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The Australian Catholic Church is continuing on its groundbreaking path toward a potential dramatic overhaul with the announcement that a panel of experts will thoroughly review the governance and management structures of Catholic dioceses and parishes.

Such a review was a key recommendation of Australia's landmark Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, which handed down its findings in October 2017 after four years of hearings that rocked the country with serial tales of child abuse in Catholic dioceses and institutions, other Christian and religious institutions and secular groups.

But senior church insiders, who asked to remain unidentified because they were not authorized to speak, told Catholic News Service there has been fierce debate over the commission's recommendations especially whether to hold a review of church management. There also has been ongoing discussion on other key findings related to the management and formation of clergy, voluntary celibacy and the sanctity of the seal of confession, they said.

"The Royal Commission uncovered some practices that could have exacerbated the abuse of children and hampered the response to that tragic reality," said Josephite Sister Monica Cavanagh, president of Catholic Religious Australia, which jointly announced the review with the Australian Catholic Bishops' Conference.

"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," she said.

The review comes as an initiative of the Implementation Advisory Committee established by the Catholic Religious Australia and the bishops' conference in 2018 to manage the church's response to the Royal Commission's recommendations.

"The establishment of the governance review project is hugely significant to the church both in Australia and in other parts of the world," said Jack de Groot, CEO of the St Vincent de Paul Society in New South Wales and advisory committee chairman.

"Australian church authorities are supportive of this work," he told CNS. "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."

The terms of the review were outlined in a six-page document released by the advisory committee that sets the scope and timeline for review.

"The appalling revelations of widespread sexual abuse of children by clerics and in church organizations 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 document noted.

"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," it said.

The review 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 laypersons and three of whom are women.

"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 organizations," Archbishop Mark Coleridge of Brisbane, president of the Australian bishops' conference, said, noting that some church structures were devised "centuries ago."

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