

# Survey on Prayer and Clerical Vocations

Robert J KISALA

IN JUNE OF 1996 the Catholic Women's Association of the Nagoya Diocese asked for cooperation on planning and conducting a survey of women believers in the diocese on attitudes towards prayer and vocations to the priesthood. The purpose of the survey was to aid pastoral planning, and specifically to objectively explore whether a link between prayer and the promotion of vocations could be established.

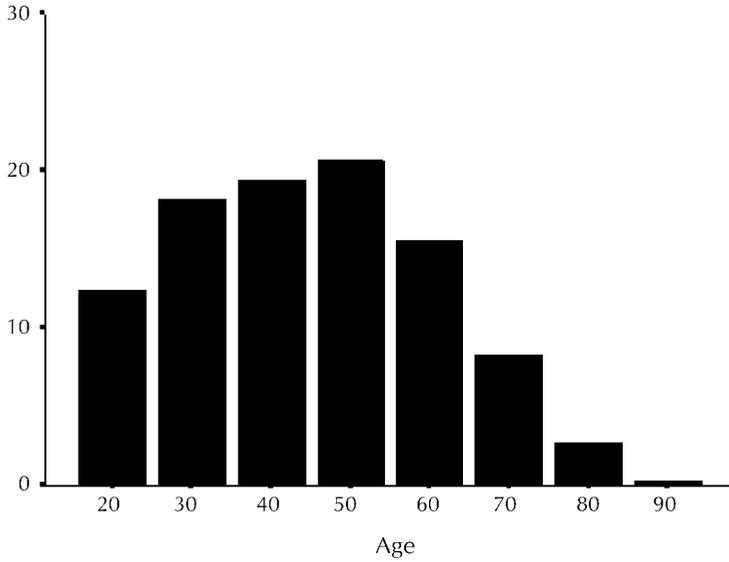
Some leaders of the Women's Association drafted a survey instrument, which was subsequently revised in discussions with parish representatives, the bishop of the diocese, and the author of this report. The survey instrument, consisting of twenty-one items, was distributed to all Catholic women in the diocese during the month of October. A universal sample was used for the survey, with care being taken to reach all registered women believers over twenty years of age in the diocese. Approximately ten thousand questionnaires were distributed, with instructions that they be returned either to a response box placed in the local church or by prepaid postal delivery. We obtained 3276 valid responses, providing us with a sample size sufficiently large to yield a wealth of information.

## Profile of Catholic Women in the Nagoya Diocese

In addition to the city of Nagoya and the surrounding Aichi Prefecture, the Nagoya Diocese encompasses four outlying prefectures: Gifu, Fukui, Ishikawa, and Toyama. The vast majority of respondents were from parishes in the Nagoya metropolitan area, with 41.7% from the city itself and an additional 30% from parishes in Aichi Prefecture outside of Nagoya. The neighboring Gifu Prefecture was residence to 8.1% of the respondents, with Ishikawa (5.8%), Toyama (2.7%), and Fukui (1.1%) following in order.

The age distribution of women in the diocese yields a slightly skewed bell pattern, as seen in figure 1. Significantly, nearly two-thirds of the respondents

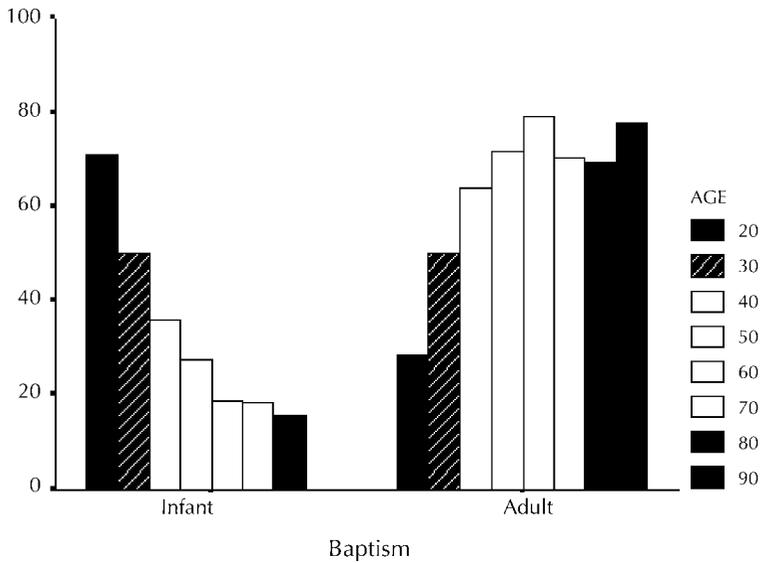
FIGURE 1



(60%) were between the ages of thirty and sixty, a period when women can be expected either to be raising families or to have children who are young adults, so that their attitudes towards the promotion of vocations would be of particular interest.

