

PELL, George. *Prison Journal. The Cardinal makes his appeal, v.1.* San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2020, 348p. ISBN: 978-1-62164-448-4.

As a visible institution, the Church is not only called to govern a spiritual society on this earth, but also to offer her guidance to temporal society. Throughout her history she has been the object of reproach and vituperation. This vitriol has only increased in the more recent decades with the publication of unsubstantiated and unfounded accusations against her. One of the most recent and spectacular incidents was the March 13, 2019, condemnation of George Cardinal Pell in an Australian court of law for the supposed perpetration of lewd and lascivious acts upon a minor and he was condemned to six years in prison. Although this is not the first time in history that the Catholic Church has confronted such animosity, at the dawn of the 21st century, it emerges as the onset of religious persecution.

Prison Journal contains the memoirs of George Cardinal Pell during his period of incarceration and appeal. Long-time friend and well-known author, George Weigel writes in his introduction that the Cardinal had no obligation to return to Australia to stand trial as a citizen of the Vatican, but he did so voluntarily to vindicate the Catholic Church and his honour. Pell was remanded into custody from February 27, 2019, until April 7, 2020, when he was released after his

successful appeal to the High Court of Australia.

The first volume of his diary, carrying the subtitle “The Cardinal makes his appeal,” is chronologically divided into weeks, and a great number of them take their inspiration from the daily liturgy of the Catholic Church. In the volume, he describes every day of his imprisonment up to July 13, 2019. He tells of the difficult and gloomy life in a cell and pens a wide number of reflections for his close friends pondering the current religious and political situation. Each day he closes his musings with a prayer to the Almighty or with a poem encompassing his impressions.

The four hundred days of his sentence that Pell spent in confinement was like an extended retreat as he expressed it. He had prepared a routine for himself within his new life without being certain of its final outcome. His morning would begin with the liturgical prayers of the Church followed by a meditation, and close with a similar prayer in the evening. This programme would often be broken with a joyful moment of visits from family and friends. Besides his regular exercises in the prison yard, he would also take two extended walks. If one of the principal reasons for ordination to the priesthood is to celebrate the Sacred Mysteries, the

fact that he was forbidden to celebrate his mass was a great suffering for him. He sadly notes that which had been a daily custom for almost seventy years, he could not even celebrate on Sundays. At the beginning of this new phase of his life, he also could not receive the Holy Eucharist. After a period of several weeks, a nun working at the detention centre where he was incarcerated began to bring him the Body of Christ. All of his personal possessions including his rosary was confiscated. Nonetheless, he was permitted to keep his breviary and the prison provided him with rosary beads so that he could continue to nourish his piety. Television was a source of information and entertainment during his confinement. Amid his religious, social and physical activities, he still had his tribulations. He suffered significant pain in the tendons in his left leg because he was not provided with an adequate chair. His bed was very close to the floor. At his request, he was finally provided with three chairs. And later he received a special ergonomic chair at the recommendation of the medical staff. On the other days, along with Muslims chants he could hear his companions shouting out of grief.

Cardinal Pell is an outstanding example for Christians who find themselves in difficult situations. Along with practising mutual brotherhood, he is of an extremely religious nature. He never failed to pray the Liturgy of the Hours, and despite his being

barred from celebrating Holy Mass, his enormous desire to receive the most precious body of Christ was answered. At the beginning of his ordeal when the spurious charges had been lodged against him, he besought the special protection of the Blessed Virgin while offering a votive Mass in her honour.

During this period Pell had the opportunity to more closely conform himself to the paradigmatic example of the humility of Our Lord Jesus Christ. He writes on March 9 in his diary: “Naturally I feel uneasy and embarrassed being compared to the Lord; or even to Thomas More or John the Baptist (the alternative choices of one husband and wife couple who wrote to me)” (p. 37). True humility is that which permits man to see candidly his qualities among his weakness and, why not, his obligations. True humility enables a man to candidly evaluate his qualities and his defects as well as to ascertain clearly the scope of the obligations he has undertaken. During the first week of his incarceration as a convicted criminal, he felt as if the whole Church, together with his family and friends, had entered into a torment where he was at the centre of the storm. Concluding this reflection, he prays that the bishops of the Catholic Church have the courage to guide the flocks that Christ has entrusted to them.

Reading the diary of the Cardinal one can easily see how Pell had a profound vision about the meaning of life and of

suffering. One can get a glimpse of this by witnessing the patience with which he suffered these cruel accusations and his evident abandonment to Divine Providence, as he writes in the third week of his prison journal: “We know that God is never cruel to us, no matter what is allowed to happen. [...] God is always with us turning our sufferings to good, uniting it with Jesus’ suffering and death. God is always listening, especially when it is silent. Our sufferings have a purpose” (p. 44). Faced with apparently undeserved sufferings the innocent victim draws his inspiration from the attitude of holy Job in Sacred Scripture, who never uttered a sinful word. Later on, Pell directs our attention to the sufferings of God’s only begotten Son, Jesus Christ, when we find ourselves in similar circumstances. Cardinal Pell considers his solitary confinement from an almost military perspective, affirming that it is necessary to concentrate on doing what one can, rather than lamenting what one cannot do.

“Fidelity to Christ and his teaching remains indispensable for any fruitful Catholicism, any religious rival” (p. 25). This excerpt reveals his fidelity to the successor of the apostles in guiding the faithful in fulfilling the Holy Church’s mission and, in this particular matter, against a false interpretation of *Amoris Lætitia* granting divorced and remarried Catholics *carte-blanche* permission to receive Holy Communion. His life in

seclusion not only served as a spiritual retreat but also as a means whereby he could layout and develop his vision for the future. In the fourteenth week of his incarceration, he states that the world is entering a period of change comparable to the advent of the Industrial Revolution in which the United States and China will be dominant and divide the world’s market between them.

As asserted earlier in this review, Cardinal Pell strove to defend the Holy Catholic Church from its bitter enemies, and his own person as a representative of that Church and of the Holy See. The Australian prelate is a “greater devotee of Churchill” (p. 189). Reminiscent of Winston Churchill’s famous speech in the House of Commons, the cardinal’s suffering for the Church evokes those words that he has “nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears and sweat. What is our aim? I can answer in one word: Victory. Victory at all costs. Victory in spite of all terror. Victory, however long and hard the road may be”.

George Cardinal Pell is the pivotal figure in the persecution occurring within the 21st century, of the Divine Institution founded by Christ. Come what may, quoting Hilaire Belloc, Pell assures us what the outcome for this spiritual society is: “The Church is a perpetually defeated thing that always outlives her conquerors” (p. 243).

Ashley Gerard