

John Menadue – Pearls and Irritations

MICHAEL SAINSBURY. Australian Catholic Church – reform or die.

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Australia's Catholic bishops appear to have ceded control of the direction of wholesale reform in the church, with the announcement of a sweeping and unprecedented review into the management of dioceses and parishes by a group whose six-members include just one member of the clergy and three women including a nun.

The terms and membership of the review have been set by an Implementation Advisory Group, which was created by the Australian Catholic Bishop's Conference and Catholic Religious Australia in May 2018. It is likely to pave the way for a new governance model for the Australian church that would see the laity – and especially women play a key role in how diocese and parishes in Australia are managed.

Such a review was a key recommendation of the Royal Commission into Institutional Child Sex Abuse (no 16.7) yet it is more than 18 months since that body handed down its recommendations and only now do we have a document (a five-page outline) that details the scope and some of the intent of the review, well over two years since the Royal Commission finished its hearings.

There was initially a confused and non-unified approach to the sex abuse crisis by the Church, the Melbourne Diocese under then Archbishop George Pell formulated its own response and the Jesuits were outliers, taking some years to join Towards Healing, the unified response of the rest of the church's dioceses and religious orders. Yet Australia has been at the forefront of dealing with this tragedy, so the Catholic world is watching.

This review is critical not just for the future of the Australian church but for the future of the entire global church. And while they may not see it this way, after taking close to a year to respond to the Royal Commission, Australian Catholic Bishops' Council has effectively ceded its moral authority to the Royal Commission and with this central plank of its recommendations now finally underway, it seems the vast majority of the Commissions recommendations will at last be undertaken by the church.

Still, it is worth noting that there has been fierce debate inside the church over the recommendations of the Royal Commission. This has been especially of whether to hold a review of church management, the formation of clergy, voluntary celibacy and the sanctity of the Seal of the Confessional. So getting the review underway was not a forgone conclusion and it a victory for reform-minded Catholics over clericalist leaders.

The terms of the review have been set out in a six-page Project Plan for Review into the Management of Dioceses and Parishes, released by the IAG that outlines reasons, scope and time line for the review. It will focus on issues of transparency, accountability, consultation and lay participation and be conducted by a panel of six prominent Catholics, four of whom are lay persons and three of whom are women.

“The appalling revelations of widespread sexual abuse of children by clerics and in Church organisations and the mishandling of complaints of abuse have been a lightning rod

attracting and focusing attention on calls for cultural and practical renewal and reforms as an essential part of the response to the tragedy,” the Project Plan noted in its introduction

“If there is to be a restoration of trust and credibility in the Church in a way that will make it a safe place for all who come to it and that will enable it to proclaim its Gospel mission, there must be ‘real social and cultural transformation’. This can only occur if all of the People of God are involved in the way the Church is governed.”

Sr. Monica Cavanagh rsj, president of Catholic Religious Australia (CRA) which jointly announced the review with the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference (ACBC) spoke admirably plainly saying:

“The Royal Commission uncovered some practices that could have exacerbated the abuse of children and hampered the response to that tragic reality,”

“The establishment of this panel is another step in our serious response to the Royal Commission and will help establish a way forward for the Church into the future.”

Archbishop Mark Coleridge, president of the ABCB, was less forthright, no doubt having to pander to more conservative colleagues when he noted that some of the Church’s structure were devised “centuries ago” adding, *“We cannot ignore the wisdom that the Church has handed down through the years, but we must also be mindful that some of our practices fail to acknowledge and draw upon the best practice of other large, contemporary organisations.”*

The truth is that religious orders have been a long way ahead of the central church hierarchy on governance.

The review will be chaired by former Western Australian chief justice Neville Owen who is former chair of the Truth, Justice and Healing Council, which facilitated the Church’s engagement with the Royal Commission. He is a member of the IAG and is a current member of the Pontifical Council for the Protection of Minors.

Its other members are Mr Jack de Groot, CEO of the St Vincent de Paul Society NSW, chair of IAG, as well as:

- Ms Pauline Connelly, chancellor of the Archdiocese of Adelaide, deputy director of Centacare Catholic Family Services, Adelaide;
- Rev Dr Brendan Daly, lecturer in canon law, Good Shepherd College, Auckland, New Zealand;
- Sr Professor Isabell Naumann ISSM, president, Catholic Institute of Sydney;
- Adjunct Professor Susan Pascoe AM, president and chair of the Australian Council for International Development, former Commissioner of the Australian Charities and Not-for profits Commission and former executive director of the Catholic Education Commission of Victoria;
- Professor John Warhurst, Emeritus Professor of Political Science at the Australian National University and chair of Concerned Catholics Canberra Goulburn.

The review comes as preparations for the Australian church’s first Plenary Council in more than 80 years continue, with the ACBC preparing to announce on June 9 the main themes of the council which will shape its second phase. In pre-empting that announcement from the ACBC the IAG has already set a high expectation that governance will be a major theme.

The move cements the positions of de Groot and Owen who are arguably Australia’s most influential Catholics following the demise of Cardinal George Pell, who is now in jail for child sex abuse – the first time lay people has even been in this position.

“The establishment of the Governance Review Project is hugely significant to the Church both in Australia and in other parts of the world,” Jack de Groot, told me in a report in Catholic News Service in the US. “Australian Church authorities (Bishops, Religious and PJP’s) are supportive of this work. The child sex abuse crisis and the Royal Commission in Australia demonstrated the weaknesses of governance in the Church. Governance that is transparent, open to participation and leadership by the laity and focused on accountability is crucial.”

de Groot has also said the review will take its cues not just from existing Canon Law but from Vatican II and he is confident that there are structures existing within the church that point the way to the future, specially the governance of schools, hospitals and other charities where religious work collegially with lay experts in sound governance models.

The review comes as the operations of the government-run National Redress Scheme, the most significant recommendation of the Royal Commission up until now, has come under a cloud.

In April, a Committee of Inquiry of Australia’s parliament handed down a wide range of recommendations for changes to the NRS, including raising the maximum payment for victim from \$150,000 to \$200,000, a simplification of the application process and other major changes.

But these recommendations are on hold as Australia is now in the midst of an election campaign that could see a change of government after the May 18.

The six member panel will produce an interim report by the end of October and a final report should be provided to CRA and the ACBC in the first half of 2020, ahead of the first of the Plenary Council’s two meetings in late 2020 and mid 2021.

The unprecedented scope and urgency of this review is sign that, finally the leaders of the Australian church have at last taken the adage of “adapt or die” to heart.

This comes in a broader context of a declining church in Australia, the self-defeating sidelining of women in leadership roles and serial critical leadership failures underscored by the insistence by too many senior clerics of clinging to outmoded ways of thinking.

Parishioners will hope that this welcome change of direction that is fundamental to the future of the Catholic Church in Australia has not come too late.

The [announcement](#)

The project plan for the [review](#)

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