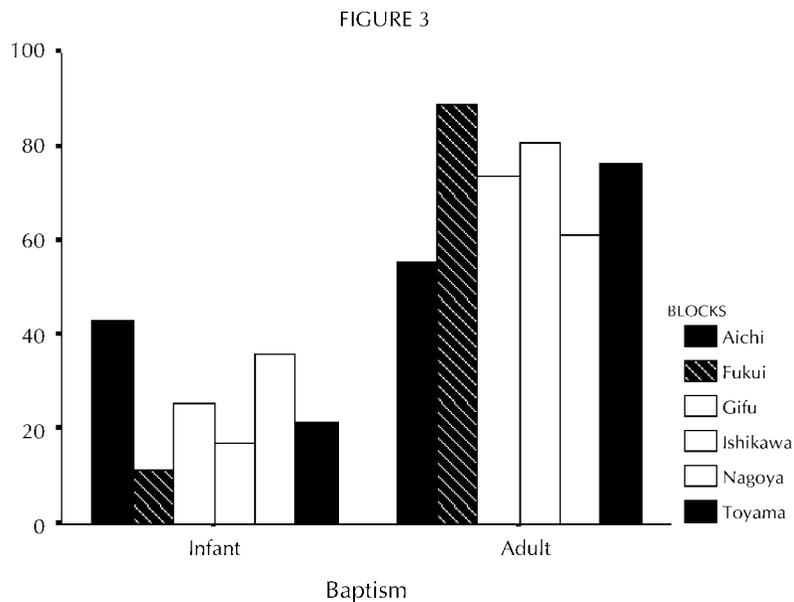
Only slightly more than one-third (36.3%) of the respondents were baptized as infants, indicating that the church in the Nagoya diocese is still pre-

FIGURE 2



dominantly first-generation and that its ranks have been increased more through conversions than the raising of Catholic families. Broken down by age, however, the survey results indicate that this pattern might be changing. As figure 2 illustrates, there is a constant rise in the number of infant baptisms as the age of respondents decreases. This means that the majority of members in the younger cohorts are predominantly second- and third- generation Catholics, and it could indicate that in recent years the church has been gaining members through birth rather than conversion, a trend that seems to be accelerating.<sup>1</sup>

Analysis by region reveals an additional interesting fact regarding infant baptisms. Fully 43.8% of the respondents from churches in Aichi Prefecture outside of Nagoya were baptized as infants, far and away the highest figure from any of the regional blocks (figure 3). One possible explanation for this result is regional immigration from Nagasaki and other Kyushu prefectures in search of employment in Aichi's industrial sector. Considering Catholicism's



<sup>1</sup> In fact, this trend can be seen in recent baptism statistics provided by the diocese. Infant and adult baptisms between 1990 and 1993 break down in the following way:

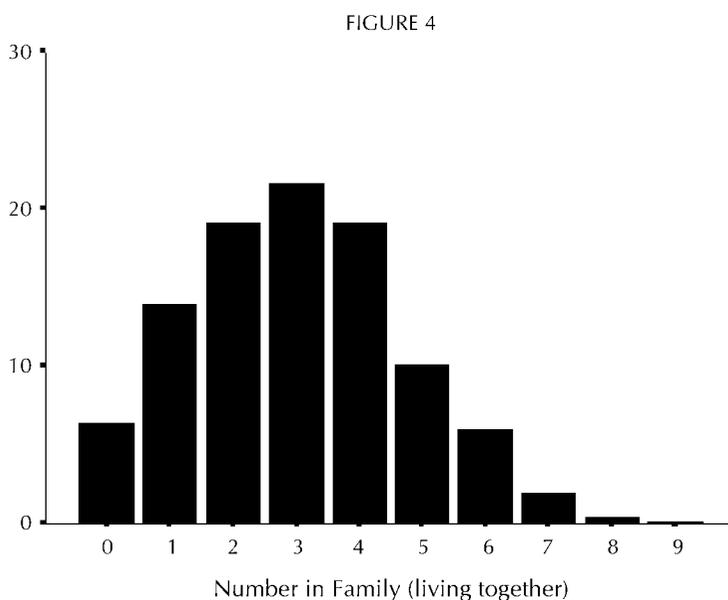
	Infant	Adult
1990	315	252
1991	384	285
1992	374	271
1993	470	293

relative strength on the southern island of Kyushu, Catholic immigrants from that area would presumably have a greater chance of being baptized as an infant.

It appears that marriage is the single most important factor in promoting adult conversions. When those who were not baptized as an infant were asked to indicate the direct reason for their baptism, 20% attributed it to marriage with a Catholic. Nearly as many respondents (19.6%) offered a wide range of personal reasons, the most popular among these being the influence of a family member (2.6% of the total respondents). This was followed, in order, by the influence of a priest or religious brother/sister (16.7%), a sense of unease or anguish over life (13.9%), and an encounter with an outstanding Catholic believer. Attendance at a so-called Catholic mission school ranked fifth, with only 11.3% of the respondents attributing their baptism to this influence. This would seem to raise questions concerning the effectiveness of these schools in encouraging conversions among their young charges, one reason popularly given for their continued existence. Presumably, however, many of the priests and religious mentioned above who influenced the decision to request baptism would have been met while attending one of these schools.

The respondents were also queried concerning the makeup of their family. Nearly two-thirds live together with from two to four other family members. Only 6.4% live alone, and 18.4% live with five or more family members. The breakdown on family size can be seen in figure 4.

