

Is Cardinal Pell a Martyr?

The Australian Church Tries to Move On

By [Austen Ivereigh](#)

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Because he has a weak heart and must build strength in his chest muscles, the seventy-seven-year-old Australian cardinal asks for a broom he can push around the jail's exercise yard each day. The remaining twenty-three hours of his solitary confinement in Melbourne Assessment Prison George Pell reads and writes, when not sleeping and praying.

He is not allowed to say Mass.



Australian Cardinal George Pell outside the County Court in Melbourne Feb. 27, 2019 (CNS photo/Erik Anderson, Reuters)

He tells some that his prison sentence is a retreat; to others he describes it as a martyrdom. Never exactly the contemplative sort—as archbishop of Melbourne, Pell used to tell his priests he liked to get his prayers over and done with in the morning, to leave more time for the day—the second rings more true, especially for his supporters. They say that Pell, who tells it how it is, has always been a lightning rod, and is now a scapegoat, the victim of a monstrous injustice.

The former Vatican finance chief will next week learn whether he is to serve the remainder of a non-parole minimum sentence of three years and eight months for the rape of two choirboys in Melbourne Cathedral in 1996. These are charges that he has always vigorously denied and that many find frankly incredible. They strained the credulity of the first jury at his trial last year, which was reliably rumored to be deadlocked ten to two in his favor.

But then a second jury last December went unanimously the other way, shocking a respected Jesuit human-rights lawyer who sat in on the hearing. Because he is so obviously not part of “Team Pell,” the [article Fr. Frank Brennan, SJ, later wrote](#) has colored many people's view of the trial. His amazement that the jury could have

convicted on the basis of a single complainant's "improbable if not impossible" evidence has persuaded many that a major injustice has been committed.

That was a common view among dozens of knowledgeable Catholics I spoke with during a week of talks and lectures in Sydney and Melbourne in March. Among them was Fr. Brennan. When we shared a panel at Melbourne's Newman College he had just emerged from his spiritual exercises to learn that, because of his article on Pell's conviction, the city's university had decided not to award him an honorary doctorate in divinity.

But I also met Catholics who took a different view. They weren't concerned so much with the details of the case as with the wider principle: Hadn't the church learned, after all this time, that victims are almost always telling the truth, that abusers brazenly lie? Some drew my attention to [a cogent riposte to Brennan](#) by a Dominican friar in Melbourne who warned against assuming that the jury had got it wrong.

Yet what struck me most was how, whatever their view of Pell as a man and church leader—and many are highly critical of his impact on the Australian Church over the past twenty-five years—so many leading Catholics I spoke with just didn't think it possible that Pell could have committed such a brazenly violent, wanton act in such a public place, so soon after being appointed archbishop of Melbourne, and at the same time as he was setting up a legal redress scheme to cope with claims from clerical-abuse victims. It just didn't square with the man they knew. "If Pell's a pedophile," one priest who had lived with him for three years told me, "I'm a Dutchman."

But therein lies the difficulty. People find it difficult to accept that someone they know—especially a well-known person they have respected—has performed vile acts on children. They look for evidence that confirms it can't be true, and see everything through that lens. Many pointed, for example, to the way the case eventually made it to trial, after a two-year trawling operation by Victoria police that became personal. If ever a movie comes to be made, it will surely feature the intense mutual loathing of Police Chief Commissioner Graham Ashton and Cardinal Pell, each the strongman of their powerful institutions, jousting through media communiqués.

Was there a police stitch-up? Or was the cardinal's sole living accuser—who everyone agrees is credible—suffering from mistaken identity, compounded by years of drug addiction? Team Pell points out that the accuser's account to police in June 2015 of sex abuse in St. Patrick's Cathedral in 1996 bears an uncanny resemblance to a case in Philadelphia written up in *Rolling Stone* in 2011 concerning a Father Engelhardt and a boy called Billy Doe. The two accounts are so similar, [says Keith Windschuttle](#), editor of *Quadrant* magazine—a key outlet for Team Pell—that "the likelihood of the Australian version being original is most implausible."

