholics within Australia, as far as possible within the constraints of the variables available within these data. The dependent variable conceptualised frequency of church attendance on a four-point scale: hardly ever or never, some weeks, most weeks, and every week. *Ecclesia domestica* or the role of the home was operationalised by three core measures: a four-item scale of family encouragement, a nine-item scale of religious engagement, and an assessment of mother's and father's church attendance. Other relevant

measures included an index of online accessing of religious resources, and an indication of whether or not the child was attending a Catholic school. The availability of these variables facilitated the research problem being conceptualised in terms of a regression model involving four steps. Each of the four steps addressed a distinct research question within a progressive sequence.

The first research question was: What are the effects of personal factors (sex and age) on frequency of church attendance among 8- to 14-year-old churchgoing Catholics? Addressing this question needs to be contextualised within information about the sample. In terms of sex, there was a close match between 1,053 girls and 1,065 boys. This finding is not dissimilar from the 54% female reported for the 2001 NCLS (Bellamy, Mou, & Castle, 2005) and the 52% female reported for the 2011 NCLS (Hancock & Powell, 2015). This finding contrasts with experience in England and Wales, where child church attendance reflects adult church attendance, with a higher proportion of females. For example, for the 2001 English Church Life Survey, Francis and Craig (2006) reported 60% female. Moreover, the present study found no significant correlation between sex and frequency of attendance. In terms of age the composition of the sample shows roughly equal numbers of young churchgoers aged 8, 9, 10, 11, and 12, but with numbers dropping after the age of 12. This finding, too, contrasts with experience in England and Wales where there is an earlier exodus of young people from church attendance (see Francis & Lankshear, 1991; Francis & Craig, 2006). Moreover, there is a small but significant positive correlation between age and frequency of church attendance, suggesting that the 13- and 14-year-old Catholics who have not by that stage dropped out of church, maintain a higher frequency of attendance.

The second research question was: Taking personal factors into account, what is the additional effect of parental church attendance (church attendance of mother and father considered separately) on frequency of church attendance among 8- to 14-year-old

churchgoing Catholics? The bivariate correlation coefficients indicate correlations between mother's and father's church attendance, between mother's church attendance and child church attendance, and between father's church attendance and child church attendance. The beta weights clarify the association by confirming the independent effect of both mother's attendance and father's attendance on child attendance. Young Catholic churchgoers are most likely to keep going if both mother *and* father are churchgoers. This finding is highly consistent across different studies (see, for example, Francis & Casson, 2019; Byrne, Francis, Sweetman, & McKenna, 2019). Moreover, within the regression model parental church attendance accounts for the largest proportion of variance explained by the model.

The third research question was: Taking both personal factors and parental church attendance into account, what is the additional effect of home environment (family encouragement and religious engagement) on frequency of church attendance among 8- to 14-year-old churchgoing Catholics? This research question was made possible by the inclusion of the two measures of family encouragement and religious engagement within the home in the 2016 survey as a way of accessing aspects of the *ecclesia domestica*. The regression models confirm that additional variance is explained by the inclusion of these two variables. Moreover, the beta weights demonstrate that both variables exercise a unique effect on frequency of child church attendance. Young Catholic churchgoers are most likely to keep going if they are supported within the *ecclesia domestica* both by parental encouragement and by engaging in religious activities that may both nurture and help to sustain churchgoing among young Catholics.

The fourth research question was: Taking personal factors, parental church attendance, and home environment into account, what is the additional effect of external factors (online engagement with religious resources and attending Catholic schools) on frequency of church attendance among 8- to 14-year-old churchgoing Catholics. The

bivariate correlation coefficients indicate both a small positive association between frequency of church attendance and engagement within online religious resources, and a small negative association between frequency of church attendance and attendance at a Catholic school. The regression model, however, suggests that these apparent associations may be artefacts of other effects within the model. When the effect of family encouragement and religious engagement within the home as expressions of the *ecclesia domestica* is within the model, these two external factors lose significance.

