

May the Global Church Discover "Light from the Southern Cross"

Review and analysis of "potentially groundbreaking document" on Church governance

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As the entire world struggles with the challenges, tragedies, and constraints imposed by the current COVID-19 pandemic, the Catholic Church finds itself in the midst of an altogether different kind of global pandemic, one of a distinctly spiritual and ecclesial nature, the clerical sexual abuse scandal.

Although its import is certainly not as dire, the spiritual life and credibility of the Church are at stake. This, too, is a pandemic of global dimensions and, sadly, there is no vaccine on the horizon.

No, this pandemic must be addressed with a kind of comprehensive, ecclesial hygiene: unflinching ecclesial self-reflection and patient, courageous ecclesial reform.

The Church of Australia has been one of this ecclesial pandemic's most public hotspots. Sadly, it was not the Church's own vigilance that brought the pain and scope of the scandal to light, but a government mandated Royal Commission charged with investigating child sexual abuse in Australia.

That commission's report directed sweeping criticisms at the Catholic Church of Australia. It called on the Church to address a series of problems, principal among which was the systemic, institutional failures in Church governance and management structures. The commission was convinced that these were a major contributing factor in the scourge of clerical sexual abuse.

The Australian Catholic Bishops Conference (ACBC) and Catholic Religious of Australia (CRA) instituted the Implementation Advisory Group to respond to the Royal Commission Report.

That group, in turn, created the Governance Review Project Team (GRPT). This team was tasked with crafting, "in light of Catholic ecclesiology," a comprehensive response to the Royal Commission's critique of Church governance.

After a year of study and reflection, that team delivered to the ACBC a potentially ground-breaking document, "The Light from the Southern Cross: Promoting Co-Responsible Governance in the Catholic Church in Australia."

The Australian bishops have decided to delay the release of this document for six months while they engage its recommendations themselves. Fortunately, the editors at *La Croix International* have [obtained a copy](#) and have asked for a review and analysis of its contents.

Part One: "The Light from the Southern Cross"

This is a remarkable and, in many ways, an unprecedented document. It is impressive in its scope, depth of analysis and detailed recommendations. It is also quite long; including a glossary, bibliography, and appendices, the report comes in at 200 pages and includes 86 specific recommendations.

Consequently, this summary will be selective in consideration of the document's contents and principal contributions, focusing on what might have greater import for the global Church beyond Australia.

The teaching of Vatican II and vision of Pope Francis

The project takes as its starting point Pope Francis' call for a synodal Church, one marked by "the imperatives of co-responsibility, collaboration and genuine consultation between Church leaders (bishops and others) and the lay faithful" (11).

At the same time, the GRPT clearly hopes the document will contribute to the deliberations of the Plenary Council for the Church of Australia now likely to take place late in 2021 and continue into 2022.

The Catholic ecclesiology undergirding this document draws substantially from the teaching of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) and Pope Francis. It is thoroughly missiological in its orientation.

The Church does not exist for its own sake, but rather for the sake of its mission to proclaim and embody the Gospel" (25). All mechanisms for Church governance, the

report insists, must be assessed in light of their service to the Church's mission. Christ calls us to a life of discipleship in service of the coming kingdom of God.

The report invokes the council's teaching on the Church's fundamental sacramentality, thereby highlighting the interplay between the Church's divine and human dimensions. This sacramentality extends to the Church's "structures and forms of governance" which are both mediations of grace and human constructs that can impede God's grace; as such they are subject to reform.

Mission-oriented and Synodal

The missiological orientation is accompanied by a pneumatology that evokes the work of the Spirit in the life of the Church, a work that unites all believers while affirming that rich diversity manifested so powerfully at Pentecost. The reach of that Spirit is universal, extending beyond the community of the baptized to include "all people of good will" (27).

This Church lives in history as the pilgrim People of God. As pilgrim, it "will reach its completion only in the glory of heaven", as the council put it. This frees the Church to honestly assess its own failings.

As the People of God it is oriented toward the world as what the council termed the "seed and beginning of the kingdom on earth." And it is here that the report begins to integrate themes central to the present pontificate, particularly Pope Francis's call for a Church that is synodal in character.

Synodality requires that we become a listening Church. All the baptized must be invited into the Church's corporate discernment and mission. This theme runs through the entire document.

People of God, Body of Christ and the *sensus fidei*

As the body of Christ, the Church is built up by baptismal charisms that play a vital role in matters of Church governance. The report places ordained ministries within this charismatic economy as well. This move is decisive for overcoming the temptation to set the laity and the ordained in a competitive ecclesial relationship.

The report highlights key conciliar texts that consider both the theological integrity of the local Church as more than a mere branch office of the Church Universal and the

bishop's vital relationship to his local Church. This relationship requires the bishop to promote synodality in the local Church by attending carefully to the needs, abilities, and insights of his flock.