The lawyers I spoke with in Sydney and Melbourne agreed that the verdict is sufficiently shaky for there to be a strong chance of Pell's appeal succeeding. If a majority of the three judges conclude that the jury could not have been satisfied beyond reasonable doubt he was guilty, Pell will walk. Yet if the appeal succeeds on the second or third grounds, which concern the conduct of the trial itself (the trial judge refused to allow a video graphic to be used in the defense's closing speech, for example), then the appellate judges could still order yet another trial.

But will either of those outcomes settle the matter? I went to Australia thinking they would; I came away thinking the contrary. Because while the Pell controversy is superficially about whether or not he is guilty of particular acts of sexual abuse, in reality it is about so much more.

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I was (and still am) inclined to believe him innocent, no doubt because I knew him, a little: he invited me to Sydney for a conference in 2013, where he was gracious and hospitable, and we bumped into each other in Rome after he was appointed to the Vatican the following year. In March 2017, I interviewed him as prefect for the Secretariat for the Economy on financial reform. I was at the press conference in the Vatican that July, when he made the dramatic announcement that he was returning to Australia to face police charges, his flint expression barely concealing his fear.

In Rome many were relieved to see the back of him. He was confrontational, overbearing, and crude. But others admired him as courageous, hardworking, and bloody-minded. Francis needed him, at least at the start of the reform, a *brutta figura* to counter the *bella figura* of Vatican financial opacity, an Anglo-Saxon juridical scourer to clean up the Vatican's shady favor-trading networks. Pell admired Francis as a leader, for the same reasons: the pope was courageous, and was bloody-minded in challenging the corrupt. But he clearly regarded Francis as a threat to doctrine, as he made clear at the family synod. Pell behaved abominably, baselessly accusing the pope of rigging the synod to secure an outcome displeasing to conservatives.

But while I was inclined to think him innocent, I also found repugnant the martyrdom narrative Pell and his supporters had created around his prison cell. The cardinal's longtime friend and chief cheerleader in the United States, John Paul II biographer George Weigel, had even [likened Pell's case to that of Captain Alfred Dreyfus](#) in *fin-de-siècle* France, when a young artillery officer of Jewish descent was unjustly blamed for espionage by the anti-Semitic royalist establishment. Because Pell "embodies what the cultural and political left in Australia fears and hates: Christian doctrinal and moral orthodoxy," said Weigel, the cardinal had to be expelled as a foreign body from Australia's army of secular modernists. He had to be "destroyed" so that the "revolution of lifestyle libertinism and political progressivism can proceed unimpeded."

This is a common refrain among his supporters. Pell is doing time because of his *parrhesia*. He is called now to suffer just as his sixteenth-century heroes SS John Fisher and Thomas More once did under Henry VIII, as John the Baptist did when he queried Herod's domestic set-up.

But there is nothing in this goodies-and-baddies narrative that assigns any responsibility to Pell himself, or to the culture he represents. True, there is real hostility

to the church in Australia—liberal contempt mixed with anticlerical fury—but mostly it is directed not at the church’s teaching but at the kind of clerical *puissance* Pell represents, with its haughty defensiveness, its finger-wagging moralism, and its tribal ruthlessness. Pell has rich and powerful allies. He always “shopped in the high end of town,” as one leading church figure put it to me. He has particularly spared no expense in his own self-defense, recruiting the best and most expensive lawyers to crush the many attempts to pin on him charges of abuse and cover-up.

It is impossible to read Louise Milligan’s carefully documented [Cardinal: The Rise and Fall of George Pell](#), which draws on many sources including public inquiries, and still see Pell the way he has always presented himself: as a reformer somehow detached from the shocking levels of clerical abuse and its cover-up in the Australian Church that were laid bare in the Royal Commission’s exhaustive report in December 2017.