By way of summary, these data provide some empirical support for the effective contribution not only of parental churchgoing, but additionally of family encouragement and religious engagement within the home as expressions the *ecclesia domestica* in sustaining young churchgoing Catholics. This conclusion may have implications for the design of future church life surveys among young churchgoers, and, in the case of the specific study, for the catechetical practices of the Catholic Church.

In terms of the design of future church life surveys for use among young churchgoers, the present study has drawn attention to the value of including adequate measures of parental attendance and of the wider contribution made by the home and family. The quantity and quality of the measures employed in the present analysis were quite limiting. Future studies could be enhanced by including more precise measures of the frequency of parental attendance, considering mothers and fathers separately, and by extending both the number and precision of the items included within the scales of family encouragement and religious engagement within the home. Further consideration could also be given to conceptualising and operationalising other characteristics of the *ecclesia domestica*.

In terms of enhancing the catechetical practices of the Catholic Church, the implication of these findings underline the importance of continuing to invest in the education and formation of Catholic parents in order to enable them, in turn, to nurture the

Christian formation of their children. This challenge to the Catholic Church is part of the wider challenge facing a number of Christian Churches, which is to encourage parents to embrace the primacy of their role as the religious educators of their children both implicitly through their day-to-day living and explicitly through direct engagement with nurturing and sustaining the faith of the Church. This equipping of lay Christian parents and other lay adults takes place in the context of increasingly secular and religiously diverse societies. Such strategic investment by Churches may be fruitful in retaining and developing the church involvement of parents of young children and in enhancing the transmission of faith among their children.

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Table 1

Frequency of church/mass attendance

	%
Hardly ever / never	5
Some weeks	17
Most weeks	25
Every week	54

Table 2

Parents come to church a lot

	%
Mother and father	56
Only mother	25
Only father	6
Total mother	81
Total father	62
Neither parent	12

Table 3

Scale of Family Encouragement

	<i>r</i>	Often %
<i>Does anyone in your family do the following things?</i>		
Read the Bible or pray	.44	48
Have discussions with you about God or Christian faith	.59	28
Ask you what you have learned about at church	.50	19
Talk with you about doubts or worries about Christian faith	.48	15
Alpha	.71	

Table 4

Scale of Religious Engagement

	<i>r</i>	Often %
<i>Do you do the following things?</i>		
Say thank you to God or Jesus	.67	59
Ask God or Jesus to help others	.63	52
Say sorry to God or Jesus	.66	50
Ask God or Jesus to make the world better	.52	43
Pray on your own	.60	40
Read Christian stories or books	.57	24
Listen to Christian music (outside church)	.48	17
Read the Bible on your own	.55	13
Talk to your school friends about God or Jesus	.48	12
Alpha	.85	

Table 5

Online religious activities in past month

	%
Watch videos about God or Jesus	30
Listen to Christian music	25
Read the Bible (on a screen)	20
Listen to people talk about God or Jesus (e.g. podcast)	16
Connect with others in their church (e.g. Facebook)	12

Table 6

Correlation matrix

	Church	School	Online	Engag	Encour	Father	Mother	Age
Sex	-.00	.03	.07**	.10***	.05*	-.05*	.03	.01
Age	.11***	.00	.02	-.08***	-.04	.05*	.08***	
Mother attendance	.44***	.00	.14***	.27***	.32***	.32***		
Father attendance	.41***	.02	.12***	.27***	.29***			
Encouragement	.35***	.00	.29***	.64***				
Engagement	.35***	-.03	.40***					
Online	.14***	.06**						
School	-.07**							

Note: * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

Table 7

Regression models

	<i>r</i>	One B	Two B	Three B	Four B
<i>Personal factors</i>					
Sex	-.00	-.00	.01	-.01	-.01
Age	.11***	.11***	.08***	.10***	.10***
<i>Parental church attendance</i>					
Mother attendance	.44**		.37***	.31***	.31***
Father attendance	.41***		.31***	.26***	.26***
<i>Home environment</i>					
Encouragement	.35***			.11***	.11***
Engagement	.35***			.12***	.13***
<i>External factors</i>					
Online	.14***				-.01
School	-.07**				-.04*
R ²		.01	.32	.35	.35
Δ		.01***	.30***	.04	.00

Note: * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$