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Cardinal Pell and Australian Catholicism: Where does the centre of gravity lie in the church?

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Cardinal George Pell is often called the public face of Australian Catholicism. Catholics of all stripes and persuasions therefore have a considerable investment in what can broadly be called the Pell affair as it affects all of us directly or indirectly.

There have been several developments, to which the Cardinal himself has contributed, in the aftermath of the unanimous High Court decision making Pell a free man. One has been the critical attention directed to the culture and operations of the Victorian justice system and its police force. Another has been the criticisms calling to account numerous individuals and institutions said to have given a one-sided anti-Pell representation of the Pell case, including the Australian Broadcasting Corporation and various senior journalists, biographers and authors.

Cardinal Pell has widened the debate during his first post-release interview on Sky News with Andrew Bolt by his characterisations of Australian society and his place within it. This debate is important even though it has been dampened by the COVID-19 pandemic which dominates our media.

Australian society, according to Pell, is one in which there is a systematic attempt underway to dismantle the Judaeo-Christian tradition. He describes this situation as a culture war.

Secondly, Pell situates himself within Australian society as a social conservative and believes he became a victim of criminal charges because of his advocacy of social conservative positions on issues like marriage, gender and sex.

Thirdly, Pell believes that his situation was caused in part by widespread anti-Catholicism in Australian society. It is Catholicism versus the rest, even though, he says, Catholics pay taxes too.

These characterisations raise the stakes in the Pell affair, not just for Catholics but for all Australians. Catholics are burdened with an interpretation which will be seen by many in wider society as THE Catholic position. Wider society, too, may see Pell’s serious accusations and interpretations as ones which are held by all or most Catholics.

Yet many, possibly most, Catholics don’t share Cardinal Pell’s views and don’t want the church in Australia to be identified as a bastion of social conservatism. Most Catholics don’t consider themselves to be foot-soldiers in a culture war against secular society, but rather as useful contributors to it from their unique perspective.

Australian Catholicism is by general agreement a broad church. Yet we don’t have the scientific tools to determine just where the centre of gravity of church members lies in Australia. Its leaders, the bishops, wishing away the philosophical diversity of the church, have been at pains to say in the lead up to the Plenary Council 2020, that numbers don’t matter because the church is not a democracy. But numbers do matter in determining where the balance, the centre of gravity, lies. We, Catholics and non-Catholics alike, all should be interested in that.

The 17,500 PC2020 submissions from the Catholic community were not subjected to quantitative analysis, but the official qualitative analysis suggests that the average Catholic doesn’t sound like George Pell. Most Catholics, even those who have serious criticisms of him, want justice for Cardinal Pell, but they don’t want his social views to represent them.

The issues that Pell has mentioned as leading to his situation are marriage, gender and sex. These are big and varied categories to unpack. The category of marriage would certainly include divorce, same sex marriage and the ability of divorced and remarried Catholics to receive Communion. The gender category would include the role of women in the church, gender diversity, homosexual rights and women priests and deacons. The category of sex would include the use of artificial contraception and sexual relations outside of marriage.

What do Catholics in general think about these issues? There are some statistics about Catholics’ widespread failure to adhere to official church positions like the ban on contraception. There has been analysis of federal election voting by Catholics and of Catholic Ýes’ voting in the 2017 same sex marriage plebiscite. There are the many voices in the PC2020 submissions supporting women priests and divorced and remarried Catholics. There is also the decline in church attendance, some at least of which follows dismay at some of these official church positions.

Another test of this proposition may be coming in the form of PC2020. But will it be a true test? We may never know because we have no way of knowing how representative of the church in Australia PC2020 will be. Not only will the delegates be unrepresentative because lay Catholics are heavily outnumbered by clerics, but the lay Catholics themselves have been chosen by diocesan bishops.

The evidence may not be conclusive but from what we know the centre of gravity of the church in Australia is well to the left of Cardinal George Pell and close to the moderate centre. The general community should be aware that Australian Catholicism is not a right-wing church and shouldn’t be characterized as such.