The report situates issues of parish governance within a Eucharistic ecclesiology. When the faithful gather at the Lord's Table, the reception of the Body and Blood of Christ effects as well the transformation of the gathered community into the ecclesial Body of Christ.

The report recalls the council's teaching that the whole Christian faithful are recipients of God's revelation. All the faithful possess a supernatural instinct for the faith (*sensus fidei*). Consequently, all the baptized participate in the traditioning process of the Church. All synodal structures, but particularly those present in parish life, must be attentive to their witness.

Church governance and the necessary change of the current ecclesial culture

Beyond reflection on these ecclesiological foundations, the bulk of the report offers a perceptive and informed consideration of Church governance at all levels of Church life: the global Church, the diocese, and the parish.

According to the report, "governance comprehends the framework of rules, relationships, systems and processes within and by which authority is exercised and controlled in the organisation" (38).

Governance mechanisms always function within a larger ecclesial culture. You can't change "governance practices and processes without a change in culture" (39). That culture must be informed by key ecclesial principles: subsidiarity, stewardship, synodality, dialogue, and discernment.

The report contends that a consistent application of the principle of subsidiarity is vital to good governance: "At the heart of the principle of subsidiarity is vesting involvement and decision-making as close as possible to those impacted by the decision" (41).

Checks and balances

Synodality, the report notes, requires that good governance include a robust set of checks and balances. Synodal governance, in turn, depends on the sustained dialogue and participation of the whole People of God in the life of the Church.

Finally, authentic governance presumes genuine discernment, a careful, deliberate and prayerful reflection that is sensitive to the impulse of the Spirit.

The GRPT considered, as well, principles gleaned from healthy civil governance. Of particular note is the report's recognition of the need to cultivate an ethical culture. This speaks to a glaring lacuna in current Catholic governance.

It is rare that one finds clearly articulated norms for professional conduct in the Church. Many who work in the Church labor without clearly articulated job descriptions and few benefit from regular performance appraisals. Indeed, the latter are almost non-existent for clergy.

Strengthening episcopal accountability

Authentic synodality, the report insists, requires far more developed structures of accountability than can be found in the Church at present.

Episcopal accountability has traditionally presented difficulties for Catholicism since in current Church law the bishop is only accountable to the pope, "who alone can appoint and remove bishops and intervene in the affairs of all particular Churches, including dioceses" (57).

One recommendation for global governance calls for incorporating more robust accountability mechanisms into the bishops' "ad limina" or quinquennial visits to Rome.

The report frankly admits the problematic nature of an exercise of episcopal power that is almost entirely without meaningful checks and balances. This contributes considerably to a pervasive clerical culture.

Clericalism is not only an attitude that denotes a distorted perception of relationships in the Church. It is also a behavior that fails to reflect the equality of all disciples of Christ, an equality that the New Testament underscores (64).

The only adequate antidote, the GRPT contends, lies in cultivating consistent practices of consultation and co-responsibility, features proper to an authentically synodal Church.

Although canon law affords a bishop many opportunities for consultation before making key decisions, few are mandatory and "[w]ithout the wholehearted embrace of a culture of synodal decision-making, structures will be 'simple masks without heart or a face'" (70).

Selecting bishops, appointing priests

One of the most important contributions of this document lies in its focused consideration of the selection and appointment of both bishops and parish priests.

The Church in Australia (and many other Churches throughout the world) has suffered from "inordinate delays" in the appointment of bishops (60). Moreover, there is little significant consultation in the current practice.

The report calls for much greater participation of local clergy and laity in both the creation of the diocesan profile that serves as the basis for an episcopal appointment and in the discernment process leading to the appointment itself.

Regarding the assignment of priests to a parish, the document encourages a fuller implementation of canon 524, which allows the bishop to consult the lay faithful prior to making priest assignments.

In current practice, of course, this rarely goes beyond placing a few phone calls. This could be enhanced by allowing select lay persons to participate in meetings of the college of consultors or "clergy appointments panel" when priest assignments are under consideration.

Reforming the seminary system

The Royal Commission had singled out flaws in current seminary practice as a significant factor in clerical sexual abuse.

In response, the GRPT strongly encourages a far greater role for lay men – and particularly women – in the screening and formation of seminarians. They should also

be included in any final decision regarding the acceptability of a candidate for ordination.

Again, given the historical and pastoral context of this report, the widespread clerical sexual abuse in Australia and elsewhere, it is not surprising that concern for the selection and formation of candidates for the priesthood was given such attention.

The GRPT insists that having an individual charism is not sufficient for ordination. The priest today must be able to work collaboratively, celebrating the gifts and contributions of lay ecclesial ministers in ways appropriate to a synodal Church.

Seminarians should be given more time in pastoral placements prior to ordination and have more extended opportunities for communal living outside the seminary.

