

Melbourne Catholic Archbishop proposes big church restructure over ‘serious challenges’

By [Farrah Tomazin](#)

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Melbourne Catholic Archbishop Peter Comensoli is facing dissent from within over ambitious plans to restructure almost 200 parishes across the city, conceding the church’s painful history and parishioners abandoning the pews had caused serious challenges.

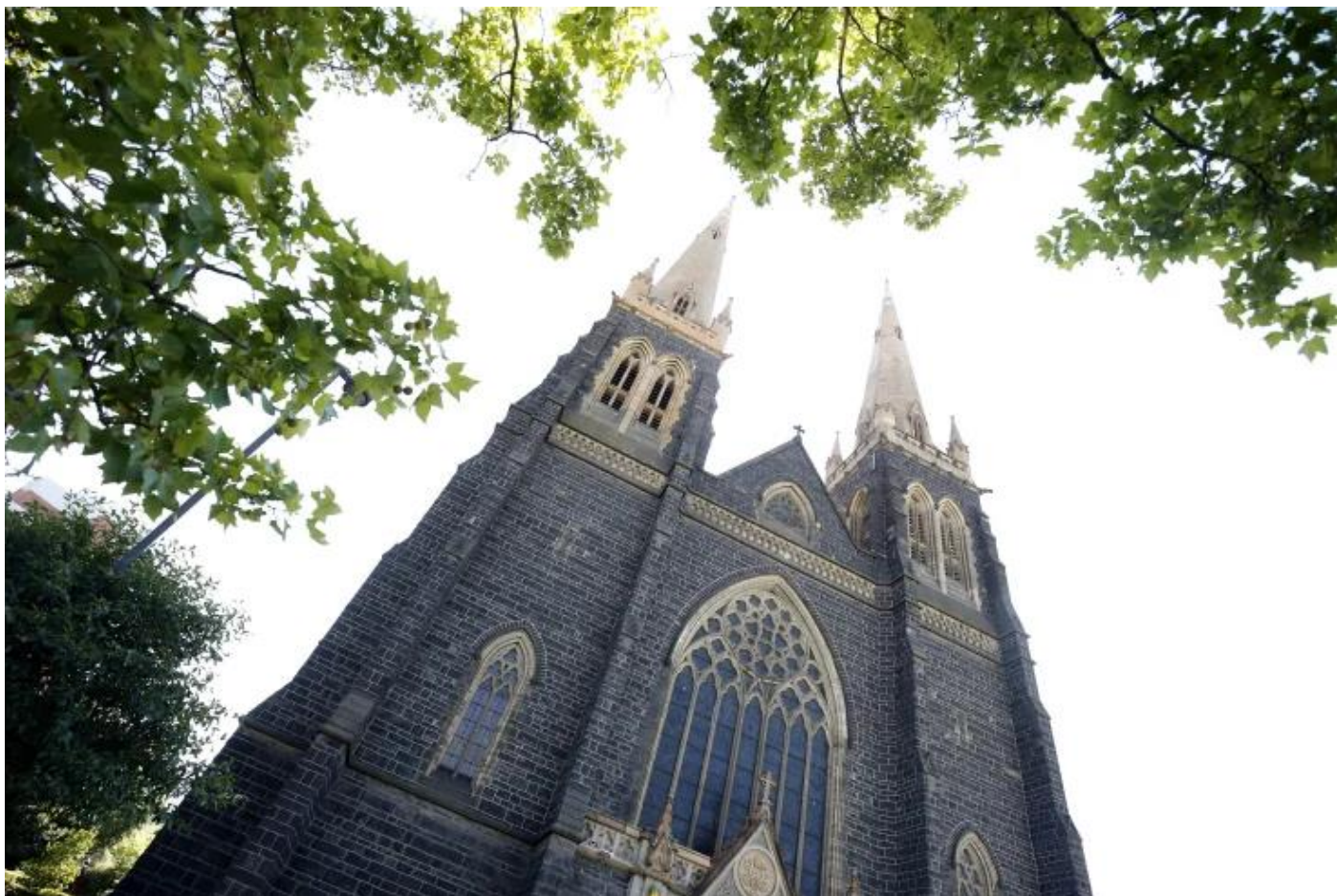
In the wake of Australia’s clergy abuse scandal, Archbishop Comensoli has warned that the archdiocese had reached a “threshold” and could “sink into the sunset” without structural reform.



