
Australia. Instructions for Church governance review in a 32-page report

The Australian bishops released today a 32-page Report that sets in motion a comprehensive review of governance of the Catholic Church in Australia. The Report is the first concrete step towards addressing the "systemic failures" that allowed for crimes and abuse in the past. The governance review Report was discussed and approved by the Australian bishops during their plenary meeting at the end of November. The lengthy text is the outcome – and not the final word – of a review of governance in the Catholic Church in Australia commissioned in 2019 following the five-year inquiry of the Royal Commission into the scourge of child sexual abuse in the country. Notably, in its Final Report the Commissioners called on the Catholic Church in Australia to explore and develop ways in which its structure and practices of governance may be made more accountable, more transparent, more meaningfully consultative and more participatory, including at the diocesan and parish level." "This report – reads the document - is not the final word about Church governance but a significant contribution at this time." The Report, titled [*The Light from the Southern Cross: Co-Responsible Governance in the Catholic Church in Australia*](#), acknowledges and builds upon improvements already made across the Church in Australia. It proposes some additional reforms. And it highlights areas where further investigation and change may be warranted as part of the "continuing process of renewal in the Church, which is always a work in progress." "It's something that's never been done before", Bishops Conference president Archbishop **Mark Coleridge** said during the presentation of the document. "It will provide an invaluable point of reference as we look to the future." **Before delving into the details of the Recommendations of the Royal Commission, the bishops once again repeated their many previous acknowledgements "of the terrible crimes against children perpetrated by some clergy, religious and lay Church personnel"** along with "the failures in Church governance that allowed many of these crimes to be repeated." "*We renew our commitment to ensuring this does not recur and to making the Church a child-safe environment.*" The Australian Church has therefore seriously embraced the Royal Commission's proposal that child abuse is always a crime perpetrated by an individual person or persons upon an individual victim or victims, and combating it requires addressing "systemic failures of governance." In this respect the Report explicitly mentions "the culture within institutions", "the failures adequately to choose, form and supervise Church personnel", "the failures to respond appropriately to complaints received." "The Bishops acknowledge that there have sometimes been serious failures of leadership in the Church in Australia outside the child protection area also," the document states." This does not diminish the fact that there are "signs of hope." The Report reads: "Despite shame at the past behaviour of some fellow clergy and religious, the vast majority of priests, nuns and brothers have been faithful to their vocations." "Despite disillusionment over historic child abuse cases and the failure of some Church leaders to respond adequately", many lay faithful believe we can be a better Church in the future. This is a great sign of hope for the Church today." **The Report features numerous responses to the Royal Commission Recommendations.** The final goal is to make the Church "the safest of places for children and adults at risk", with a broad sphere of action that explores various ambits, starting with "the increasing role of lay people, particularly women, in leadership in chanceries, parishes, schools and Church agencies." A key principle is embraced and enhanced: "*A right understanding of "co-responsibility" in leadership will unlock gifts and experience of lay people, relieve bishops and clergy of unnecessarily carrying all the burden of governance, and through their collaboration hopefully improve the way in which our dioceses, parishes, schools and agencies operate.*" In addition to the question of co-responsibility, the Report addresses the request for greater "transparency" in the appointment of bishops, pointing out that the aspects of the processes and procedures that can be made public will be decided on a case by case basis and in consultation with the Apostolic Nuncio and the Congregation for Bishops. Women may

assume "a key role with respect to the formation and admission of a candidates to a seminary", and "be included in the evaluation panel tasked with evaluating a candidate for ordination", the document states. With respect to *Ad Limina* visits of bishops and the recommendation as to whether its content may be released to the public, the Report notes that "the primary purpose of the visit *Ad Limina Apostolorum* is, as indicated by the title, for the Bishops to make a pilgrimage to the tombs of the Apostles and to meet with the Pope." Such meetings "rarely generate immediate outcomes." However, the Australian Bishops' Conference "might issue a report on each Ad Limina visit, much as already occurs after the plenary meetings of the bishops. The Report reviews questions pertaining to the protection of minors and vulnerable adults, the formation of clergy and bishops, collegiality systems in church governance, including diocesan governance, transparency and information. With a reminder: "*Good governance in Church or society is never merely a matter of structures, policies and training*". It also implies "*an attentive listening to the Holy Spirit, an ongoing commitment to conversion and renewal, and a cultivation of virtue and generosity in service of the common good*." As "Pope Francis has reminded us on numerous occasions", reads the Report, "a highly bureaucratized Church might be a well-respected NGO but could lose its "soul" – its core identity and sense of mission."

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