The document also embraces the Royal Commission's call for the establishment of a National Protocol to govern the screening of candidates for priesthood and religious life throughout Australia.

The GRPT is to be commended for tackling a particularly sensitive pastoral reality for the Churches of Australia (and elsewhere!), namely the role of international priests for ministry in local Churches.

The drafters call for "greater consistency and rigor in the inquiries concerning the history and suitability of international priests for ministry in Australia and attention to their ongoing formation, both spiritually and culturally for service in this country" (85).

Pastoral councils and a greater role for women in Church governance

As the report notes, further development of mechanisms for synodality at both the diocesan and parish levels is clearly required.

The document proposes a change in Church law that makes diocesan pastoral councils mandatory in every diocese and it suggests that the role of these councils in diocesan decision-making be significantly expanded. There is a similar proposal to also make parish pastoral councils mandatory.

Adequate formation should also be provided for clergy and pastoral council members at both the diocesan and parish levels to ensure that the full potential of these synodal structures is realized.

Finally, one of the most consistent themes in this document is the persistent call for a greatly expanded incorporation of lay women in key governance structures.

The document speaks poignantly and directly regarding the negative consequences that follow from the lack of full inclusion of women in Church leadership, including ordained ministry.

There is much more of value in this extraordinary document, but I have tried to focus on aspects of the document of interest to the Church beyond the Australian shores.

In Part Two I will offer a broader assessment of the contributions of the document and situate it within the Francis pontificate.

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[Click here to read and download the full report and recommendations.](#)*

A promising roadmap for ecclesial reform and conversion

One of the world's top ecclesiologists analyzes an unprecedented Church governance report

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June 4, 2020

The Australian Catholic Bishops Conference (ACBC) and the Catholic Religious of Australia (CRA) instituted the Implementation Advisory Group to respond to the Royal Commission Report.

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The Australian bishops have decided to delay the release of this document for six months while they engage its recommendations themselves.

However, *La Croix International* was able to obtain a copy. I have already provided a summary in a previous article, looking at the points that have a value for the wider Church beyond Australia.

Here, in this essay, is my analysis of "The Light from the Southern Cross".

Admitting failure and daring to offer a way forward

It is perhaps surprising that we have given so much attention to what is ultimately nothing more than a committee report.

In different times, and in a healthier Church, such a report would have received little attention, largely because it would have been unnecessary to begin with. But today we have a Church wracked by scandal, yet led by a pope with a bold vision for ecclesial conversion.

In this time of ecclesial crisis, "The Light from the Southern Cross" report may offer a road map for key elements of what such a conversion would require.

This report holds considerable promise. It is grounded in sound ecclesiology. It offers a frank admission of the failings of Church governance at every level, and it dares to offer very specific recommendations for moving forward substantive ecclesial reform.

The drafting team included persons experienced in corporate and ecclesial governance – clergy, lay pastoral ministers, Church and school administrators, and leaders of

Church reform groups. It also included several respected theologians and experts in canon law.

This breadth of perspective and range of expertise paid dividends in the overall quality of the text.

The path to decentralization and synodality

The document builds on important themes central to this pontificate. Indeed, it represents the most thoroughgoing consideration to date of what healthy Church governance ought to look like in the light of Pope Francis' dream for a synodal Church.

Its frequent ecclesial application of the principle of subsidiarity is particularly significant since both St. John Paul II and Benedict XVI had questioned whether it was appropriate to apply this principle – first articulated in Catholic social teaching – to matters of Church governance.

Yet Pope Francis' repeated calls for the decentralization of Church authority suggest that he has fully embraced the principle.

The Argentinian pope has also insisted that synodality be enacted at every level of Church life. This document offers a raft of concrete reforms that would go a long way toward making that a reality.

It would be difficult to exaggerate the consequences for the pastoral life of the Church if the baptized members of a local Church were given genuine input into the appointment of bishops and the assignment of parish priests, as the report proposes.

How different would the pastoral life of a diocese look if diocesan pastoral councils reflected the diversity of the local Church and were regularly called upon for input before important pastoral decisions were made?

This would represent not only a check on unfettered episcopal power, it would move the Church well along the path toward becoming a genuine community of ecclesial discernment.

Sexism in the Catholic Church

Without ever using the term, the document recognizes the rampant sexism in the Catholic Church and emphasizes, time and again, the need for a much greater incorporation of women in Church governance, particularly at the higher levels of church decision-making.

It briefly mentions the Pan-Amazonian Synod's request for the consideration of the ordination of women to the diaconate and speaks forcefully of the negative impact that has come from the exclusion of women from ordained ministry.

The drafters are to be applauded for a consistent call for the inclusion of women that refuses to rely on Pope Francis' misguided appeals to some "feminine genius". It is to the equal dignity of women and to their many gifts and abilities that the document appeals in rectifying this scandalous Church failing.

