

# The Catholic Church must make these seven changes now

By Francis Sullivan

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Many have asked whether the Catholic Church can survive the shock of the conviction of Cardinal George Pell and the impact on its credibility, even utility.



PHOTO: [The clerical caste has failed Catholics in its mismanagement of the abuse scandal.](#) (Reuters/Osservatore Romano)

Yet to assume that the institution is exclusively the Church is to miss the point: Cardinal Pell has been sentenced, not Australia's Catholics.

Believers, and those who identify with the Catholic faith tradition, are the real Church. The institution is but an organised mechanism to give expression to some of that believing community's social and practical activities.

For the Church to survive, its members need to take responsibility for their future.

[Now is the time for lay Catholics to be actively engaged in the governance of the institution.](#)

The clerical caste has failed us in its mismanagement of the abuse scandal. The protectionism and closed shop mentality that comes with clericalism is a curse for my Church.

Too many clerics have been too self-interested to seek the health of the Church above their own sense of entitlement and advancement. Organisationally they hold all the cards.



**PHOTO:** [Can the Catholic Church survive the shock of Cardinal Pell's conviction and the impact on its credibility?](#) (AAP: James Ross)

What should be done now?

## Accountability

The Australian bishops must act. They are accountable only to the Pope and he is struggling to get on top of the issue.

They should voluntarily subject themselves to a transparent accountable mechanism that is not run by clerics. They must not use [Canon Law](#) as an excuse to avoid being accountable to both the Catholic and wider communities.

## Governance

It is time for an independent body, perhaps an ombudsman model, to oversee the cultural reform of the Australian Church and the performance of bishops.

This body needs to be separate from the hierarchy, conducted under accepted public service principles and staffed by experts in fields of governance, cultural anthropology and ecclesiology.

## Equality

The bishops have instigated a Church-wide future directions dialogue within the Catholic community. Known as a [Plenary Council](#), it is an important initiative but risks being clouded by perceptions of overt clerical control. To date, only bishops chair the important forums and only bishops and male clergy have full voting rights.

**In the interests of better engagement with the Catholic community, there should be a woman immediately appointed to co-chair the formal decision-making meetings.**

Anywhere else in society this would be a "no-brainer".

The medieval patriarchy of the institution is starkly out of touch.

## Lay appointments

The lay community deserve a potent say and a mechanism to have it heard.

Serious proposals for innovated governance that provides mutual roles for lay and clerical appointments must be placed on the table. This is best practice in our society and the institution should reflect what is increasingly seen as common sense.

## Openness

Urgent pastoral aspirations of Catholics, like access to communion for the divorced and meaningful ministry to the LGBTI community, must no longer be quashed by legalisms. Too often the Church has presented itself as a bulwark against changes in society and in turn become judgemental to the point of ostracising decent people of good will.

## Progress

An expansion of formal ministry roles, such a women deacons and married clergy, needs open and genuine discussion. Bolstering declining vocations to the priesthood using men from the developing world is a far from satisfactory solution for a cosmopolitan, diverse society such as our own.

[We need to build an Australian Catholic Church that reflects our culture, social mores and lifestyles.](#)

Parishioners must have a direct say in the merit appointments of priests and bishops. Directors of diocesan boards and trustees of Church assets must include equal numbers of lay and clergy. This will instil better accountabilities and less opaque processes and protocols. The veto decisions taken by bishops over a range of financial and human resourcing issues must be transparently reported.



**PHOTO:** [There has been a steadily growing indifference by the young to formalised Catholic practise.](#)  
(Reuters: Alessandro Bianchi )

# Relevance

None of this is rocket science. But for too long it has been resisted by the bishops as if these changes somehow threaten the tenets of the faith. In fact, they may well infuse the practice of the faith and make it more relevant and vibrant.

The upshot has seen a steady decline in attendances at mass and a growing indifference by the young to formalised Catholic practice. Not great KPIs for any organisation.

Perhaps most pressing is raising the voice of the members of the institution. So many Catholics have become disillusioned, sadly, even disaffected to the point of disinterest.

If the bishops insist on speaking then maybe they should talk less about sexual morality and more about social and corporate ethics.

If they wish to be heard, they should lead by example.

## The impact on Catholic parishioners like me

I was shocked by the Pell verdict. I still feel its impact on me as a declared Catholic with a deep commitment to my Church. This gives rise to tensions that I struggle with and I know that I am not alone in this.

At the same time, I have hope.

This is not some kind of romantic avoidance of reality, but the opposite: my hope is based on a confidence that to be Catholic means to be a part of a community that continually seeks to give personal faith a way to articulate with reason and understanding.

A set of life skills in a way. A disposition that helps me embrace life, its challenges and joys and make sense of things in confused moments.

This is the dynamism of being involved in a faith community steeped in a tradition of spiritual and intellectual discernment. It is not an ideological or merely doctrinal straightjacket.

Rather it is more akin to an impassioned search that involves a belief that life has a transcendent purpose, that the rational is not always sufficient and that mystery is a window into the depths of human consciousness that leaves residues of wonder, surprise and enlightenment.

It is this spirit that animates being a Church. It is the foundation for an institution and for those who lead and work in it.

It nurtures believers and seekers alike. It enables wisdom to come to the fore, especially through crisis.

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