News



St. Mary's Cathedral, Sydney, New South Wales, Australia, pictured Oct. 25, 2019 (Wikimedia Commons/Dietmar Rabich)



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A number of influential Catholic figures across Australia are expressing concern that the divisive atmosphere stoked by the recent quashing of Cardinal George Pell's sexual abuse convictions could frustrate hopes for an upcoming once-in-a-generation assembly of the nation's church.

The assembly, a plenary council in preparation for two years and involving the direct input of some 222,000 people across the continent, is intended to address issues of church reform and to consider the difficult questions confronting the country's largest faith community in the 21st century.

But in a series of interviews conducted over the month since Australia's highest court released Pell from prison, senior Catholic leaders worried that the passions inflamed by the case could provoke a sort of fortress mentality, in which Pell's now-scuppered prosecution is just one example of a church unfairly under siege.

Robert Fitzgerald, a widely respected lawyer and former member of the 2013-17 Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, said there is "genuine concern" among Australian Catholics that opponents to discussing church reform "will seek to leverage this recent decision to undermine the plenary council."

"Today's Catholics want a hopeful, inspiring future for the church in Australia in which they have a legitimate voice," said Fitzgerald, now the Ageing and Disability Commissioner for the Australian state of New South Wales.



Francis Sullivan (Provided photo)

"Let there be no doubt, that should the plenary council be undermined or derailed this will be seen as yet another catastrophic betrayal of trust of the faithful and will do immense long-term damage both within and outside the Australian Church," he warned.

Several other eminent Australians spoke in similar terms. Neville Owen, one of Australia's most senior retired judges, said the "biggest problem" for the council now are people who see the Pell case as "a vicious attack on the church."

"Nothing could be worse for open, rational discussion at the plenary council than that sort of a mentality," said Owen, a former senior judge of the Court of Appeal of the Supreme Court of Western Australia, one of the country's six states.

"That's nothing to do with [Pell] personally, or any influence that he might bring to bear," said the jurist, who is also the former chair of the Truth, Justice and Healing Council, a national organization that was tasked by the church with responding to the Royal Commission.

"It's the wash-up from what we've been through," said Owen.

Francis Sullivan, who worked with Owen as the CEO at the healing council, said Pell's release was "opportunistic for forces who always want to use the imagery of religion as a bulwark for their own personal ideologies."

"I worry that the type of issues that the church needs to be able to demonstrate that they are relevant and they are contemporary on, aren't going to get [brought] up now," said Sullivan, who has previously served as the Secretary-General of the Australian Medical Association and led the lobby group Catholic Health Australia.

Pell, aged 78, has long been the highest-ranking Catholic prelate in Australia. A former archbishop of both Sydney and Melbourne, he was serving as the prefect of the Vatican's Secretariat for the Economy when police in the Australian state of Victoria announced they would be pursuing charges against him in June 2017.

The cardinal was later convicted in 2018 on five counts of molesting two choirboys in the 1990s.

The High Court of Australia quashed those convictions in a unanimous decision April 7, concluding that there was "a significant possibility that an innocent person has been convicted because the evidence did not establish guilt to the requisite standard of proof."

Pell has long been a controversial figure — Sullivan called him "a lightning rod for polarized opinion" — and people's opinions about his legal case are often mixed up with personal opinions about his style of ministry, or his fairly conservative political positions.

The cardinal can also act brash and combative in public. For example, in his first major interview after his release from prison — given to Sky News Australia, somewhat akin to Fox News Channel in the U.S. — the prelate said he considered himself a victim of a culture war against the church.

He also sharply criticized the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, which reported many of the stories outlining the allegations against him.



Cardinal George Pell is pictured in a screen grab during an interview that aired April 14 on Sky News Australia (file). (CNS)

Owen, who said he found the High Court's decision "legally correct, and undeniably so," also called Pell's television interview "terribly divisive and polarizing."

