

Parish Life: Who Is Involved and Why?

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The Church today understands itself primarily in terms of an ecclesiology of communion. If ordinary parishioners are going to experience how the Church enacts that ecclesiology, it will normally, perhaps exclusively, be through their local parish. The concept of community is essential to an understanding of parish. As Pope John Paul II emphasised in *Christifideles Laici*, a parish is not principally a structure, a territory or a building, but rather ‘the family of God’, ‘a familial and welcoming home’, ‘the community of the faithful’.¹ Canon law defines the parish as ‘a certain *community* of Christ’s faithful stably established within a particular Church’.² However, a parish community does not exist just for its own sake but for the purpose of carrying out the Church’s mission in its local area. Fundamental to an ecclesiology of communion is this interpenetration of community and mission.³ This is true of all the baptised: all are ‘incorporated into the Church and made sharers in her mission’⁴, or, as the ACBC website puts it, ‘all who have been baptised have rights and responsibilities in the Church’,⁵ which includes non-church-attending Catholics.

* This article is based on a workshop presented by Dr Claudia Mollidor at the Pastoral Research Conference in Melbourne in February 2014. At the time, Dr Mollidor, who has a PhD in social psychology from the London School of Economics, was a Research Associate at Australian Catholic University and was working as a member of the National Church Life Survey team in a position funded by the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference (ACBC). As she left this position shortly after the conference in order to return to her native Germany, she called on Robert Dixon, Director of the ACBC Pastoral Research Office, for assistance in completing the transition from conference paper to journal article.

1. Pope John Paul II, *Christifideles Laici*, 26.
2. Canon Law Society of Great Britain and Ireland, *Code of Canon Law in English translation* (London: Collins, 1983), can. 515 §1 (emphasis added).
3. CL 32.
4. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997), 1213.
5. The Catholic Church in Australia, www.catholic.org.au/about-us/the-catholic-church-in-australia, accessed 1 April 2014.

At the heart of the parish, therefore, is a community of people who gather under the same faith. With belonging to a parish comes a call to contribute to parish life and bring parishes nearer to those they are meant to serve. In *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis highlights the fact, however, that parishes do not always fulfil this mission:

We must admit, though, that the call to review and renew our parishes has not yet sufficed to bring them nearer to people, to make them environments of living communion and participation, and to make them completely mission-oriented.⁶

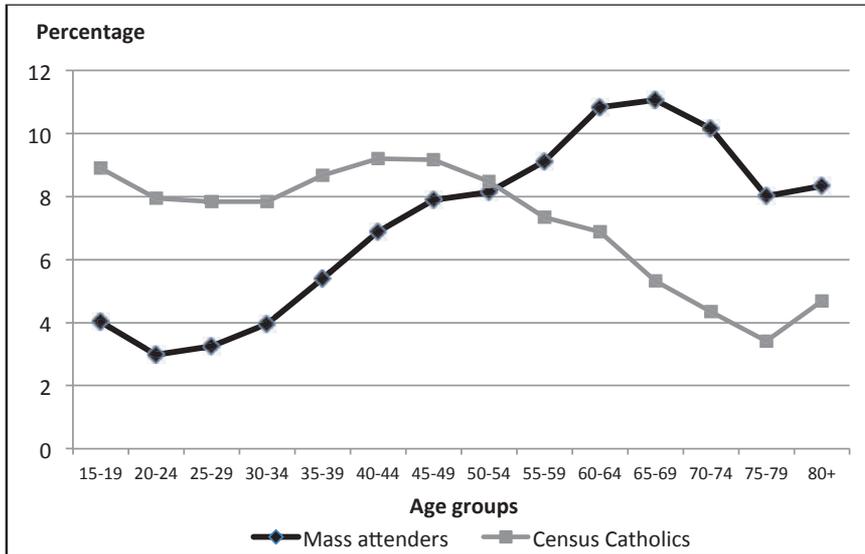
So what is really happening in Australian parishes? To what extent do they realise this vision of an ecclesiology of communion? Data from the 2011 National Church Life Survey (NCLS) can help us answer these questions. The 2011 NCLS was carried out over a random sample of 217 Catholic parishes, resulting in the return of over 47,400 questionnaires completed by Mass attenders. Most of the questions discussed in this article were included in the questionnaire completed by 67 per cent of attenders in Catholic parishes, although a few questions were part of a small sample questionnaire completed by about 6 per cent of respondents. I will examine the data by asking four further questions: Who goes to Mass? Why do Catholics go to Mass? How are Mass attenders involved in their parishes? How satisfied are people with their parish?

