

After the tumult and the shouting

In the eye of the storm, where the tragic drama of Cardinal Pell is more symptom than cause, something very good may grow

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With the dismissal of Cardinal George Pell's appeal against his criminal convictions and the unlikelihood that he will be given leave to appeal to Australia's highest Court, the Catholic Church in Australia now can't escape its moment of truth.

The dismissal of Cardinal Pell's appeal against his criminal conviction for child abuse is the latest, but by no means the last, chapter in the prosecution of the former Archbishop in Sydney and Melbourne and leader of the Vatican's financial reform.

He will soon have to face further civil charges related to sex abuse and possibly other criminal charges arising from his testimony to the Royal Commission into child sex abuse. Two volumes of its report are yet to be released and observers believe that is because those volumes contain material that could have prejudiced his trial on the charges he is convicted of.

Equally, it is the latest but by no means the last chapter in the collapse of a particular form of Catholicism in Australia that he championed.

Cardinal Pell aimed to do no less than reform the Church in Australia and lead it to some imaginary past that embodied all that he thinks Catholicism is about: orthodox belief, institutional discipline and, strangely in the light of his recent conviction, moral rectitude.



A general view of St Mary's Cathedral in Sydney, Australia, Aug. 21. Cardinal George Pell's appeal has been dismissed by the Court of Appeal and he will remain in prison for sexually abusing two boys in the 1990s. (Photo by EPA/JOEL CARRETT AUSTRALIA AND NEW ZEALAND OUT/MaxPPP)

The culture of Catholicism that Pell grew up in and sought to regenerate is one that Catholics in many parts of the world under the age of 60 are familiar with: the pre-Vatican II clerically controlled Church, centralist in administrative structures, pious in its religious practice and ritualistic in its expressions of faith.

Authoritarian governance and cultic performance were the hallmarks of a Catholicism in Australia characterized by the old saying about what was expected of lay Catholics in Australia: pay and pray.

Catholicism was all about external compliance and ritual performance. A lot of non-Christian religions can be like this too as any familiarity with Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism will confirm.

The extra element that Catholicism in Australia shares with other parts of the world such as the United States is its heavy reliance on tribal allegiances and loyalties that also had a serious dose of self-interest to propel them.

Catholics have always arrived in Australia as largely poor and uneducated minorities mostly from Europe, although today they frequently come from Asia – Filipinos, Indians and Chinese in the main.

Almost all landed with little in their pockets, frequently uneducated and unskilled and having to start a new life from scratch. The Church provided the engine rooms for the desired upward mobility: education.

Enter the Church, which provided the elevator to success and prosperity: an education system which has always provided schooling – primary, secondary and in the last 30 years, tertiary – for marginalized communities looking to "make it."

The points of intersection between the Church's services and Catholics' needs were many and deep. For a century and until the last 50 years, those institutions drew their personnel – priest, bothers and nuns – mostly from Ireland before locally recruited Religious took their place.

Until the Federal Government covered the salaries of teachers in Catholic schools from the 1970s, these religious workhorses – unpaid, poorly trained and living mostly very poorly – were the tribal heroes who were admired and esteemed by one grateful generation after another for the sacrifices they made to help Catholics "get on."

But once Catholics could be properly paid to teach in Catholic schools, thanks firstly to the government of Gough Whitlam (1972 – 1975) and then adopted by successive governments, teachers could share in this ministry without the encumbrances of poverty, chastity and obedience.

Very visibly behind this massive cultural project was the colossal integrator: the parish led by the clergy. Another matrix of organizations such as ones for boys and girls, newly married couples and young people's sporting clubs were formed and marriages by the hundreds were celebrated in parishes each year.

But side by side with these social bonding organizations were myriad devotional groups focused on different Saints, sundry prayer formats, processions in honor of Saints or the Eucharist and of course the weekly Eucharist, to which at least 60 percent of Catholics in Australia came in the 1960s.

