

Today's Martyrs – George Pell

At the end of the 2015 Lenten season, Australian Christians experienced a rude awakening. Four Catholic churches in the Melbourne area were burned in arson attacks, just before Easter. Why? Because they had employed pedophile priests, some as recently as three decades prior. And what was the response by public pundits to the loss of these historic buildings? For many, elation and joy, and the Australian Broadcasting Corporation gave them airtime to express it. Few were critical of the ABC for granting such a platform, or of the words themselves.



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Modern Western concepts of justice prohibit collective guilt or punishment. Nor do they allow for scapegoating, namely the substitution of the innocent for the guilty. Nor do they allow for abandonment of due process concepts, the most important one being presumption of innocence. This essay will show that Australia, like much of the West, is under great pressure to abandon its legal and judicial heritage.

Australian Catholics, like Christians everywhere, have for decades suffered from horrific cases of sexual abuse by their clergy. Some Australian politicians, lawyers, and much of the media have for years openly used these events to attack the Church in an effort to silence its voice. For example, Archbishop Philip Wilson was charged in 2015 by Newcastle police with having withheld evidence of a sexual assault *in 1973*; some charges came from a convicted pedophile priest! He was tried in the media long before his jury convicted him in May 2018, despite substantial evidence that he had sent other clergy to the police with evidence of such crimes. In December 2018 an appellate court overturned his conviction on the grounds that there was simply no evidence to convict, and the prosecutors then admitted three weeks later that they had “no reasonable grounds” for further appeals; in effect they admitted they were either incompetent or corrupt in their pursuit of an innocent man.

Archbishop Wilson was widely hated in certain circles for his defense of orthodox Christianity. So was Cardinal George Pell. The media castigated Pell after he denied communion to homosexual activists in 1996. When his diocesan seminary faculty threatened to resign over his order that they say daily Mass he accepted their resignations and replaced them with more orthodox teachers. Around the same time he became nearly the first bishop in the world to create an effort to compensate victims: the Melbourne Response. Unfortunately his efforts to protect church assets led to conflicts of interest in the Response.

Pell had also been the subject of charges of hiding or perpetrating sex abuse. The Victoria state police opened a criminal case long before it had a complainant, a highly suspect move. In 2013 he was called to the Vatican to clean house in the Vatican Bank, where he found almost a billion euros in hidden accounts. In June 2017 he was charged in Australia with sexual assault; he resigned his Vatican position and returned to Australia to mount his defense, rather than hide in the Vatican.

The first trial ended in a hung jury; some reports say 10 out of 12 voted to acquit. The second jury never knew this: the secrecy laws meant to protect the integrity of the trial worked against Pell. During the trial the defense showed conclusively that the alleged crime scene was a public space normally full of people, and that Pell was never alone. One accuser recanted on his deathbed. The prosecution attacked a Jesuit witness by repeatedly calling him a Christian Brother, thus alluding to a Catholic religious order particularly rocked by sex scandals. Pell was convicted (to the apparent surprise of the judge, and just five days after Archbishop Wilson was freed), and the conviction was announced after the prosecution decided it would not prevail in the next trial and so the secrecy was lifted. Pell was taken into custody.

Throughout this legal process Pell has been personally silent. This is quite unusual for him. As a former sports figure and champion of Christian orthodoxy he has been pugnaciously vocal over the years. In fact, apart from one apparent lie he told in a media interview (concerning whether he had seen a photo of a victim's suicide attempt) and the conflicts of interest within the Melbourne Response (the motives and extent of which have always been put into a bad light by the media) the main complaint against Pell has always been that he has been 'unsympathetic' to abuse survivors and heterodox church members. This, it seems, was the real reason for his arrest and conviction: the crimes were likely fabrications used to punish his secular sins. His critics are correct: this *is* how he has appeared to the public much of the time. The problem is, the Christian world can see that he was not only 'unsympathetic' in the eyes of some valid criticism, he was also so to critics for whom 'sympathy' could have been gained only by the complete surrender of himself and the Church to the ways of the world. Some critics are valid critics, and some are wolves, and we often forget that the symbolic purpose of a bishop's staff or crozier is to beat back the wolves.

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