Mass-attending Catholics are a small subset of the overall Catholic population, but not a representative sample. As Dixon has noted, 'In general, Mass attenders are older, better educated and more likely to be female and to have been born overseas than the Catholic population as a whole'.⁷ In some respects, as illustrated by the age profiles of Mass attenders and the total Catholic population shown in Figure 1, the two groups are dramatically different. In light of the Holy Father's call to bring parishes nearer to those they are meant to serve, the differences between these two groups are a concern.

6. Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 28.

7. Robert Dixon, 'The Changing Face of the Catholic Community in Australia: Challenges for Catholic Social Service Organisations', in *Listening, Learning and Leading: The Impact of Catholic Identity and Mission*, ed. Gabrielle McMullen and John Warhurst (Ballarat: Connor Court, 2014), 130. For a full profile of the Catholic population in the 2011 Australian Census, see Robert Dixon and Stephen Reid, 'The Contemporary Catholic Community: A View from the 2011 Census', *Australasian Catholic Record*, 90, no. 2 (April 2013): 131–46.

Figure 1. Age profile of the Catholic population and Mass attenders aged 15 years and over, 2011



Source of data: 2011 National Church Life Survey and Australian Bureau of Statistics—2011 Census of Population and Housing.

Who Goes to Mass?

Typical weekend Mass attendance in Australia in 2011 was around 662,000 people,⁸ more than 97 per cent of whom were Catholic. Almost nine out of ten (89 per cent) had been baptised as infants, but 9 per cent had become Catholics as adults. The median age of attenders aged 15 and over⁹ was almost 60 years, and women outnumbered men by about three to two (61 per cent compared to 39 per cent). Fifty-nine per cent were born in Australia, 8 per cent were born overseas in an English-speaking country, and the remainder (34 per cent) were born in a non-English-speaking country, in particular India and Sri Lanka (8 per cent), the Philippines (7 per cent) and Italy (3 per cent). Among those born in Australia, 18 per cent had at least one parent born in a non-English-speaking country. Just over three-fifths (61 per cent) were in their first marriage, with another 5 per cent having remarried after divorce or the death of their spouse. Only 17 per cent had never married and 10 per cent were widowed. Six per cent

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8. Robert Dixon, Stephen Reid and Marilyn Chee, 'Mass Attendance in Australia: A Critical Moment. A Report Based on the National Count of Attendance, the National Church Life Survey and the Australian Census' (unpublished report, ACBC Pastoral Research Office, Fitzroy, 2013). The figure includes a small number of people who attended Sunday Assemblies in the Absence of a Priest.
9. Figures from the National Church Life Survey refer to Mass attenders aged 15 and over.

were separated or divorced, while fewer than 2 per cent were in a de facto relationship. Among those who were married, 82 per cent had a Catholic spouse, 7 per cent were married to an Anglican, 5 per cent to a Christian of another denomination, 1 per cent to a person of a non-Christian religion, and 4 per cent to a person with no religion. Almost three-quarters had attended a Catholic school, at least for a part of their schooling (71 per cent for primary and 71 per cent for secondary schools), and almost all the rest (26 per cent primary, 24 per cent secondary) had attended a government school. One-third (34 per cent) had a university degree.

About four-fifths (79 per cent) of Mass attenders live in Australia's major cities, a higher figure than for Catholics in general (72 per cent). This is related to the fact that people born in non-English-speaking countries are more likely to live in the cities, and Catholics from non-English-speaking countries are more likely to attend Mass than Australian-born Catholics.

While 85 per cent of people who go to Mass go every week, they don't always go to the same parish. The percentage of people at Mass on a typical weekend who are usually to be found at the same parish is 79 per cent. More than half of all Mass attenders (55 per cent) have been going to the same parish for more than ten years, while 14 per cent have been going to their regular parish for less than two years and 6 per cent were visitors on the day of the survey, mostly (5 per cent) visitors from another Catholic parish or a church of a different Christian denomination, with the other 1 per cent being people who rarely or never go to church. About two-thirds of all Mass attenders (68 per cent) live in the parish where they completed the survey, although 4 per cent were unsure whether they lived in the parish or not.

