

St Mary's Parish East St Kilda

ABN 63 366 342 124

208 Dandenong Road, East St Kilda VIC 3183

PO Box 251, St Kilda VIC 3182

Telephone: (03) 9510 7744

Email: stkildaeast@cam.org.au

www.stmaryestk.org

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Pastoral letter following the conviction of Cardinal George Pell on offences of childhood sexual abuse

Dear Friends,

During this week as I laid in a hospital bed recovering from knee surgery, I found myself with plenty of time to listen to the radio, read newspapers and watch the television news and current affair shows.

In my post-anaesthetic haze and heavily dosed with painkillers, I nevertheless found it distressing to learn that Cardinal Pell had been convicted on offences of childhood sexual abuse. It is a very confronting time for many Catholics when one of the leaders of our church, who had moved at the highest levels of authority and administration, is convicted of such horrible offences against children. Cardinal Pell, for his part, has maintained his innocence and will exercise his rights to appeal his conviction.

On reflection it struck me that, despite the high profile of the accused, the intensity of the media coverage, and the very high stakes for both accused and complainant alike, the events that did or did not take place in the sacristy at St Patrick's Cathedral after a particular Sunday mass in 1996 are not, at heart, the main question that we face as a Church.

Yes, it is always important that the truth comes out, that the guilty are punished and the innocent are not; and no less so in this case. The way the story has been presented, however, could lead some to believe that the Pell case is somehow a 'make or break' moment in the whole sorry and sad story of the church and childhood sexual abuse. This is not the case.

Despite its importance and regardless of how it ends, this individual case should not be allowed to distract us from the huge task of reform that continues to lie ahead of us as a Church. A Victorian parliamentary inquiry, the Royal Commission into Institutional Response to Child Sexual Abuse (RCIRCSA), the experience of Catholics globally and the outcome of any number of other investigations, confirm that our Church is in major need of serious reform.

In Australia, the Church must hold firm to its resolve to do all in its power to eradicate any form of abuse of children or vulnerable adults in its care. The RCIRCSA shone a spotlight on the Catholic Church and uncovered a deep culture favouring protection of the institution over care for victims and a deeply rooted clerical culture with extremely weak accountabilities.

The church is now on a journey of reform from which it must not be deflected. At the conclusion of the recent four-day summit at the Vatican, where the heads of Episcopal Conferences from around the globe gathered, Pope Francis released a 21 point plan to combat sexual abuse by members of the clergy. This now is finally acknowledged as a global crisis for the Catholic Church that must be faced head on and overcome.

Pope Francis has, on many occasions, named clericalism as the major cause of the cover-ups and lack of response by the Church to victims' claims. Clericalism is a culture in which priests and bishops are seen as a sacred caste and a law unto themselves. The Church is now on a critical pathway to changing that culture.

Cultural change is never easy and requires long term and short term goals and actions. The required changes include decision making that involves consultation and input from all the faithful. The Church must now develop, at diocesan and parish levels, deliberative decision making roles for laypeople and particularly for women in the governance of the Church. The Church must also develop more inclusive and accountable practices in all aspects of its ministries and mission.


In Australia our bishops have said that now is a time for them to stop talking and to start listening. Under the Plenary Council 2020 process, they invite Australian people - both Catholics and any others who have some contribution to make - to advise them on the way forward; to help all of us to discern together where the Holy Spirit is calling the Church in Australia in this age.

As members or friends of the Catholic Church at St Mary's parish through your engagement with our school or as a participant in the worshipping and serving life of the parish community, I encourage you to participate in the listening and dialogue phase of the Plenary Council 2020. Go to the website and ensure that your views are included in the issues that should be on the agenda for the Australian Catholic Bishops' Plenary Council. <http://plenarycouncil.catholic.org.au/>

At the local level I welcome feedback as to how we can be a more inclusive and accountable parish. Furthermore, over coming months we will seek to develop structures that will allow broad participation in setting and implementing the pastoral goals of our parish.

In the meantime, let us keep our hearts and minds focussed on the many thousands of survivors who have been abused at the hands of Catholic clergy. Their stories and their courage in coming forward should not be in vain. The time for complacency is over.

With every best wish and blessing,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Joe Caddy". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a large initial 'J' and a long, sweeping underline.

Fr Joe Caddy EV AM
Parish Priest St Mary's St Kilda East
Episcopal Vicar for Justice and Social Services
Catholic Archdiocese of Melbourne