News

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September 26, 2022
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Australian Archbishop Mark Coleridge will conduct an investigation into retired Bishop Christopher Saunders of Broome, using a process established by Pope Francis in 2019.

Young Aboriginal men from towns and bush communities in the remote Kimberley region of Western Australia accused Saunders of sexual misconduct. The bishop has denied the allegations.

Local media reported the inquiry in February, but it was not confirmed until late September.

Brisbane's Coleridge is president of the Australian Catholic Bishops' Conference.

The church investigation comes 14 months after police closed a three-year investigation into allegations of sexual misconduct against Saunders, who was not charged. While the church's investigation is underway, the Vatican ordered that Saunders leave the diocese, where he has continued living since resigning in August 2021.

During 2020 and 2021, retired Bishop Peter Ingham of Wollongong traveled to Broome and interviewed parishioners, diocesan staff and volunteers about Saunders' management style and financial management, but he did not investigate the sexual misconduct allegations due to the police investigation underway at the time.

Police have provided interviews with the accusers to church officials.

The investigation will be conducted under a process established in 2019 by Pope Francis in a motu proprio titled, *Vos Estis Lux Mundi*, outlining procedures for reporting allegations of sexual abuse and for holding accountable bishops, eparchs and religious superiors who protect abusers.

The papal document asks the investigator to report on progress every 30 days and submit a final report within three months, but the Australian church has gained additional time from the Vatican.

The process outlined for investigating bishops and other superiors is believed to have been used less than a dozen times anywhere in the world, with six confirmed *Vos Estis* investigations into bishops in the United States.

Its three-year trial period was over June 1, but the process appears to still be in use. It can be triggered by child or vulnerable adult sexual abuse allegations, the possession of child abuse material or covering up of sexual abuse allegations by senior clerics.

"The church's protocols, particularly those enshrined in Pope Francis' document *Vos Estis Lux Mundi*, mean the outcome of a police investigation does not prevent the church from conducting its own inquiry," Coleridge said.

"I have assembled a team of people who are highly qualified to conduct this investigation in a thorough way, mindful of the particular needs of the people of the Diocese of Broome," he said. "Their job will be to gather, as best they can, all relevant information to pursue truth and justice for everyone involved."

The investigation comes amid increasing legal cases against the church and some senior clerics in Australia. These include a civil suit against Cardinal George Pell, who was found guilty, but later acquitted by the High Court of Australia on charges of sexual assault against two choir boys in 1996; one of the accusers is now deceased.

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