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The epicenter of the hyper-clericalist, homophobic yet homoerotic culture that fostered that abuse was Pell’s diocese of Ballarat, where he was a key player as a consultor and episcopal vicar for education under Bishop Mulkearns in the 1970s. The stories of Pell the fixer, “back-door George,” who would mop up after abusive priests—pacifying parents, keeping it all in house—are just too many to ignore. Yet rather than recognize, in all humility, just how blind the church was in those days to the suffering of victims, how it minimized and overlooked what were seen as sexual sins that should be kept in the family, Pell’s tactic has always been to deplore that culture while emphatically denying that he was ever a part of it.

Is his lack of self-doubt connected with what he can ill afford to admit? The evidence of Pell’s pedophilic tendencies, testimonies from boys he played with for hours in “Eureka pool” in Ballarat in the late 1970s, are meticulously (and devastatingly) documented in Milligan’s book. The claims were examined in depth in 2002 in an inquiry by a retired Supreme Court justice, Alec Southwell, who [found the central witness in that case credible](#), but said corroborative evidence was insufficient to bring a prosecution for indecent assault.

The so-called “swimmers’ trial,” using the same testimony and more, was due to start in April this year, following the “choirboys trial”: it is said Pell’s legal team feared the swimmers’ trial more, because so many were willing to testify. But it won’t go ahead after [a February hearing ruled](#) that a testimony that Pell had groped a ten-year-old in 1975 could not be used as “tendency and coincidence” support of the evidence against him at the Eureka pool.

To read the victims’ testimonies in Milligan, to speak to Australia’s Catholics, and to review Pell’s now fifteen-year-long battle with inquiries and hearings, is to feel a kind of exhaustion. Here is a man who seems to have been in a battle all his life, who has defined himself as much by what he is against as what he is for, who relishes a fight

because it keeps him in the limelight, yet who too often confuses his own sense of rejection with a sense of persecution.

Perhaps it all began when Pell was a boy at Ballarat's Corpus Christi minor seminary, a place that turned out a remarkable number of pedophiles, where there was no greater taunt than to be a "woofter," and in whose clerical, muscular, homoerotic world he thrived as a natural leader. Milligan makes much of Pell's admission in a television interview that he was so buttoned-up because he was controlling his fiery temper; she does not doubt that, if Pell really did rape those choirboys in that alleged outburst of abusive rage in 1996, it was "Pell's last really spectacular slip-up," one that shocked him thereafter into exercising an iron self-control. (There have been no accusations since then.)

Whatever the truth of the "choirboys" case, many people I spoke to in Australia believe that Pell and his legal team made a huge mistake in not letting him testify. Now it was his arrogance—and with it, the church's—in the dock. Most people, Catholic or not, understand that a priest is a pastor, and that pastors are supposed to be transparent: they answer questions; they are accountable.

Maybe what the jurors saw was the church again spending a lot of time and money defending its reputation. They saw yet another alleged victim, with a compelling story of pain. And they saw his alleged abuser, a churchman of power like few others, refusing even to take the stand to answer questions. Perhaps what tipped the jury was not an objection to Pell's defense of the timeless truths of Christianity, but to the defensive, corporate, reputation-obsessed church.

If so—if such reactions, though understandable, blinded them to the evidence—then Pell must be freed. But it would still be wrong to say that he was convicted only because of the religious persecution of an innocent man. If there was one part of Judge Peter Kidd's verdict that was beyond dispute, it was that the cardinal's conduct was "permeated by staggering arrogance."

What I saw in Australia in March is that that culture is now past. The new culture of the church down under is at the opposite shore of everything Pell and his era epitomized. In Parramatta diocese outside Sydney I met that new culture in its remarkable Franciscan bishop, Vincent Long, who spoke of leadership as service, of the priesthood as a means to empower, not to exert power. I met the organizers of Australia's plenary-council process, which is listening in humility to the prompts of the Spirit. I met it in Melbourne's people of God, who are finding their voice. And I came away thinking maybe Pell's time in prison has not been a retreat, or a martyrdom, or even a monstrous injustice, but an expiation that is helping to bring about a long overdue pastoral conversion.

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