Why Do Catholics Go to Mass?

Why do people go to Mass?¹⁰ Respondents to a small sample questionnaire in the 2011 National Church Life Survey were asked to mark ten reasons for going to Mass on a four-point scale from 'Not important' to 'Very important'. Table 1 shows the percentages of men and women who marked each response as 'Very important'.

Giving thanks to God was the most common reason people gave for going to Mass (63 per cent), followed by deepening a relationship with God (60 per cent). These are the most prominent reasons in all age groups, particularly among women, and well-aligned with the sacramental meaning of the Mass and, indeed, the very meaning of the word 'Eucharist'.

10. For an account of why people *stop* going to Mass, see Robert Dixon, Sharon Bond, Kath Engebretson, Richard Rymarz, Bryan Cussen and Katherine Wright, *Research Project on Catholics Who Have Stopped Attending Mass* (Melbourne: Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, 2007).

Table 1. Reasons why people go to Mass. Percentage indicating 'Very important'

<i>How important to you is each of these reasons for going to Mass?</i>	Women (%)	Men (%)	Total (%)
I want to give thanks to God	66	57	62
I want to deepen my relationship with God	63	54	60
I need a time for prayer	57	44	52
It's important for my family	47	47	47
I want to be part of the Christian community	48	41	45
I want to offer sacrifice to God	42	42	42
I need encouragement and inspiration	44	37	41
I feel it is my duty	36	39	37
I would like to understand the Gospel	39	34	37
I want time to think	39	30	36

Source of data: 2011 National Church Life Survey. Questions come from Questionnaire S3 (N = 2786).

The least common reasons regarded as very important were feeling a sense of duty, and wanting to grow in understanding of the Gospel (both 37 per cent) and wanting to have time to think (36 per cent), suggesting that those Catholics who do attend Mass are generally there for positive reasons that are consistent with an appreciative understanding of the Mass. Older attenders were more likely than younger attenders to say that duty was a very important reason for going to Mass, but less likely to say they went because of a need for understanding the Gospel. In the 2006 NCLS, Mass attenders were asked whether they agreed that it was a sin to miss Mass on a Sunday without a serious reason.¹¹ Only about half (49 per cent) expressed agreement with the statement, but responses were heavily dependent on age, with 59 per cent of people aged 60 or more agreeing or strongly agreeing, compared to only 35 per cent of young adults. There was virtually no difference between men and women on this issue.

Overall, 45 per cent of respondents said that wanting to be part of the Christian community was a very important reason for going to Mass. However, there were distinct differences between the sexes and age groups, with the desire to be part of the community being stronger among women (48 per cent) than men (41 per cent) and among older attenders (46 per cent of attenders aged 35 or more compared to 36 per cent of those aged 15 to 34).

The reasons why people go to Mass are also reflected in the responses given to a question about what three aspects of their parish attenders value most. Celebrating the Eucharist / receiving Holy Communion, a traditional style of worship or music, homilies, and praying for one another were the four most popular responses for men. For women, the top four choices were the same, but

11. The question was not asked in the 2011 NCLS.

in a different order of popularity: celebrating the Eucharist / receiving Holy Communion was followed by praying for one another, traditional forms of worship, and homilies. Aspects of parish life least valued by both men and women were small prayer, discussion or Bible study groups, and reaching out to those who do not attend Mass. All four of the things that attenders value most are related to prayer and liturgy, and therefore essential elements of the life of the Church, but this does mean that aspects of parish life to do with mission and evangelisation seem to be downplayed. However, this may be due to the constraints of a question that restricted respondents to four choices out of thirteen.¹²

How Are Mass Attenders Involved in Their Parish?