Beyond the question of how the current atmosphere around Pell's case could affect the plenary council's discussions, the former judge suggested that the prelate could also personally intervene in the assembly, if on a small scale.

"He still has, I think, support in some circles that could be influential in the way the plenary council operates," said Owen. "I'm not saying it's 'make or break' for the plenary council by any means, but it will be a factor."

"You couldn't say that it's not a factor," said Owen, suggesting that Pell could intervene particularly in terms of what matters are ultimately selected for the assembly's agenda.

Paul Collins, a former priest who is a well-known Australian church chronicler and retired radio presenter, called Pell's vision of the church "aggressive." He used the Australian phrase "boots and all," meaning something like "no holds barred" in U.S. English.

"He does have influence still in the church," Collins said of Pell. "I would not underestimate that."

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'New and promising future'

Australian church officials first announced their plans to hold a plenary council in 2017, as the Royal Commission, which documented decades of abuse and cover-up by Catholic clerics, was finishing up its work.

Many church leaders have portrayed the council endeavor as something of an opportunity of last resort — a final chance to convince Catholics and wider society that the church has reformed in how it handles sexual abuse cases and can still be culturally relevant in this era.

Bishop Vincent Long, who leads the Parramatta Diocese about 15 miles west of Sydney, said in an interview that the work of the Royal Commission, coupled with the drama surrounding Pell's case, had "created something like 'ground zero' for us."

Related: An Australian bishop speaks about a national church 'fraught with division'

"We cannot go on the way we have," said Long, who fled Vietnam with his family in 1979 and is Australia's first Asian-born bishop. "We must humbly and boldly address the biggest challenge of our time and build a healthier church for future generations."

"In many ways, perhaps, it is the last throw of the dice," the bishop said.

But Long acknowledged that Pell's release could affect the council's deliberations.

"Like it or not, the release and public rehabilitation of Cardinal Pell will affect the plenary council process," said the bishop.

"Many will be emboldened to promote [Pell's] vision for the church in Australia, while others believe that his vision falls short of much needed deep and fundamental reforms for the way ahead," he said.

Preparation for the council got underway in 2018 with a 10-month "listening and dialogue" process that organizers say involved meetings among 222,000 Australian Catholics, which then resulted in some 17,500 submissions about how people view the current reality of the church.



Bishop Vincent Long Van Nguyen, 2014 (CNS photo/Courtesy of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference)

Those submissions were whittled into six general areas of discernment, which will we be used to determine the final agenda for the actual assembly of the council — which will take place in two meetings, one in Adelaide, the capital of the state of

South Australia, and one in Sydney.

The first meeting of the assembly was to take place in October, but has been delayed due to the coronavirus pandemic. The bishops say they expect to announce a new timeline for the two assembly meetings sometime this May.

Trish Hindmarsh, a noted member of several Australian church reform groups and a former director of Catholic education for the island state of Tasmania, said she had been involved in nine of the listening meetings. She said the ones she attended were conducted "in the context of great, good faith."

"What the people said in their submissions was actually the fruit of the Catholic Christian community sitting down and discerning, and asking themselves: 'What does God want for the Australian church now?' " said the former educator.

Among issues Hindmarsh said received attention: better welcoming LGBTQ people, governance in the church, "including a much wider spectrum of people," and making liturgies "more life-giving and more involving."

"What surprised us and even shocked us was that ordinary Catholics … were saying these things," said Hindmarsh, adding that, in her view, people who took part in the listening process will now want church leaders to act on what was recommended.

"They're going to be very disappointed if the council doesn't take those issues forward," she said.

A plenary council is essentially a formal gathering of all the Catholic bishops of a national territory, so that they can assess and plan for pastoral needs across their various dioceses together.

Unlike a more routine gathering of a national conference of bishops, a council has legislative power under canon law. But any decrees the bishops at the council may wish to promulgate among their dioceses must first be reviewed by the Vatican.

