

It doesn't help to condemn George Pell

FRANK BRENNAN THE AUSTRALIAN JUNE 03, 2015 12:00AM

Witch-hunts are not just a feature of the past. Justifiably, people are upset about the Catholic Church's failures to deal with child sexual abuse. On Monday, I was doing my best to answer questions upfront about all manner of things from indigenous constitutional recognition to child abuse when ABC presenter Ian Henschke from Adelaide questioned my right to deliver the homily at the funeral mass for ex-Keating minister Bob Collins in Darwin's St Mary's Cathedral eight years ago.

He said "a lot of people wonder at why you did that". He wanted to know if I had spoken to any of Collins's victims. When Collins died, nothing had been proved against him. No one then or since has approached me saying they were a victim of abuse by Collins.

Henschke's producer later defended the question as "appropriate within the context of the interview and the climate we find ourselves in". The climate is one of witch-hunt.

I told Henschke's listeners that Collins, like anyone, was entitled to Christian burial. In my homily, I had said, "God alone is our judge, and God alone is Bob's judge. This is not a day for judging Bob, his political opponents or his accusers. There have been plenty of splinters and logs in evidence these past days. Putting aside the splinters and logs, we come to the table of the Lord, all of us sinners and all of us praying, 'Lord I am not worthy to receive you. Say but the word and I shall be healed.' We pray healing for all who have spoken for and against Bob these days."

I doubt Henschke would have been so brazen but for the story on the Nine Network's 60 Minutes the previous night when Peter Saunders, one of Pope Francis's hand-picked 17-member Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors, expressed very adverse personal judgments about Cardinal George Pell. Many Australians are baying for Pell's blood. It's time for a dispassionate consideration of the facts.

Let me be very upfront. I am no fan of Pell, and he is no fan of mine. It got to the stage a few years ago that he published a gratuitous defamation of me and the Jesuits. He said: "Part of the key to understanding Brennan is that he's really not well-educated in the Catholic tradition" and that with the Jesuits, Jesus "has been almost displaced by (their) enthusiasm for social justice".

I asked for an apology. Not only was none forthcoming, he wrote to me saying, "I am afraid that your letter confirms my worst fears about your judgment and about the absence of a proper sense of respect for, and understanding of, things Catholic. This has nothing to do with postgraduate credentials, no reflection on your integrity, but touches on your Catholic sensibilities."

It is time for those of us in the church to stop paying undue deference to those who exercise ecclesiastical power in a fashion at odds with contemporary notions of transparency and equality. It's also time for all commentators to play the ball and not the man.

Pell's career spans three distinct periods when it comes to child sexual abuse.

Before 1987, when he was first made a bishop in Melbourne, he was a priest in Ballarat when Father Gerald Ridsdale was abusing children constantly. There is no evidence Pell had any more idea of what Ridsdale was up to at the time than did any others in the church, including journalist

Paul Bongiorno, who was then a priest in Ballarat.

Last week the royal commission sitting in Ballarat heard sworn evidence from some of Ridsdale's victims claiming Pell later came to know of the abuse and did nothing. Pell quite rightly has indicated his willingness to return to Australia and to answer any questions under oath. We all await his evidence and the findings of the commission.

Between 1987 and 1996, Pell was an auxiliary bishop to archbishop Frank Little in Melbourne. Pell has constantly claimed he knew nothing of abuse in those days and was therefore in no position to do anything about it.

No evidence has been produced proving Pell knew anything at that time. If the royal commission concludes without turning up any such evidence, the Catholic Church needs to accept that its mode of governance until 1996 was so opaque and operated with such disregard for the wellbeing of vulnerable children that not even a cleric as senior, clever and worldly as Pell could be expected to have known what was going on.

From the first day of his appointment as archbishop of Melbourne in 1996, Pell went into overdrive seeking a means for dealing promptly and efficiently with abuse claims.

There have been many hindsight criticisms of his efforts, but no one can fault his commitment to address the issue in a pioneering fashion when other institutions and other parts of the church were still playing catch-up. Pell's arch supporters, such as his Sydney successor Archbishop Anthony Fisher, constantly point to Pell's achievements since 1996. But these achievements provide no answers to the questions outstanding about Pell's first two periods of clerical power.

The Catholic Church still has a long way to go in cleaning up the mess, and the royal commission can help. However, not even the commission is infallible. For example, what possessed judge Peter McClellan to put Ridsdale on public display in the witness box, where he provided absolutely no credible, probative evidence, simply further traumatising his victims? The Pope has set up the independently minded 17-member pontifical commission including Saunders, one of two survivors of abuse who sees his role as representing strongly the interests of survivors. Here in Australia, the bishops have ceded at least some control to the laity with Francis Sullivan, chief executive of the Truth, Justice and Healing Council, being able to speak fearlessly and truthfully for the church.

We await Pell's appearance before the royal commission. He should drop all threats to sue any member of the Pope's commission. While he calls off the defamation lawyers, his enemies should call off the witch-hunt. Let's await the findings of the commission and implement fully those findings which will justly assist past victims and all children entrusted to institutional care.

Frank Brennan is the author of *Amplifying That Still, Small Voice* (ATF Press, 2015).

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