National Church Life Survey results consistently show that Mass attenders are less actively involved than attenders at other Christian churches.¹³ While three-quarters say they know nearly everyone or at least a fair number of people in the parish, and almost half contribute at least \$10 a week to the support of the parish, for most people this does not translate into any other form of active involvement in the parish beyond attendance at Mass. Table 2 lists a number of types of attender involvement measured by the National Church Life Survey, including participation in groups and activities, and having an active role in leadership or liturgical or other ministry.¹⁴ The table shows that just over a quarter (28 per cent) are involved in parish group activities such as prayer, Bible study, or social groups, and just over a fifth (21 per cent) regularly take part in parish community service, social justice or other outreach activities. A similar percentage (20 per cent) say that they have sometimes been involved in the making of important decisions in the parish, and more than a quarter (27 per cent) say they would usually welcome people they know to be new arrivals in the parish.

The most common ministry or leadership roles in parish life are those of reader and special minister of the Eucharist, roles undertaken by 17 per cent of survey respondents. Next most common were roles in music ministry as singer, organist or other musician (7 per cent). However, more than three-fifths of all attenders (63 per cent), and three-quarters of young adult attenders (77 per cent) say they do not have any ministry or leadership role in the parish.

In virtually all these roles and activities, women were more likely than men (or at least as likely as men) to be active, exceptions being in relation to financial contributions and membership of parish councils or other committees. In general,

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12. The other response options in the question concerned wider community care and social justice, contemporary style of music, social activities, ministry to children and youth, practical care for one another, openness to social and cultural diversity, and the parish school.
 13. NCLS Research, 'Denominational Church Life Profile: The Catholic Church in Australia' (unpublished report, ACU, Strathfield, 2014), 27.
 14. The extent of involvement in parish life by people who do not go to Mass, such as the involvement of non-attending parents in the parish school, is not measured by the NCLS and so is not considered in this discussion.

Table 2. Types of involvement in parish life

<i>Involvement in parish life</i>	Women (%)	Men (%)	Total (%)
Involved in parish group activities	30	25	28
Involved in parish outreach activities	24	20	21
Contribute \$10 or more per week to the parish *	45	51	48
Know fair number of people / nearly everyone here *	78	75	77
Would always or mostly personally welcome new arrivals	28	26	27
Had opportunities to be involved in decision making and often or occasionally participate *	20	21	20
<i>Have one of the following ministry or leadership roles</i>			
Reader or special minister of the Eucharist	18	16	17
Music ministry	8	6	7
Liturgy planning group	3	2	2
Adult sacrament group (e.g. RCIA, marriage preparation)	1	1	1
Children's liturgy or sacrament preparation	5	2	4
Religious education teacher in a government school	2	1	2
Visitor to the sick or elderly or others in need	8	5	7
Group leader	3	2	3
Parish council / parish leadership group member	3	4	3
Committee member	4	5	5
Teacher in the parish school	2	1	2
Active involvement in school	3	1	3
Other role	10	11	11
No role	61	65	63

*Source of data: 2011 National Church Life Survey. Questions come from Questionnaire AC (N = 32,153) unless otherwise indicated. * These questions come from Questionnaire S3 (N = 2786).*

attenders aged 60 or more were much more likely to be involved than young adults, except in music ministry and children's liturgy. Although only 7 per cent of all attenders said they were visitors to the sick or elderly or others in need, this figure jumped to 12 per cent among the 60-plus age group. In many roles and activities, the most active attenders were those in the 35 to 59 age group. In most respects, there was little difference between attenders born in Australia and those born in other English-speaking countries, but both groups were considerably more involved in almost all types of roles and activities than were attenders born in non-English-speaking countries, except that there was no difference between the groups in relation to involvement in music ministry, and that those from non-

English-speaking countries were much more likely than the Australian-born to say they would welcome new arrivals to the parish.

How Satisfied Are People with Their Parish?

The final question I will look at in this article is how people experience their parish and, in particular, parish liturgy. Mass attenders are generally satisfied with their experience of parish life; it is probable that many of those who were not satisfied have stopped going to Mass. More than four-fifths (81 per cent) say that their spiritual needs are met by the parish, two-thirds (66 per cent) have a strong and growing or a strong and stable sense of belonging to the parish community, and the same percentage say they find it easy to make friends in the parish (see Table 3). Overall, almost half (45 per cent) say the parish is a very important or even an extremely important part of their life. However, they are less satisfied with certain aspects of parish life: only one-third (34 per cent) say that the parish's leaders take their ideas into account to a great extent, and only 13 per cent say that they are encouraged to use their gifts and skills to a great extent. (Another 25 per cent say that their ideas are taken into account or they are encouraged to use their gifts and skills 'to some extent'.)