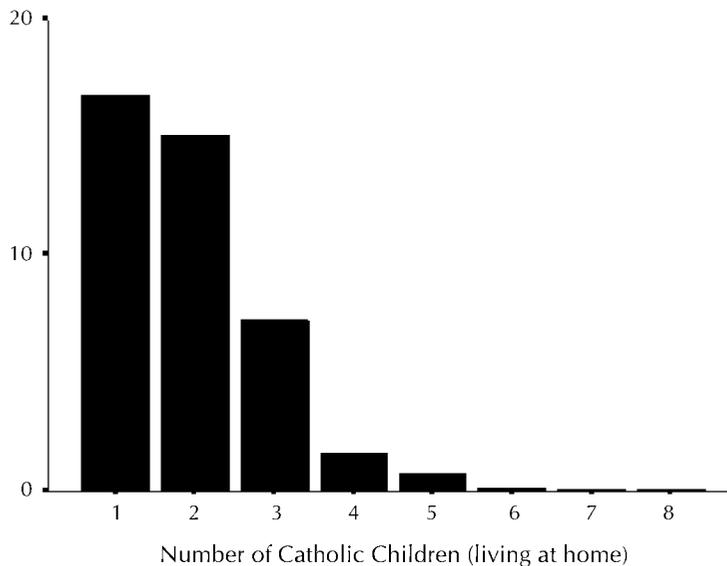
Only slightly more than one-third of the Catholic women in the Nagoya



Diocese live together with a Catholic husband, and nearly 30% of those married to a non-Catholic indicated that this caused a problem in the practice of their religion. When asked to specify what kind of difficulty these interreligious marriages caused, almost half said that they have problems attending mass, and an additional one-fourth decried the fact that it was difficult to pray together as a family. Only 6.7% percent indicated, however, that they had problems either with the baptism or religious education of their children.<sup>2</sup>

Finally, let me summarize the results concerning the number of baptized children living at home with the respondents. Just over 20% have one baptized son living at home, 7.5% have two, 1.7% have three, and .1% have four. The results for daughters are similar: 1=19.8%, 2=6.6%, 3=1.4%, 4=.3%, 5=.1%. These numbers were combined to give the total number of Catholic children living at home, and the results can be seen in figure 5. Furthermore, as figure 6 on the following page shows, there seems to be a tendency to have more children if the husband is also baptized as a Catholic.<sup>3</sup>

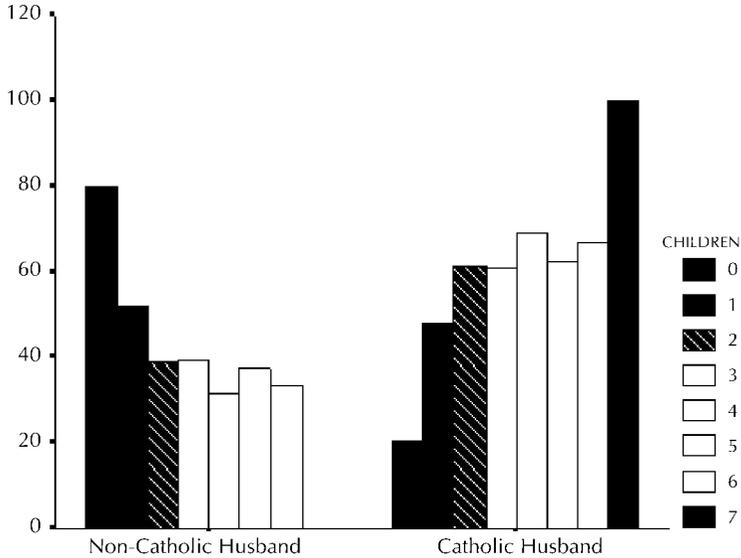
FIGURE 5



<sup>2</sup> Respondents were given the opportunity to rank up to five areas of difficulty: mass attendance, participation in church activities, family prayer, the practice of religious life, and the baptism/religious education of children. They were also able to suggest additional areas of difficulty caused by interreligious marriages. Analysis of the results, however, indicates that many who gave multiple responses merely copied the order of the responses provided. Therefore, results are provided only for the top-ranked response.

<sup>3</sup> Although the figures might be a bit skewed here by the fact that respondents were only queried concerning the number of Catholic children, it does not seem out of line to presume that if one child is baptized the tendency would be to baptize all the children in the family. Therefore, the fact that there are

FIGURE 6



### Attitudes Towards Prayer

Multiple questions concerning attitudes towards prayer and the practice of prayer were included in the survey. Additionally, the respondents were queried concerning their own religious influence in youth, their feelings about being a Catholic, and their image of God.

