

EXCLUSIVE NATIONAL CATHOLIC CHURCH

Secret bishops' report calls for radical revamp of Catholic Church

By [Farrah Tomazin](#)

May 21, 2020 – 11:55pm

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Australia's Catholic Church could be dramatically overhauled to give lay people more power, increase the number of women in leadership roles and force parishes to open up their finances to the public.

A secret 200-page report being considered by the nation's bishops has called for unprecedented reform in a bid to make the church more inclusive and break down the structures that contributed to decades of clergy abuse and cover-ups.



Australia's Catholic Church is set for a shake-up. JACKY GHOSSEIN

The report is in response to the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Abuse, which found that the hierarchical nature of the church, coupled with its lack of governance, had created "a culture of deferential obedience" in which the protection of paedophile priests was left unchallenged.

But in a sign of how sensitive the church is to issues of reform, the body that commissioned the report - the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference - is unlikely to publicly release or reveal how it will respond to its 86 recommendations until the end of the year.

Brisbane Archbishop Mark Coleridge, the current president of the ACBC, acknowledged that the proposals would have "far-reaching implications for the Church's life and mission".

"To do it justice, the bishops will now take advice, consider the report in depth, conduct discussions at a provincial level, and otherwise prepare for a full discussion at their November plenary," he said.



Brisbane Archbishop Mark Coleridge, head of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference.
MELISSA ADAMS

The report is based on a 15-month review of church governance, which was conducted by a seven-member panel led by Justice Neville Owen, the former chair of the Truth, Justice and Healing Council.

The Age and the *Herald* understand that among its many findings is the notion that bishops should cede more control to professional laity, taking a more collegiate approach rather than simply being the chief decision maker.

Catholic dioceses have also been urged to set up pastoral councils or consultative bodies - ideally with equal numbers of men and women - to advise bishops and parish priests about pastoral matters.

And church dioceses and agencies would be required to meet similar governance standards to other entities, with clearer lines of accountability, greater oversight of risks and publicly available financial reports.

At present, religious charities are exempt from reporting to the national regulator, and the church has always been highly guarded about its multibillion-dollar wealth - even to the point of misleading the royal commission.

A [2018 *Age* investigation](#), for instance, found the church had grossly undervalued its property portfolio in both NSW and Victoria, while claiming that increased payments to abuse victims would require cuts to its social programs.

Since then, Melbourne Archbishop Peter Comensoli has committed to greater financial transparency, telling *The Age* and the *Herald* last month that "we're moving towards an annual report of some sort" - but the details were still being developed.

Insiders say that if the recommendations are adopted, the changes would represent a new paradigm for the church - as well as its schools, hospitals and charities - with potential flow-on improvements around the world.

But while some are cautiously hopeful, the secrecy surrounding the report has angered Catholics who want the contents openly debated ahead of next year's plenary council - the most significant assembly Australia's Catholic Church has held in 80 years.

Peter Johnstone, the convener of the Australian Catholic Coalition for Church Reform, said it was "supremely ironic" that the bishops were now refusing to release a report that called on them to be more transparent and inclusive of the communities they serve.

Catholics for Renewal president Peter Wilkinson agreed, calling for the report to be made public by the end of June.

The report was handed to the Bishops Conference on May 4. Other members of the governance review committee include St Vincent de Paul Society NSW chief Jack de Groot, former national charities commissioner Susan Pascoe and Emeritus Professor John Warhurst from Concerned Catholics Canberra Goulburn.



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