Such councils have become uncommon in the Catholic world, partly because improvements in technology and travel made it easier for bishops to speak to one another from afar, or to go directly to Rome for guidance.

Australia's last plenary council was held in 1937. The last held in the U.S. was in 1884.

Long, who is a conventual Franciscan, said that Australians "cannot afford to let the momentum for cultural and structural change in the church to fizzle out."

The council, he said, "will be an opportunity for the church here to rise from the ashes, to listen to the Spirit, especially through the lay faithful and women, and move into a new and promising future."

Greg Crafter, a former member of the South Australian House of Assembly who recently retired as the chair of the National Catholic Education Commission, pointed to the effect that the Australian church has historically had on wider society, especially through its extensive healthcare and educational systems.

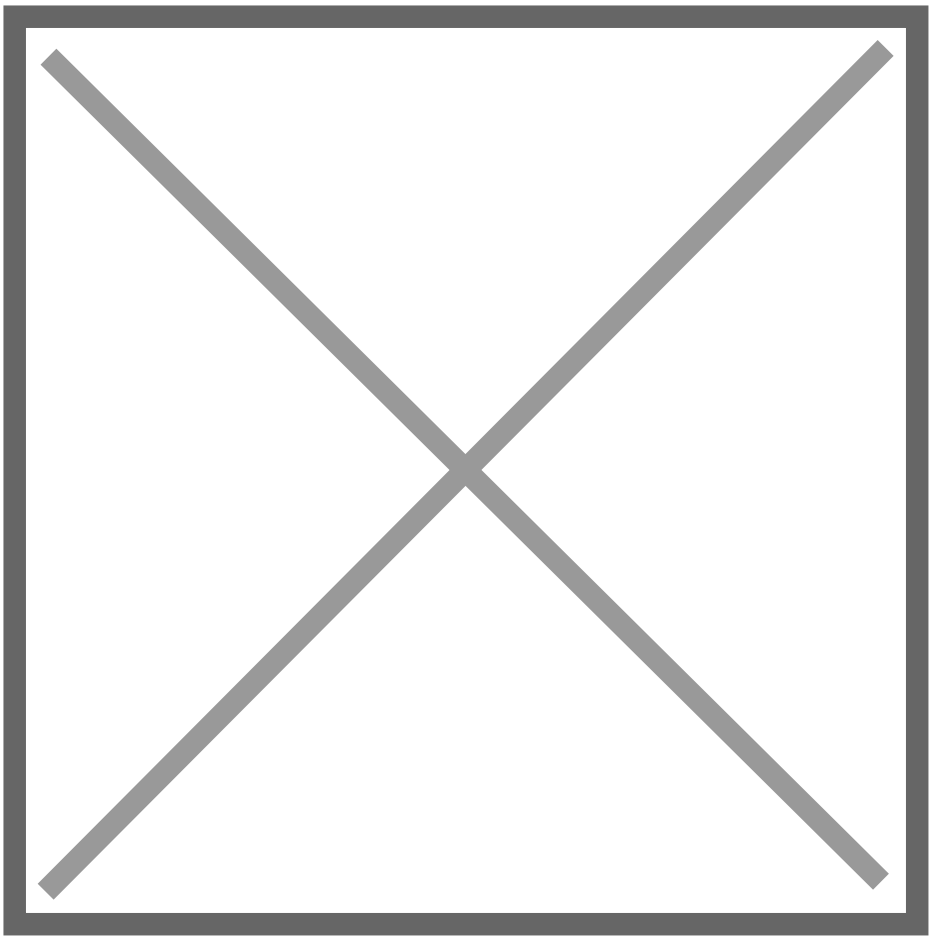
"The Catholic Church is a massive enterprise for good," said Crafter. "And the opportunity the plenary council presents is to rethink the church — to reimagine it in a way, to be open to the Spirit that has built our church in this country, and guided it, and to embrace that broad and deep discernment."