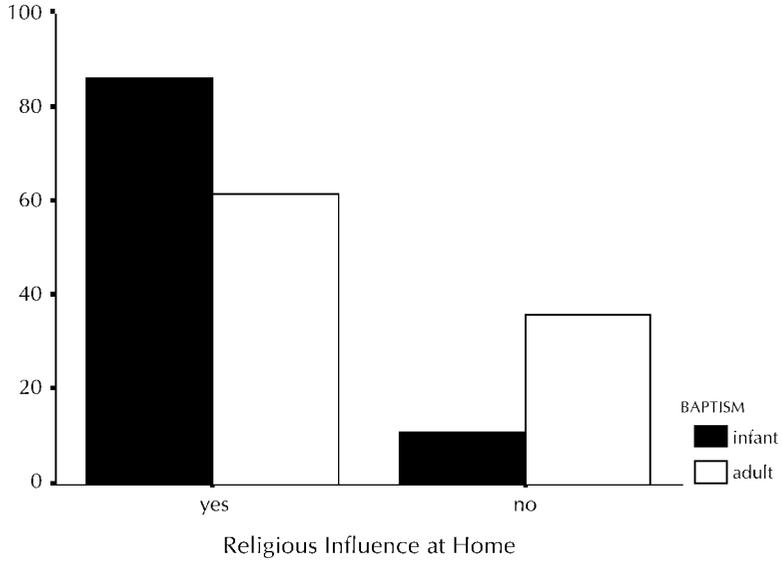
Nearly three-quarters of the respondents to the survey testified to the presence of religious influence at home while growing up. Although the rate of those baptized as infants who acknowledged religious influence as a child is relatively higher, as indicated by figure 7 (page 22), fully 60% of those from non-Catholic homes also experienced some such influence. Only 25% of those responding, however, pray together with their family now. Although this figure is significantly affected by the presence of a Catholic husband, rising to 40% in that case, it would seem that if the children of the respondents are to experience some religious influence at home today it will be by means other than prayer in common.

Survey respondents were overwhelming favorable regarding their feelings about being Catholic. Forty-six percent described being a Catholic as a source of joy, and an additional 23% said it was a grace. Less than 3% were critical in

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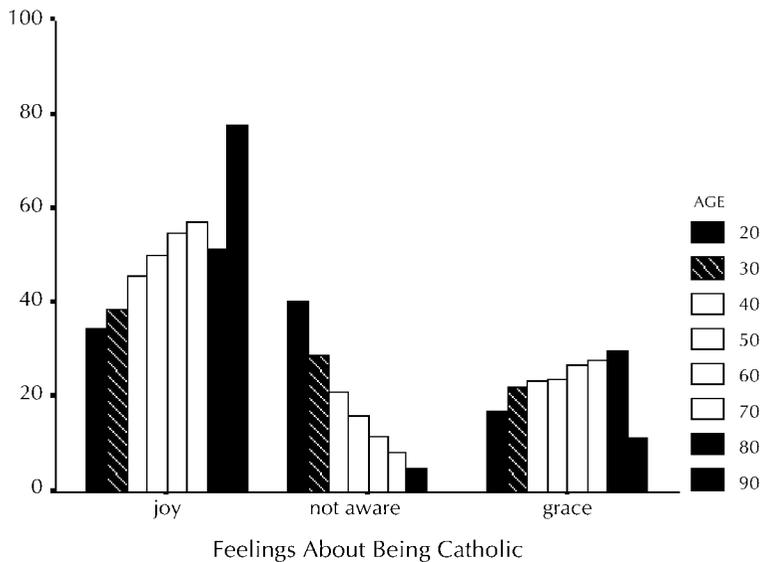
higher figures for the number of all baptized children except for zero or one in families with Catholic husbands should indicate larger families in these cases.

FIGURE 7



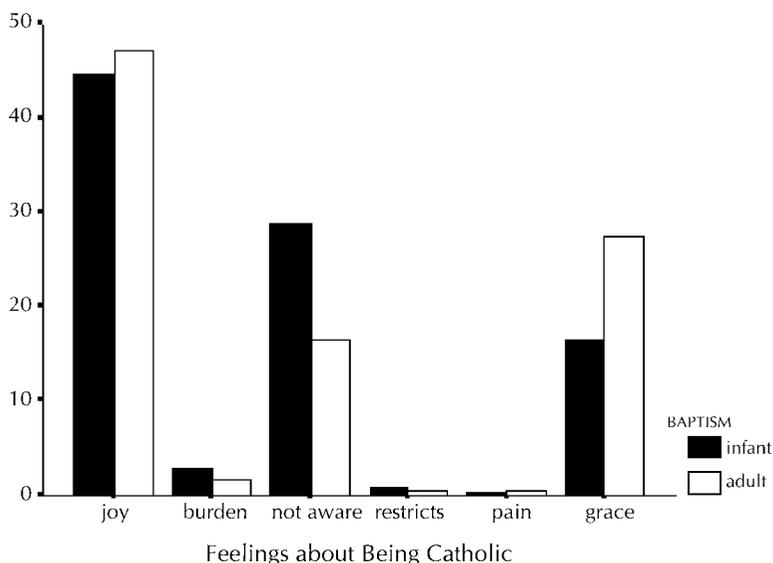
their assessment: 2% called it a burden, .5% said that it restricts them, and nearly an equal amount described it as a source of pain. Interestingly, however, more than one in five said that generally they are unaware of themselves as Catholic, an answer that increased markedly with youth (figure 8). Lack of awareness was also relatively high among those who were baptized as infants,

FIGURE 8



while conversely the feeling that being Catholic was a grace was relatively high among those baptized later in life (figure 9).