Some may be disappointed that the document does not push harder in certain areas.

Cautious and respectful of the law

One of the notable features of the text is its determination to stay within the parameters of Church doctrine and, with but a few exceptions, Church law.

Regarding the latter, the GRPT does propose an emendation to canon 391 that would require bishops to consult the diocesan pastoral council and the council of priests before making particular law.

A second proposal called for amending canon 513 to grant that diocesan pastoral councils would continue to function when a see is vacant.

There were also calls for changes to particular law, mandating, for example, the establishment of diocesan and parish pastoral councils in every Australian diocese and parish.

The document is clearly much the better for the contributions of not just the ecclesiologists appointed to the team, but also the experts in canon law. Presumably their contributions helped ensure the document would offer, at every turn, appropriately expansive readings of what Church law allowed and opportunities within current law that had been underutilized.

Probing the parameters of the laity exercising jurisdiction

One particular example stands out. The report consistently advocates for greater participation of the laity in Church governance. However, this advocacy has to contend with a school of canonical interpretation insisting that laypersons may not exercise the power of jurisdiction.

The report offers an unexpected excursus on this debate and ultimately sides with an opposing school of interpretation, finding sufficient warrant in the tradition for the lay exercise of jurisdiction. This interpretation would considerably expand the ecclesiastical offices to which a layperson could be appointed.

One can argue that this measured approach to doctrine and Church law has greatly enhanced the chances for its actual implementation. But there are limits to this approach as well.

The accountability of bishops

For example, the report simply accepts Church law's claim that a bishop is only accountable to the pope. Unfortunately, current law in fact relies on a problematic equivocation at the Second Vatican Council.

While the report invokes conciliar teaching linking the ministry of the bishop to the local Church, in reality the council's teaching was somewhat ambiguous on this point.

It is true that there are important texts in both *Lumen gentium* and *Christus Dominus* that emphasize the link between the bishop and the local Church. But there are also texts that seem to ground the ministry of the bishop much more in his membership in the episcopal college and his obedience to the head of that college, the pope.

It is the second view that has dominated post-conciliar Church law and custom. Yet those conciliar texts that stress the bishop's relationship to the local Church find considerable support from the ancient tradition. In the early centuries of Christianity, bishops were elected by the local Church and prelates like St. Cyprian of Carthage insisted that bishops were accountable to their local flock.

The need to engage deeper ecclesiological problems with current law

At some point this ambiguity in Church teaching will have to be addressed if Church law and custom are to buttress the bishop's relationship to the local Church.

Doing so would challenge the current practice of offering episcopal ordination as an honorific for those granted bureaucratic or diplomatic posts. It would also challenge the frequent transfer of bishops from Church to Church or, if you will permit me, from "See to shining See."

This common practice encourages ecclesiastical careerism and, for that very reason, was prohibited in the early Church.

My point here is that a program for Church reform that is reluctant to engage deeper ecclesiological problems with current Church law will face certain limits regarding the scope of possible Church reform.

So, what is the larger import of this document? We will have to wait and see.

Translating the rhetoric of synodality into an institutional reality

Earlier in the year Pope Francis released his post-synodal apostolic exhortation *Querida Amazonia*. That document can be justly scored for its failure to respond adequately to synodal pleas for a greater role for women and for the ordination of *virii probati* to the priesthood.

But those failings should not allow us to ignore an inspiring series of social, cultural, ecological and ecclesial "dreams," and the conversions necessary to make those dreams a reality.

Francis has just promulgated a "[motu proprio](#)" that would clean up procedures for Vatican procurement of goods and services. It may sound arcane, but this represents a significant achievement in the long-awaited enactment of Vatican financial reforms.

And we are expecting soon the long-awaited apostolic constitution *Praedicate Evangelium* on more comprehensive curial reform. [Analysis of an earlier draft](#) suggests the constitution may actually have some reforming "teeth."

For example, in that earlier draft there was a consistent emphasis on incorporating the laity in Church decision-making, particularly with respect to episcopal appointments.

Although [some](#) have raised quite legitimate concerns that the reformist energy of this pontificate may have dissipated, there may yet be substantive opportunities for lasting ecclesial reform. If so, "The Light from the Southern Cross" could make a

considerable contribution by offering a blueprint for a much healthier exercise of governance.

However, for that to happen, this document cannot remain simply a committee report.

How will the ACBC and CRA respond to this document? One hopes that it will find its way into the deliberations of the forthcoming plenary council.

And were it to actually implement the bulk of these recommendations, the plenary council of the Church of Australia could mark the beginning of a genuine renewal of Catholicism on the Australian continent.

It might also contribute to translating Pope Francis' soaring rhetoric about a synodal Church into an institutional reality.

Either way, the Australian bishops should be mindful: the global Church will be watching.

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