Lack of women's participation

Beyond the divisive atmosphere stoked by the quashing of Pell's convictions, several Australians highlighted another concern about the plenary council itself: the composition of the 267 official delegates who will attend its two sessions and vote on the issues at hand.

They say the group, which in accordance with canon law is primarily composed of bishops and priests, is not representative of the wider Australian church, and, in particular, does not include a sufficient number of women.

For example, the Melbourne Archdiocese, the country's largest diocese by number of Catholics, is sending 15 delegates: the archbishop, the two auxiliary bishops, eight other priests, two laywomen, one layman, and one woman religious.



Greg Crafter (Provided photo)

The Sydney Archdiocese is sending 20 delegates: the archbishop, the two auxiliary bishops, seven other priests, five laymen, four laywomen, and one woman religious.

Sullivan called the imbalance between men and women delegates "quite appalling."

Mentioning the canonical requirement that the delegates primarily consists of the country's bishops, vicars general and seminary rectors, Sullivan said he had initially hoped that the council organizers would find a creative solution to include more women.

He suggested they could have adopted a "two house" process for the assembly — one house to meet the canonical requirement for plenary council delegates, and another to include more laypeople. Or, he suggested, they could have invited a woman to "co-chair" the assembly sessions.

"I lose heart … when there's been very sincere attempts by lots of groups to try and get a more distinct agenda on the table, to get more overt democratic processes running, and particularly, to see that women were going to have a prominent role in the process," said Sullivan.

"In those three areas, it's not hopeful," he said.

After original publication of this article, Melbourne Archbishop Peter Comensoli wrote to NCR to clarify that the Australian bishops have petitioned the Vatican to allow them to appoint more women as delegates to the council.

Referencing the canonical limit on the number of lay people who can be invited as delegates to plenary councils, Comensoli said the Australians have asked for permission for each diocese to double the limit in order “to try and address the imbalance inherent in the canonical strictures.”

In Melbourne’s case, the archbishop said, the number of lay delegates would increase from three women and one man to six women and two men.

"We await Rome’s decision,” said Comensoli.

Hindmarsh said the lack of women acting as official delegates was something she was "very concerned" about.

"What everyone can say with conviction is that the proportion of the laity and the proportion of women is right out of whack, because, of course, all the *ex officio* people, with few exceptions … are clerics, and therefore have to be men," she said.

The former education director described the problem as akin to a "feedback loop." She said that many of the some 222,000 Catholics who participated in the initial listening process wanted the council to address the clericalization of the church, but now see that the final decision-makers will largely be clerics.

"I think the most contentious issue that's arisen is the full inclusion of women," said Hindmarsh. "This is the hardest nut to crack for the clergy, by and large, and especially the bishops."

Others acknowledged the problem with regard to the make-up of the delegates, but expressed hope that the unexpected delay in holding the first assembly because of

the coronavirus pandemic might give organizers more time to come up with creative solutions.

Highlighting the importance of the council for the future of the Australian church, Owen called it "almost the last chance for us."

"We've got to keep behind it and make the best of it," said the retired judge, who now serves as a member of the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors.

"I'm a bit disappointed that they haven't found other ways to make sure that there's lay participation and particularly female participation at a broader level," he said. "There would have been other ways that could have been achieved."

Yet, Owen stressed: "That might still happen. We've now got more time. And I think there will be some re-thinking of the process."

As for the question of how the atmosphere surrounding Pell's release from prison could affect the delayed proceedings, no one knows for sure. But, pointing to the cardinal's brazen public persona, Sullivan quipped: "He's not the type of personality to ride into the sunset quietly."

[Joshua J. McElwee (jmcelwee@ncronline.org) is NCR Vatican correspondent. Follow him on Twitter: @joshjmac.]

Editor's Note: This article was updated May 2 to include a clarification from Melbourne Archbishop Peter Comensoli regarding the Australian bishops' request to the Vatican to allow more women to attend the plenary council as delegates.