FIGURE 9

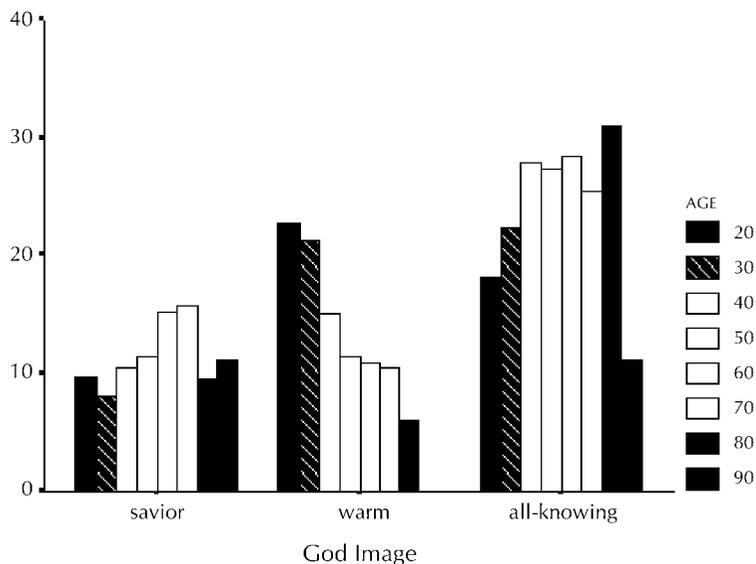


Images of God also appear to be sharply divided according to the age of the respondent. The questionnaire offered ten responses, which can be categorized as negative or harsh (far and unapproachable, a judge), familial (father, mother), doctrinal (savior, all-knowing), physically close (a close presence, always by my side), and “warm” (a blessing, invisible but warm). Few respondents (4.6%) chose the negative images, and familial images were also largely ignored (father=1.6%, mother=.5%).<sup>4</sup> While a significant number chose the doctrinal images (all-knowing=26.6%, savior=11.3%), more than one-quarter of the respondents have a close image of God (always by my side=25.2%, a close presence=1.6%), and one fifth a “warm” image (invisible but warm=14.8%, blessing=6%). The divide between doctrinal images and a “warm” image is defined by age, as seen in figure 10 on the following page. The two doctrinal images of all-knowing and savior become generally more popular with the age of the respondent, while the predominant “warm” image is clearly more popular the younger the believer.

Three questions in the survey were designed to explore the respondents’

<sup>4</sup> The Catholic Japanese novelist ENDO Shusaku (1978) argued that the father image did not fit the Japanese personality and should be replaced with that of God as nurturing mother. Given a wide range of choices it would appear that neither is very important, at least to female believers in Japan.

FIGURE 10



images of prayer, with one on concept association, one on feelings towards prayer, and a final question on definitions of prayer. In the question on concept association the respondents were offered eleven choices, which again can be categorized as follows: comforting (a refuge, peace of mind), guilt (a duty, something I neglect, self-reproach), dismissal (a waste of time, unbelief), communication (talking with God, a close chat with God), and institutional/communal (priest, mass). Similar to what we have seen regarding images of God, few respondents are openly negative regarding concepts associated with prayer. While 11% associate it with guilt (duty=9.3%, something I neglect=.6%, self-reproach=1.2%), less than 1% are dismissal of prayer (waste of time=.1%, unbelief=.8%). Institutional/communal concepts are also restricted in their appeal (priest=.8%, mass=6.8%). More than one quarter chose the comforting concepts of a refuge (4.7%) and peace of mind (22.7%), and a clear majority associate prayer with communication (talking with God=44.6%, chat with God=5.7%).

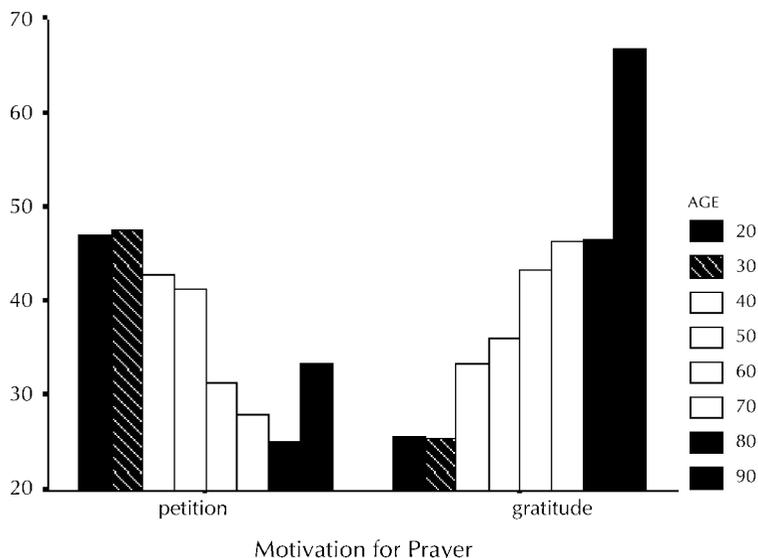
Regarding feelings towards prayer, once again a very small percentage chose the negative responses of feeling pressured (2.1%), feeling powerless and empty (.5%), and feeling that prayer is difficult (3.5%). Slightly more than half the respondents dwell on prayer's importance, with 17.7% calling it indispensable and an additional 33.8% important. The single most popular response was that of feeling healed, which was chosen by 36.3% of the women in the survey.

