



SIGNS OF THE TIMES

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November 25, 2020

Action plan missing from McCarrick Report can be found Down Under

The entire Church should take seriously the proposals for ecclesial reform coming from Catholics in Australia



The solution to the sex abuse crisis in the Catholic Church hangs in the balance between these two questions: What happened? and What needs to happen?

The so-called "[McCarrick Report](#)", which was compiled by the Vatican's Secretariat of State and published on November 10, is an example of unprecedented transparency under pressure.

It represents a fundamental step towards a better comprehension of what happened in the saga concerning Theodore McCarrick, the former cardinal-archbishop of Washington who was defrocked in 2019 for sexual abuse of minors.

The report, which was two years in the making, is in the form of a forensic analysis of who knew what and when. It shows a few key dynamics in the career system of the Catholic Church at the episcopal level.

The absence of concrete recommendations

But it ignores other factors that, for centuries, have been part of that system. Most seriously it largely skips over the role that money has played in keeping and providing one access to those Vatican rooms where the most consequential decisions are made.

Besides a methodological preface at the beginning explaining the way the report was compiled, the most significant lack of the McCarrick Report is the absence of a recommendation section at the end.

To make a comparison used already by David Gibson's analysis of the report, with the world of spies and [double agents](#), the results of the Vatican-launched investigation into McCarrick's career provides valuable intelligence, but it is not clear what can be done with this intelligence.

This has been noted by some of the most committed experts in the fight against abuse in the Church. A shining example is [Jesuit Father Hans Zollner](#), a member of the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors and president of the Center for Child Protection at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome.

It is evident that if the McCarrick Report is to be a real turning point it must have [institutional consequences](#), for instance, in the process of appointing bishops.

The urgent need for institutional change

The McCarrick Report shows a systemic problem with Church governance that has produced catastrophic consequences in the case of the former archbishop of Washington, but this was not a unique case.

In the last few years Pope Francis has accepted the resignation of a significant number of bishops for reasons related to the abuse crisis.

This brings up the issue of institutional change related to this crisis, something the Secretariat of State could not address in the report because of the ecclesial and theological dimensions that go beyond ecclesiastical or political considerations.

But other parts of the global Catholic Church are addressing this problem with concrete proposals. The Church in Australia is one of the best examples.

In the last few years Catholics there have found themselves in the unique situation of trying to deal with the findings of the "Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse" (2013-2017).

The Australian bishops have launched a Plenary Council with the involvement of the whole Catholic Church in the country.

"The Light from the Southern Cross"

The national episcopal conference (ACBC) and the conference of men and women religious (CRA) set up a task force to formulate [proposals](#) for Church reform. It worked between 2019-2020 and submitted a 208-page report called *The Light from the Southern Cross*. (Full disclosure: I was one of the four external experts called to work with the task force).

The report was finalized and submitted to the ACBC and CRA before the publication of the McCarrick Report. But, indirectly, it provides answers to the question of what needs to happen in the Church.

An integral part of *The Light from the Southern Cross* is a recommendation section.

Here a few of the recommendations:

- Reshape of the process for the appointment of new bishops to "embrace genuine discernment that includes clergy and a larger number of lay people"
- Make a more urgent effort to include women in "senior decision-making bodies"
- Mandate every diocese to have a pastoral council of laypeople that advises the bishop on major decisions
- Require each diocese to hold a local synod at least every 10 years
- Establish a national center for Catholic leadership and governance

The potential of *The Light from the Southern Cross*, in the context of the Plenary Council, goes beyond the sex abuse crisis, as ecclesiologist [Richard Gaillardetz](#) of Boston College underscored in his analysis of the report.

It would be naïve or disingenuous to read the task force's proposals separately from the consequences of the McCarrick Report.

Not a call for a revolution, but for changes that are already possible

"Unless change comes locally, it is not going to affect people's lives, even if the pope says something," noted theologian Richard Lennan in a recent [online conference](#).

An Australian priest who teaches at Boston College, he was also a consultant to the authors of *The Light from the Southern Cross*.

The report represents a challenge to those that never say openly that they are against change in the Church, but merely object to the "manner" of change.

Its proposals for reforming Church governance are deeply ecclesial. They do not aim to create something brand new, but to draw from the Church's existing resources.

The Light from the Southern Cross does not call for a revolution, but for institutional reforms that are already possible now.

It has been in the hands of ACBC and CRA, those who tasked the working group, since last August.

But there has been a pushback at various levels -- both in public and in private -- with some accusing the report's authors of disregarding Catholic ecclesiology, or worse.

Meanwhile, the episcopal conference meets this week to review the issue of [Church governance in Australia](#). And the bishops will also examine *The Light from the Southern Cross*.

The simple fact is that they and CRA now have a choice. They can take the report's proposals seriously and start acting on some of them, or they can ignore and dismiss the suggestions and the ecclesial spirit in which they are written.

Whatever the Church leaders do, or fail to do, will have far-reaching consequences well beyond the boundaries of the Land Down Under.

It will also say something about the entire Catholic Church's credibility in dealing with the abuse crisis. And that includes the credibility of Pope Francis.