Men and women responded very similarly to these questions, the exception, though, being in relation to the importance of the parish in one's life, where women (48 per cent) were somewhat more likely than men (41 per cent) to say that the parish was very or extremely important to them. Older people were generally more satisfied than younger people; for example, 38 per cent of Mass attenders aged 60 or more said that parish leaders took their ideas into account to a great extent, but only 27 per cent of young adult attenders said that. Perhaps surprisingly, given their generally lower levels of involvement in parish life, attenders born in non-English-speaking countries tended to be more satisfied than others: they were, for example, much more likely to see the parish as very important or extremely important to their lives (56 per cent compared to 40 per cent of Australian-born attenders) and somewhat more likely to say that their ideas were taken into account and that they were encouraged to use their gifts and skills.

Attenders also find the parish liturgy itself generally satisfying, with 80 per cent saying they always or usually experience a sense of God's presence at Mass in the parish. More than two-thirds say that Mass in the parish strengthens them spiritually and helps them grow in understanding of God, and that the preaching they hear at Mass is very helpful to them in everyday life, while a majority say they always or usually experience joy and inspiration, and almost half say they are challenged to take action through their participation in the Mass. Only 9 per cent say they are always or usually bored at Mass in the parish, and the experience decreases with age; while almost one-fifth of young adults say they always or usually experience boredom at Mass, only 8 per cent of attenders aged 35 to 59 and 5 per cent of those aged 60 or more do so.

Table 3. Satisfaction with the parish

<i>Aspects of satisfaction with the parish</i>	Women (%)	Men (%)	Total (%)
My spiritual needs are being met here *	81	80	81
Strong sense of belonging to the parish	67	66	66
Have found it easy to make friends	67	64	66
Parish very important or extremely important in life	48	41	45
Leaders take ideas into account to a great extent	35	33	34
Gifts and skills encouraged to a great extent	14	12	13
Satisfied with what the parish offers for children	55	55	55
Satisfied with what the parish offers for youth	38	39	39
Satisfied with what the parish offers for young adults	35	36	35
<i>At Mass in this parish, always or usually experience ...</i>			
A sense of God's presence	83	76	80
Being strengthened spiritually	73	65	70
Growth in understanding of God	72	66	70
Preaching very helpful to my life	69	63	67
Joy	64	57	61
Inspiration	61	55	59
Being challenged to take action	47	45	46
Boredom	7	10	9

*Source of data: 2011 National Church Life Survey. Questions come from Questionnaire AC (N = 32,153) unless otherwise indicated. * This question comes from Questionnaire S3 (N = 2786).*

There is a noticeable difference between women and men in their experience of the liturgy, with a higher percentage of women reporting that their experience is always or usually a positive one. Surprisingly, however, there is no consistent pattern with regard to age. People aged 60 or over are more likely than young adults to say that at Mass they always or usually experience the presence of God and helpful preaching, but they are less likely to say that they experience inspiration, joy, and being challenged to take action, and there is little difference across the age groups in experiencing growth in understanding of God.

How can Mass attenders' level of satisfaction be improved? In response to a question about what aspects of the parish should receive greater attention in the next twelve months,¹⁵ men and women both most frequently chose 'building a strong sense of community in the parish' (35 per cent). Most of the other options

15. Respondents were asked to choose three options from the following twelve: spiritual growth (e.g. spiritual direction, prayer groups etc), liturgies that are nurturing to people's faith, building a strong sense of community, creating a clear vision for the parish's future, encouraging parishioners to discover/use their gifts here, encouraging new approaches to ministry and mission, supporting social justice and aid to people in need, encouraging members to share their faith or invite others, ensuring new people are included well in church life, ministry to children and youth, increasing the number of people at Mass, and starting a new program reaching people who don't go to church.

received support from about 20 to 25 per cent of attenders, but ‘encouraging new approaches to ministry and mission’ and ‘encouraging members to share their faith or invite others [to church]’ each received support from only about 10 per cent of attenders. Interestingly, the most frequent response of young adult attenders was not building a strong sense of community but ‘spiritual growth (e.g. spiritual direction, prayer groups etc)’.