The overwhelmingly positive image regarding prayer indicated by the above two questions is reinforced by the definitions of prayer offered by the

respondents. More than one half describe prayer as freely talking with God, a definition apparently promoted by recent catechesis. An additional one-quarter of the respondents define prayer as “lingering in front of God,” while only ten percent call it a duty and less than two percent describe it as reading from a prayer book.

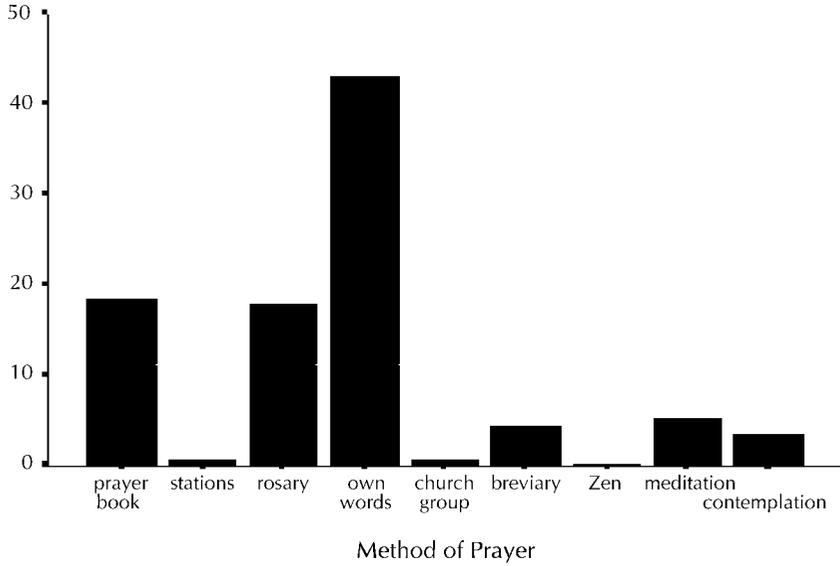
While the definition of prayer as a duty is most common among those over age seventy-five, the above answers reveal very little other difference according to age. Age does reemerge as a factor, however, when talking about motivations for prayer. The respondents were given a choice of five traditional motivations for their recent prayer: petition, repentance, gratitude, praise, and lamentation. Petition (39.8%) and gratitude (34.6%) were the overwhelming favorites, followed by repentance (9.1%), praise (3%), and lamentation (1.2%). The importance placed on petition and gratitude varied conversely with age, however, with petition being more important among young people and gratitude with older respondents (figure 11).

FIGURE 11



Preferred methods of prayer also display a connection with the age of the respondent. The survey offered nine options, and as seen in figure 12 (page 26). The use of one’s own words was most popular overall, chosen by 43% of the respondents. This was followed by the more traditional methods of reciting prayers memorized or contained in books (18.4%), and the rosary (17.9%). While a decline in popularity for these traditional methods among youth was expected, the results were perhaps more dramatic than foreseen, with use of

FIGURE 12



the rosary declining by two-thirds and formula prayers by one-fourth among women in their twenties as compared to older believers (figure 13).

Finally, the respondents were asked if they felt that they had been praying recently. While more than sixty percent answered in the affirmative, here again a breakdown by age reveals a clear trend away from prayer among the young. Nearly 60% of women believers in their twenties say that they haven't been

FIGURE 13

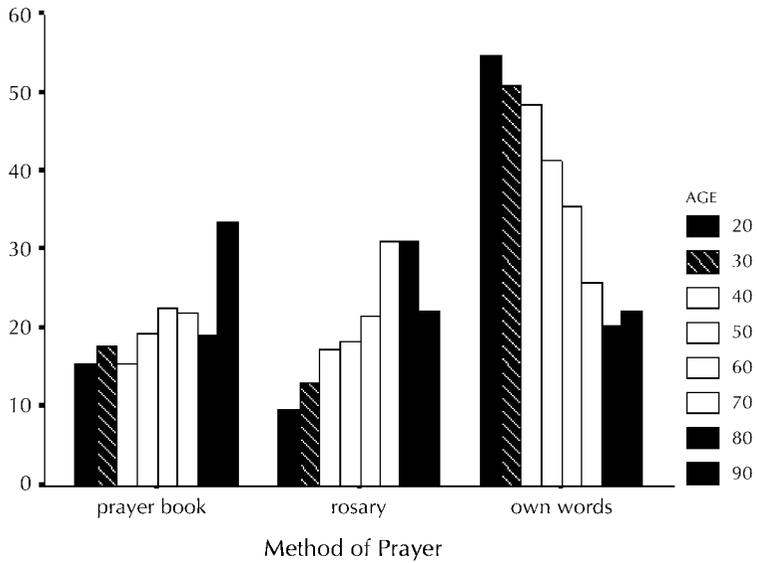
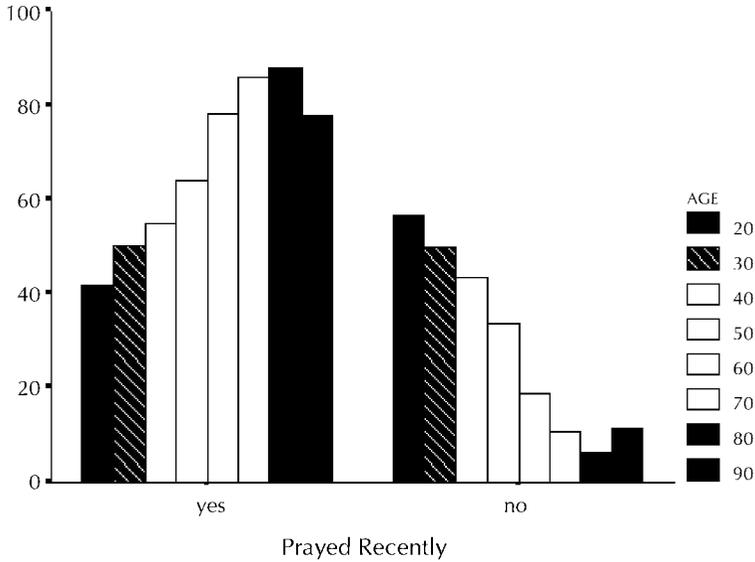