Catholic Archbishop of Melbourne Peter Comensoli at St Patrick’s Cathedral on Easter Sunday. *LUIS ASCUI*

In briefings to church officials as well as in documents seen by *The Age*, the Catholic leader has suggested overhauling Melbourne’s 200-odd parishes into about 50 to 60 “missions” – parishes grouped together based on common districts, ethnic communities or needs. Under the plan, which could take between three and five years to implement, two priests could be based at each mission, living together in the same residence so they could pool resources.

Archbishop Comensoli has not suggested the restructure would result in parishes being forced to close. He insisted that the shift was merely designed to help parishes thrive and adapt to “changing circumstances” confronting the church.



St Patrick's Cathedral in East Melbourne. *DARRIEN TRAYNOR*

“The Gospel we have given our lives to is seriously challenged by cultural shifts, by social disinterest, by pandemic-induced loss, and by a very painful history,” he said in a recent briefing.

“It is hard yakka being servants of Jesus Christ in our current circumstances in Melbourne. But we also recognise that our present way of doing things needs re-framing: we know that a change of tactics is needed in the changed circumstances in which we live.”

The Archbishop's comments come less than three months before the most significant conference Catholic Bishops have held in years, the [Plenary Council](#), which is due to take place in October.

Figures show that the Catholic church is struggling to address priest shortages. More than half of the 224 priests and 28 seminarians in training in Melbourne 2019 were either born or recruited from overseas.

But while Catholics are pushing for reform, some have accused the Archbishop of failing to do the very thing the Plenary Council process promised: consult with lay people about the structure and governance of the church.

“Comensoli has effectively thumbed his nose at the Plenary Council,” said Catholics for Renewal spokesman Peter Wilkinson. “He has made a unilateral decision, settled on his own proposal, and then, only afterwards, invited them to comment on its implementation.”

Similar concerns were echoed in an anonymous letter from a church insider, which has been circulated to Melbourne’s priests in recent days. The document, seen by *The Age*, raised concerns that “this is one big amalgamation under the guise of mission” and that the changes could shift power within the archdiocese or lead to people becoming further disenfranchised with the church.

The Archdiocese has rejected these concerns, telling *The Age* that parishes would not be abandoned, and that the consultation process began a few weeks ago with two major briefings involving clergy and lay representatives.

“This is not an ‘imposition’, but a response to having listened within the Archdiocese,” a spokeswoman said.

“This will be a long journey. The next steps include regional meetings in August and September, followed by more local gatherings in October and November. All gatherings will involve both clergy and lay representatives, chosen at the local level.”

The proposed overhaul is the latest to take place under Archbishop Comensoli, who was appointed to lead the Melbourne Archdiocese in 2018 as the church was reeling from the Royal Commission into Institutional Child Abuse.

In that time, the Catholic leader, who cut his teeth as an assistant to then Sydney Cardinal George Pell, has undertaken a cultural and structural revamp bigger than any his Archdiocese has seen in years in a bid to reconnect with Catholics, tackle the Church’s debt and deficit, and make the archdiocese less “institutional” and more missionary in its focus.

Numerous key leadership roles in the archdiocese, including the director of his office to his general counsel and director of professional standards, now belong to women while the Council of Priests, which has historically operated on a reporting model, has been reformed as a strategic advisory group.

He has also moved to replace the Melbourne Response, the church’s controversial internal complaints scheme, in favour of a new national framework for survivors which he hopes will be more “person-centred”.

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