Conclusion

These results provoke some reflections about the vitality of our parish communities. The fact that two-thirds of Mass attenders find the preaching that they hear on Sundays is always or usually very helpful to their life is reassuring for priests, but other findings are less encouraging. It is apparent that young adults and men, already under-represented in terms of numbers at Mass, are less involved than older attenders and women in most areas of parish life. The small proportions of attenders who welcome newcomers, who value reaching out to those who do not attend Mass, and who are interested in new approaches to ministry and mission and encouraging members to share their faith suggest that many attenders might suffer from a sense of complacency. Even though a very high proportion of attenders say that the parish is meeting their spiritual needs, these responses hardly convey the sense that they are endowed with the powerful commitment to mission that Pope Francis has called for. Catholics aged 70 to 79 have the best Mass attendance rate of all Catholics, and Mass attenders in that age group are among the most involved in their parishes. Such a situation cannot be maintained indefinitely. With the age profiles of those most active in parish life increasing, Church leaders must ask themselves what is being done to sustain outreach and community services and to ensure the ongoing vitality of parishes.

Fortunately, in *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis has commented on many of the aspects of parish life discussed in this article, thereby giving us a timely aid to our reflections. He reminds us, for example, not to take women’s strong involvement in parish life for granted. Instead, ‘we need to create still broader opportunities for a more incisive female presence in the Church’.¹⁶

The Holy Father also notes ‘the urgent need for the young to exercise greater leadership’.¹⁷ Yet around 90 per cent of the relatively few Mass attenders aged between 15 and 34 are not regularly involved in parish activities reaching out to the wider community in evangelisation, community service, social justice or welfare activities, and 84 per cent are not involved in any sort of group activities in the parish.

Pope Francis insists that the priest should speak to the people in an engaging way informed by a close knowledge of them. He ‘must know the heart of his community, in order to realize where its desire for God is alive and ardent, as

16. EG 103.

17. EG 106.

well as where that dialogue, once loving, has been thwarted and is now barren'.¹⁸ He 'needs to keep his ear to the people and to discover what it is that the faithful need to hear',¹⁹ since there is no point in responding to 'questions that nobody asks'.²⁰ The NCLS figures show that while older attenders are more likely than young adults to say that they find the preaching they hear very valuable for their life, it is the younger ones who are more likely to say that what they hear challenges them to take action.

The data confirm that as many as 23 per cent of Mass attenders never or rarely welcome newcomers in their parish, and another 22 per cent (and 33 per cent of young adult attenders) say the question is not applicable because they never meet newcomers! That in itself says something about parishes lacking effective methods of evangelisation. The Holy Father says that 'evangelisation demands familiarity with God's word', and therefore calls for parishes 'to provide for a serious, ongoing study of the Bible, while encouraging its prayerful individual and communal reading'.²¹ Yet wanting to understand the Gospel was regarded by only just over a third of respondents as a very important reason for going to Mass, and having Bible study groups was one of the least valued aspects of parish life—perhaps because so few parishes have them.

The need to foster a welcoming environment towards people who have been baptised but who have not been to Mass in a long time is highlighted by the pope as an area of parish life that needs attention. 'We must recognize that if part of our baptized people lack a sense of belonging to the Church, this is also due to certain structures and the occasionally unwelcoming atmosphere of some of our parishes.'²²

I started this article with the observation that it is through the parish that most ordinary Catholics experience communion ecclesiology. In many ways, the parish is the foundation on which the rest of the Church rests. Pope Francis recognises that while church institutions, agencies, movements, small communities and so on are a 'source of enrichment for the Church', there is a danger that they can become 'nomads without roots' if they 'lose contact with the rich reality of the local parish'.²³

This article has briefly examined who goes to Mass, why they go, how they are involved in their parish, and how satisfied they are with parish life. It has identified some hopeful signs and some challenges flowing from the research. As we go forward, Pope Francis urges us all to be 'realists, but without losing our joy, our boldness and our hope-filled commitment. Let us not allow ourselves to be robbed of our missionary vigour'.²⁴

18. EG 137.

19. EG 154.

20. EG 155.

21. EG 175.

22. EG 63.

23. EG 29.

24. EG 109.