

THE SATURDAY PAPER

The criminal charges brought against George Pell have seen his defenders come to the fore. By Martin McKenzie-Murray.

July 8, 2017

The people defending Cardinal George Pell

While Victoria Police was announcing they would be laying criminal charges against Cardinal George Pell, Rome was observing a holy day – the Feast of Saints Peter and Paul. On this day, which marks the martyrdom of the two saints, the bronze statue of Saint Peter is carefully draped in investments.

Pell made a brief statement about the charges, the details of which are legally suppressed. “These matters have been under investigation now for nearly two years,” Pell said. “There have been leaks to the media, relentless character assassination and, for more than a month, claims that a decision on laying charges is ‘imminent’. I am looking forward finally to having my day in court. I repeat that I am innocent of these charges. They are false. The whole idea of sexual abuse is abhorrent to me.

“I have kept Pope Francis regularly informed throughout this lengthy process, and have spoken to him in recent days about the need to take leave to clear my name ... I have been consistent and clear in my total rejection of these allegations. News of these charges strengthens my resolve, and court proceedings now offer me an opportunity to clear my name and then return to my work in Rome.”

Former prime minister Tony Abbott offered carefully worded support for the man from whom he has long sought spiritual counsel. “Obviously, the legal process must now take its course, but the George Pell I have known is a very fine man indeed.”

Last week, Andrew Bolt wrote: “How Pell keeps going astonishes me. Weaker people would kill themselves rather than undergo these years of public shaming.” Certainly, the scrutiny and pressure on Cardinal Pell has been immense, but Bolt suggests it’s closer to a witch-hunt. “Being charged also gives Pell hope because if he really is innocent he can now finally clear his name in court and put an end to the most vicious campaign of personal vilification we have seen.”

In defending the cardinal from smears and vilification, the reactionary abuse they decry is poured elsewhere. Victoria Police is a popular target.

The Supreme Court of Victoria will rule on the charges against Pell, but his public defenders invite comment by their claims. In defending the cardinal from smears and vilification, the reactionary abuse they decry is poured elsewhere. Victoria Police is a popular target. Leaks regarding the investigation of Pell were unfortunate and unprofessional. Pell was right to be aggrieved by them. But there is no evidence to suggest the investigation itself was improper or suspect.

This hasn't stopped Bolt – and others – from attacking the police. Bolt quoted a Victorian detective as saying the charging of Pell “was an important step along the way” and that the “world will be watching this”. Bolt used these quotes as evidence of a biased and intemperate police force. Had they actually been said by a police officer, they might have been. But they weren't. The quotes belonged to an alleged child abuse victim. An apology and correction was made.

The Australian's editor-at-large, Paul Kelly, seemed similarly agitated. “This decision by Victoria Police comes after an unprecedented and manic campaign against Pell, leaks to the media, vicious character assaults in the mainstream media and grave doubts about the way police have conducted their inquiries,” he wrote. “The risk now is that the historic, unforgiveable and appalling extent of child sexual abuse in the Catholic Church has taken yet another tragic turn – a show trial against the nation's most senior Catholic figure.”

Conservative commentator Miranda Devine was less temperate in her denunciation. “Victoria Police Chief Graham Ashton desperate for a distraction from the crime epidemic he's incapable of stopping,” she tweeted last week. In a News Corp column, she wrote: “Instead of locking up crooks, Victoria Police have become do-gooder agents of social change ... Last year they embraced the gender scolds of the Victoria Human Rights Commission who made the usual ‘shocking’ claims of entrenched sexual harassment and discrimination ... When he's not pondering gender quotas, Ashton reserves his zeal for a self-serving vendetta against Catholic Cardinal George Pell, which wins plaudits from the ABC.”

There is genuine concern about the possibility of assembling an unprejudiced jury. Pell's trial will be preceded by half a decade of a heavily reported royal commission, a Victorian inquiry into the Catholic Church, and any number of critical books. But the sheer fact of his being charged does not constitute a “show trial”.

Read these pieces carefully and you'll see the references to crimes are slim, obliging. They are gestures, the columns' price of admission. Their real passion concerns not the crimes but the media that report them. This is what animates them.

Gerard Henderson, in a speech to the Christopher Dawson Centre for Cultural Studies in late May, argued the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse had maintained an unseemly and disproportionate focus on the Catholic Church. Subsequently, Henderson argued, the media reflected this bias in its coverage.

Back in 2012, when the royal commission was first announced, Cardinal Pell wondered the same. “We object to it being exaggerated, we object to being described as the ‘only cab on the rank’, we acknowledge – with shame – the extent of the problem,” Pell said. “One of the reasons why we welcome the royal commission is that this commission will enable those claims to be validated ... or found to be a significant exaggeration.”

