Opinion

NCR Voices



Pope Francis talks with Australian Cardinal George Pell during an audience Oct. 12, 2020, at the Vatican. Pell died Jan. 10 at age 81. (CNS/Vatican Media)



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Not since King Hamlet appeared to Bernardo, Marcellus and Horatio on the battlements of Elsinore Castle has a ghost caused so much trouble. The late Cardinal George Pell, speaking posthumously by means of a previously unpublished article and an anonymous text of which Pell is now known to be the author, has shown the face of the opposition to Pope Francis in all its overwrought self-absorption.

The grace with which the late cardinal handled his physical imprisonment, and about which I voiced admiration last week, now melts like a snowflake in the palm of one's hand from the sin of pride. That pride had evidently imprisoned the cardinal spiritually.

Soon after the cardinal died, British journalist Damian Thompson published an article Pell had written shortly before he died voicing concerns about the synodal process. Then, Italian Vaticanista Sandro Magister revealed that the anonymous memo he published last year — detailing a list of items that afflict the church and, specifically, what kind of pope was needed — had been written by Pell.

None of the complaints Pell lodged against the synod were particularly new. You can hear similar whining almost any week on EWTN. Pell asserts that the synodal process is a "toxic nightmare" and its working document an "outpouring of New Age good will," which "nowhere acknowledges the New Testament as the Word of God, normative for all teaching on faith and morals." Pell observes that the "ex-Anglicans among us are right to identify the deepening confusion, the attack on traditional morals and the insertion into the dialogue of neo-Marxist jargon about exclusion, alienation, identity, marginalisation, the voiceless, LGBTQ as well as the displacement of Christian notions of forgiveness, sin, sacrifice, healing, redemption."



Cardinal George Pell, former prefect of the Secretariat for the Economy and archbishop of Sydney, died Jan. 10 at age 81. He is pictured in an Aug. 25, 2021, file photo. (OSV News/Giovanni Portelli, courtesy of the Australian bishops' conference)

Who knew that a churchman like Pell, who had been a priest since 1966, could be so easily confused? I wonder who suggested to him that exclusion and alienation were unknown until Karl Marx set quill to scroll? How is it that a pope who has returned the concept (and practice) of mercy to its proper and central place at the heart of the kerygma of the Gospels can be said to be overseeing a process that displaces "Christian notions of forgiveness, sin, sacrifice, healing and redemption"?

The previously anonymous memo is even worse, with direct attacks on Pope Francis. "Previously it was: 'Roma locuta. Causa finita est.' Today it is: 'Roma loquitur. Confusio augetur,' " Pell wrote. Pope Francis is chided for being silent in the face of concerns Pell thinks should be dismissed as heretical, even while there is "active persecution of the Traditionalists and the contemplative convents."

Pell frets that the Christocentrism of our teaching is being threatened, although one would be hard-pressed to think of a talk or text from this pope that was not meaningfully Christocentric. Alas, "Pachamama is idolatrous." Evidently, inculturation is OK when it results in devotion to, say, the Infant of Prague but not when an image of a pregnant woman is seen as a sign of God's providence, something St. Pope John Paul II recognized in 1985 during a homily in Cuzco.

If Pell's complaints are not particularly interesting, it is fascinating to see how his cult is taking shape and, specifically, who aspires to play Elisha to Pell's Elijah?

Tim Busch, the rightwing plutocrat who has sought to shape the church in his own image, penned a fawning tribute to Pell for the National Review. "I once called Cardinal George Pell a living saint," Busch writes. "He didn't like it." On this point, I side with Pell.

Busch goes on to explain how he became chummy with the cardinal and how he helped the cardinal "educate priests and religious about the fundamentals of financial reporting and accountability."

So, the petty corruption caught by better methods of reporting and accountability was bad, but the more fundamental corruption of our Catholic social teaching by trying to reconcile it with spread eagle capitalism is OK?

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George Weigel, at First Things, echoes the sycophantic nonsense, applauding Pell for his dismissive stance towards climate change, and adding a few cliches of his own: "He spoke truth to media power."

I understand Weigel is upset to lose a source, but let us remember Pell was born in Ballarat not on Krypton.

Unsurprisingly, Archbishop Charles Chaput announced his bid to claim the mantle of Pell with an interview at The Pillar. Asked about Vatican II, Chaput allows that "the Church did need to adjust her approach to the world and speak to the new conditions framing her mission. That was the intent of John XXIII in convening it; of Paul VI in concluding it; and of John Paul II and Benedict XVI in applying its teachings."

Hmmm. Anyone missing from that list of recent pontiffs? (Hint: I do not refer to John Paul I.) Is Chaput implying that Francis is somehow *not* applying the teachings of Vatican II?



Now-retired Philadelphia Archbishop Charles Chaput is seen March 25, 2019, at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington. (CNS/Tyler Orsburn)

On the synod, Chaput says the process is "imprudent and prone to manipulation, and manipulation always involves dishonesty." And he affirms unequivocally that "The claim that Vatican II somehow implied the need for synodality as a permanent feature of Church life is simply false."

In analyzing the way the pope being a Jesuit might affect his leadership, Chaput opined, "I do think it's clear that Francis governs like a Jesuit superior general, top-down with little collaborative input."

So, which is it: The pope is too synodal or the pope is too autocratic?

There is a limit to which Chaput can fulfill the role of leader of the opposition. He was the first archbishop of Philadelphia in a century not to be named a cardinal, so he will not be in the next conclave.

Chaput never had to take the cardinalatial oath. Pell did. Like all cardinals, he once pledged:

> I, N, Cardinal of Holy Roman Church, promise and swear, from this day forth and as long as I live, to remain faithful to Christ and his Gospel, constantly obedient to the Holy Apostolic Roman Church, to Blessed Peter in the person of the Supreme Pontiff. ...

Did Pell forget?

He has, with these posthumous complaints, forever diminished his legacy. Chaput is working on damaging his. In their shared belief that their approach to ministry, and their approach only, is the necessary way to follow the Lord Jesus, they display precisely the hubris pretending to be certainty that has played such a large role in the church's loss of credibility. Both men convinced themselves that they are the solution to the problems of the church and, therefore, the world.

Of course, they resent the fact that Pope Francis, in his willingness to listen, is pointing the church to a new and fruitful path.

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