FIGURE 14



praying recently, a rate that declines gradually to less than 5% among those over eighty (figure 14). A major reason for this trend may be the burdens of child rearing and employment, which fall disproportionately on younger women. Indeed, when asked why they haven't prayed recently, nearly one third of those who responded cited the fact that they were too busy, or overwhelmed with life's more mundane concerns. Considering the higher level of infant baptisms in this age group, however, and the perhaps consequent lower level of self-awareness as a believer, this is a trend that will need to be monitored.

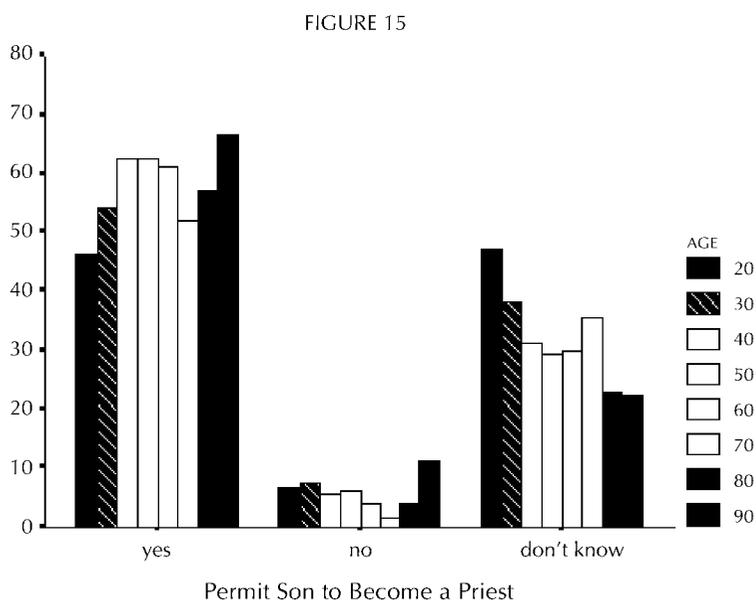
### Attitudes towards Vocations to the Priesthood

In addition to prayer, the second major concern of the survey was the attitude of Catholic women towards priestly vocations. The women who planned the survey were specifically interested in testing whether the respondents were inclined to promote and support such vocations among their sons, and in whether these attitudes were influenced by the attitudes towards prayer explored above. To this end, three questions concerning vocations were included in the survey. Respondents were first queried whether they would support a son who indicated an interest in becoming a priest. Reasons for support or opposition were the subject of the subsequent questions.

A clear majority of more than 57% of the respondents said that they would be supportive of a son who desired to become a priest, and only 5.3% said

unequivocally that they would oppose such a desire. However, fully one-third of the respondents chose the somewhat negative response of “I don’t know.” Furthermore, there is once again a clear trend away from the positive response among younger believers. More than 50% of women in their twenties were somewhat negative, as opposed to less than 30% of women in their fifties (figure 15). This trend is reversed in the groups in their sixties and seventies, but for completely different reasons, as we shall see shortly.

Those who responded positively to the question as to whether they would support a son who expressed an interest in the priesthood were further asked for the reason for their support. Thirty percent said that they would do so as a