Five years later, Henderson considers Pell vindicated. “George Pell was correct,” he said. “The royal commission's findings have revealed that in the period from 1950 until 2010 child sexual abuse was rife within Australian – and other – societies. There was child sexual abuse within religious, secular and government institutions alike. The Catholic Church was not the only cab on the rank. It should be remembered that, not so long ago, paedophilia in general and pederasty in particular was somewhat fashionable in intellectual circles.”

Has the Catholic Church been unfairly targeted? The royal commission has now run for five years. It has yielded extraordinary data on a crime for which there is famously little. So much data that we might confidently answer the question of whether Catholic institutions were disproportionately abusive. The simple answer is: yes, they were.

In a 110-page report commissioned by the royal commission and published last month, Professors Patrick Parkinson and Judy Cashmore found: “No religious community has been free of child sexual abuse cases – and that is no doubt true of non-religious institutions – but the various organisations and institutions that make up the Catholic Church have had a particularly high number of complaints in comparison with other churches. This is the case in Australia and in many other countries in which the Catholic Church is not the only substantial faith community.

“There seems to be a large body of evidence to suggest that the Catholic Church has had a much higher incidence of reported child sexual abuse than other churches or secular institutions. In its Interim Report, the Royal Commission reported from its private sessions data that in 68 per cent of cases of survivors reporting abuse in faith-based institutions, the institution was Catholic. The next highest was Anglican.

“Of all the institutions where abuse was reported, including government and private, Catholic institutions were still the most common, comprising 41 per cent of all institutions. These figures are out of proportion to the numbers of Catholic institutions in comparison with those of other faith communities or governmental bodies.

“There are also disparities in terms of criminal convictions. For example, the Victorian Police identified all convictions for sexual abuse of minors in that state between January 1956 and June 2012 involving members of religious organisations. There were 370 victims of abuse in the Catholic Church compared with 37 in the Anglican Church, 36 in The Salvation Army, and 18 involving Judaism. The figure for the number of victims in the Catholic Church was 10 times higher than in the Anglican Church. This does not reflect the religious affiliation of people in the general population.”

People are welcome to dismiss this report as sectarian bias. I suspect an overwhelming number of Australians will not. It reflects poorly upon The Catholic Weekly that they might publish Gerard Henderson’s speech about conspiratorial attacks on their church in the same month this report was released and so comprehensively disproved that argument. This was a speech that reserved more time for implying the deviancy of the author of Lolita than it did for reflection upon the systemic crimes of the church. A morally serious speech might have humbly reckoned with these facts, without forsaking the value of faith or the charitable contributions of the church.

“There is still a defensive mindset,” Francis Sullivan tells me. Sullivan is the chief executive officer of the Catholic Church’s Truth, Justice and Healing Council, the body charged with leading the church’s response to clergy abuse. “There are people trying to rationalise and minimise this data,” he says. “They just don’t get it. It’s just another part of a culture of denial. You have some questioning the royal commission for having the temerity to examine church teachings. But these things must be looked at. The church must atone.”

In February, the royal commission released comprehensive data about sexual abuse allegations in the Catholic Church since 1950. Sullivan was responsible for the data’s collation – a world first. The numbers

were appalling: 7 per cent of Australian Catholic priests had been accused of child sexual abuse. Since 1980, 4444 people reported allegations of child abuse to Catholic authorities. "The worst day in this job was seeing those numbers come in," Sullivan tells me. "The extent of abuse shocked everyone. I didn't know the full extent. Now, this is only about reported abuse. Many kids never tell anyone.

"All of this is corrosive to my faith in the institution. My confidence in the church. Fortunately, it has not impacted my personal faith in God."

Gerard Henderson and I would agree on a few things. That the left can be smugly intolerant of Christians, and that this intolerance is doubly hypocritical – it contradicts its pretensions to pluralism, and is often mute on Islamic abuse. We might agree that many journalists are dismissive of faith, and that some have found pride in their ignorance. We might also agree that we've forgotten the history of sectarian bigotry in Australia, the days when Catholics were banned from Mass.

We could agree on all of this. And per his speech, we would agree that decades past were awash with the sexualisation of children, that the BBC housed rapists, that coppers winked along with Jimmy Savile, that secular culture colluded with paedophilia. We would agree that children, until recently, were regarded as sexual chattels. Everywhere.

We would agree about the presumption of innocence, and agree that a noble element of our democracy is equal treatment before the law. We would agree the criminal charges against Pell are an entirely different proposition to questions over his handling of abusive priests.

But as someone who has reported on all manner of child abuse, I can't abide sophistic deflections. The defences of the Catholic Church prefer the invocation of culture wars to the acceptance of facts. And those facts – which are entirely separate to the charges against George Pell – are clear, damning and insist upon atonement.

This article was first published in the print edition of The Saturday Paper on Jul 8, 2017 as "The people defending Cardinal George Pell". [Subscribe here.](#)