That has largely evaporated, parishes have declined and the number of clergy has consistently fallen for 40 years. Catholics still send their children to Church schools in large numbers and appear at Church for major feasts but gone are the days of Catholics as a mass phenomenon in the way they used to be.

My own biography reflects many of these themes from the past and what has become of them. Although, and very unusually, my parents were divorced when I was 15, there was never any questioning of the significance of the Church and its processes in my childhood.

I attended one of the custom-made schools set up by the Jesuits to create an educated professional class among immigrant Catholics and was taught mostly by priests.

Not unusually, I joined the Jesuits at 18 and was one of 30 in the novitiate. At that time (1971), there were 320 Jesuits in Australia with an average age in the high 40s and another 50 on a mission in India. The Australian Jesuit Province had 90 in training. The Province was one for school teachers and everyone seemed very clear about what our mission and tasks were.

When I joined, I could not really be accused of having a spiritual life. I presented myself at the age of 17 and told the provincial of the time – he later left the Order – that I wanted to join and he listened to my reasons and "Ah, yes, well you should pray about the decision."

"Pray about the decision?" I asked myself. Why should I do that? I've made up my mind and the Jesuits should be grateful I'm volunteering! I had a bit to learn about faith and the interior life. The absence of one in an aspirant says all you need to know about how deep the journey of faith was in that adolescent.

I think that's true for a lot of Australian Catholics. Which is why it's so easy to let faith slip in a world of diverse opportunities.

Today, there are just over 100 in the Province, nine in training and a third of the Province is over 80. The Jesuits still own (but don't run) the schools the way they did in my childhood and what our sustainable commitments are is up for discussion.

The same could be said for congregation after congregation, diocese after diocese in Australia.

Why has all this happened?

The answers are well known: geographic and social mobility weakening the sense of community and inherited values shared across generations; a different evaluation of sex and relationships in Australian life; greater disposable wealth; higher levels of

education that make religious narratives less and less relevant and other features of social change common in developed countries.

These have provided Catholics with alternatives and revealed just how superficial the ties that bound the community were.

The tribalism, piety, ritual and obedience to authority that was so much part of Catholicism until about 1970 has unraveled.

Australians are pragmatists, care little for institutions or their authority figures and as a nation of people are not renowned for the depth of their thought on many subjects apart from sport. The Catholic Church in Australia reflects just these features of national life.

But these circumstances also provide opportunities for discovering a new level of faith appropriate for the new era Catholicism finds itself in. That is what some are making of the Plenary Council — a national synod for the Church in 2020.

Its success will depend — apart from the guidance and following of the Holy Spirit — on quite a new way of being Catholic: a focus on the horizontal rather than the vertical in Church life; recognition of lay leadership and the leading role of women in the Church, which actually exists already but is not acknowledged; but above all, an interior journey for those committed to the transformation of the Church.

But most of all it will require Australian Catholics to take responsibility for the Church and that's not something that's been asked or expected much of in the past and in the high days of clericalism, when it was actually discouraged.

Making choices and following unfamiliar directions is really the only way out of unraveling the mess in the Church in Australia.

All the same, it has its big challenges as one person working at a local level confided to me recently because discerning, choosing and deciding are an intimidating challenge: "My only concern is that this kind of discernment requires a level of spiritual maturity that most Catholics don't seem to possess but, hey, maybe this is partly the aim of the discernment process, to pull us Catholics up by the bootstraps and get us thinking for ourselves for a change. I am terrified at the prospect. But I have offered to run two discernment sessions for the parish."

In the eye of the storm, where the tragic drama of Cardinal Pell is more symptom than cause, something very good may grow.

The Australian Church is just where the best things can happen – at the foot of the Cross which, in John's Gospel, is where Pentecost happens. The scandal, tragedy and sheer horror of the Pell conviction is only the most bold statement available of where the Australian Church is.

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