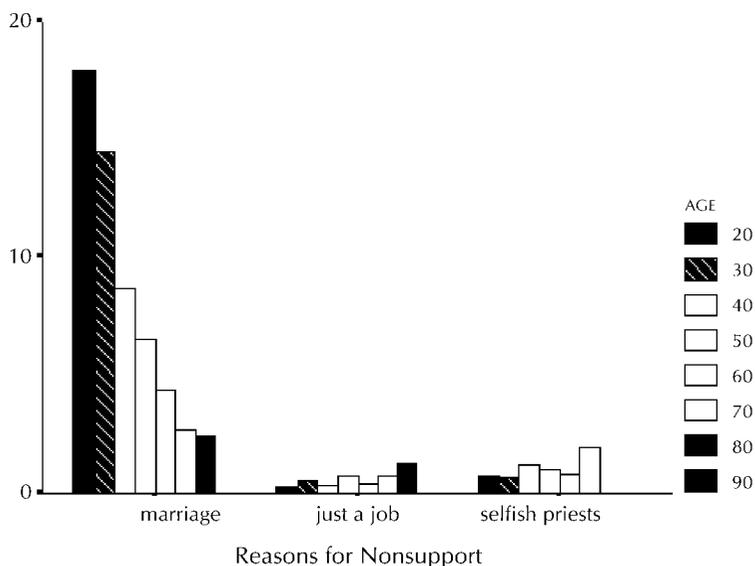


response to God’s call at work in their son, giving voice to the traditional view of vocation. An additional 7% said that they would consider such support an offering to God, and 5% offered reasons based on the needs of the church for clergy (3.2%), specifically native clergy (1.6%). Less than 4% offered as a reason the fact that they had been impressed by a priest that they had personally encountered. Far and away the most important reason offered was respect for the wishes of their son, chosen by more than one-half (53%) of the respondents. Age plays a factor in these responses as well, with women under sixty generally favoring the personal choice response over traditional views of vocation or the needs of the church.

The trend towards concern for personal choices in the life of one’s son can

also be seen in reasons for opposing an expressed desire to become a priest. Eleven options were offered here, and they can be separated into the categories of personal or family concerns, negative attitudes towards the church, and negative attitudes towards the contemporary priesthood. Responses in the latter two categories were low—the overriding concern was with personal or family considerations. Among these, the desire to have one’s son experience married life outweighs all others, chosen by one-quarter of the respondents to this question. This reason is particularly strong among those in their twenties, and, as figure 16 indicates, exhibits a strong correlation with age. Interestingly, negative images of the contemporary priesthood—such as that it has become just another occupation or that priests are more concerned now with their own life rather than with helping others—seem to play a relatively stronger role among those over sixty.

FIGURE 16



### Prayer and the Future of Clerical Vocations in the Church

The survey results indicate a clear correlation between attitudes towards prayer, the practice of prayer, and images of God with attitudes towards the promotion of vocations to the priesthood. Those who have prayed recently and pray with their families are generally more favorable towards priestly vocations, and those who have more positive feelings towards being a Catholic are

also more favorably disposed towards vocations. Furthermore, those who describe prayer as either indispensable or important are clearly more inclined to support a possible vocation in their sons. These results were expected, since a more positive attitude towards prayer and a predisposition towards the practice of prayer would indicate a greater concern generally with religious activity, which in turn would be supportive of priestly vocations. The results concerning images of God were more mixed. Those who espoused the more traditional images of savior and all-knowing were more supportive of vocations, an attitude also shared by those who chose what I have described as one of the negative or harsh—but nonetheless traditional—images, that of judge. Those professing to have a “warm” image of God, however, were generally negative towards vocations, a disturbing trend for the Church considering the popularity of this image among young believers.

On the surface, it would seem that the Catholic Church in Nagoya should be encouraged by the results of this survey. The respondents overwhelmingly indicate positive feelings regarding their faith and prayer, and clear majorities are engaged in prayer regularly and would be supportive of a son expressing the desire to become a priest. Even those who express some doubt as to their support indicate that they are not critical of either the church or contemporary priesthood, although such negative images are present to a certain extent among older believers. However, a further analysis of the results, particularly by age cohorts, should raise some alarms regarding the future of vocations.

There seems to be a clear trend towards a church composed of those who were baptized as infants rather than those who joined the church as the result of a personal adult decision. These second- or third-generation Catholics seem to be less conscious of their identity as believers and less prone to be engaged in prayer. While the latter might be more a consequence of their present social position (employed/young mothers)—something that will have to be tested in further longitudinal surveys—the question of identity would logically be more directly connected with the means of entrance into the church, and thus of more potential concern to pastoral agents. Furthermore, these young women are less disposed to be supportive of vocations to the priesthood than their mothers were, and the reason for their hesitation seems primarily to be the church’s rule regarding celibacy for its clergy. While one might assume that mothers of any generation would see married life as the normal preference for their children, there seems to be a decreasing willingness to accept other options for religious (vocation as calling or sacrifice) or institutional (church’s need for clergy) reasons. Indeed, even among the majority who expressed support for a possible priestly vocation in the family, the reason for support is overwhelmingly respect for the personal choice of the child, an indication once

again of the importance placed on personal development over religious or institutional concerns.

These results could be a reflection of broader religious trends—seen in the rise of fundamentalisms, pentacostalism, and New Age movements—that emphasize personal experience and growth over institutional authority.<sup>5</sup> The image of God as an encompassing “warmth,” especially popular among younger believers, might also serve as an indication of the diffused influence of contemporary religious ideas, where such amorphous concepts are much more popular than traditional doctrinal formulations. If this is the case, it would seem advisable for pastoral agents to acquaint themselves with these broader trends—and reflect on their significance for the Christian message—so that they might better speak to the needs of the coming generation of believers.

<sup>5</sup> For reports on the characteristics of these religious trends see, for example, BEDNAROWSKI 1989, COX 1995, FINKE and STARK 1992, HAGA and KISALA 1995, LEWIS and MELTON 1992.

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