

Cardinal Pell case shows how far we've come



On the map, Australia is thousands of miles away from the United States, but [the recent case in Australia of Cardinal George Pell](#) is so close in so many respects to American Catholics that it presents Americans with important lessons to be learned and realities to be considered.

As for similarities, Australia and the United States are strong, historically uninterrupted and vigorous democracies. Both have social and economic problems, but the population of each country experiences a high standard of living. People in both countries are educated. Many are highly educated.

Since American and Australian law both proceed from British law, and from the British cultural attitude about law, individual human rights are supreme. Police and the courts are held to high expectations, and people insist upon impartial and fully informed courts.

As for the Catholic Church, the percentage of Australians who identify themselves as Roman Catholics is about the same as that applying in this country. The Church there, as here, grew from hearty and resolute immigrant stock, and these beginnings, great Catholic institutions, schools, hospitals and social services, became indispensable aids to the common good.

Presently, in Australia, church-going and vocations are down, as is the case in this country. The last two decades have seen the troubling revelation of many cases of clergy sex abuse. The image of the Church in Australia has greatly suffered.

Cardinal Pell was bishop of a small diocese, then archbishop of Melbourne, and finally Pope St. John Paul II sent him to

Sydney, Australia's largest city and most important Catholic center, quickly thereafter appointing him a cardinal.

Pope Francis put Cardinal Pell in charge of Vatican finances. People in and out of the Catholic Church regarded George Pell to be among the best and the brightest.

Everything soured when prosecutors accused him not only of downplaying cases of clergy sex abuse, but of sexually assaulting youth himself. He was arrested, tried and convicted. In a process resembling the American system of justice, he appealed the conviction. The Australian High Court, equivalent of the U.S. Supreme Court, emphatically and decisively, without dissent among its seven judges, reversed the conviction, declaring that the charges lacked any plausible evidence.

The High Court's ruling not surprisingly pleased Cardinal Pell's supporters but not his critics.

All the events surrounding the case, including the emotions, point to a fact that should be welcomed. Society is taking sexual affronts seriously, unlike its approach not that long ago when lawyers, judges, police and legislators ignored it, because nobody cared. Physicians ignored it.

Church leaders all too often ignored it, but they hardly were alone.

That day has ended. For example, as the national election gets underway, the U. S. Supreme Court is now hearing a case involving President Donald Trump's alleged adulterous relationship with a porn star, and the media reports accusations that former Vice President Joe Biden sexually harassed a female employee in his office.

Twenty years ago, few would have cared. Reports would not have been published or broadcast.

The Church has changed insofar as disciplining bishops is concerned. In a move almost unprecedented, Pope Francis accepted the resignations of virtually all the bishops in Chile because they were said to have mishandled cases or worse. In this country, Theodore McCarrick, once archbishop of Washington and a cardinal, after his guilt was determined, received the most stringent punishment Church law provides for a cleric: dismissal from the priesthood. Other bishops around the world have met the same penalty when their fault was established.

The pope relieved Cardinal Pell of his responsibilities when charges were filed, but further actions were pending until courts in Australia ruled.

Another lesson should be learned. Despite the High Court's firm decision, Cardinal Pell will never again be trusted by all.

Crime occurs, but accusations do not mean guilt, not in Australia or in America. Processes of investigation and judgment must be strong, fair, thorough and demanded.

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