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Editorial

Eradicating clerical abuse –

The Church has not gone far enough

News of the conviction of the Australian Cardinal George Pell for child abuse has swept away whatever confidence leaders of the Catholic Church might have been feeling at the conclusion of their summit in Rome. Was that summit a success? It will ultimately be judged by results, but for all its shortcomings and disappointments, it has moved the Church forward in addressing one of the greatest crises it has ever faced. The Pell case is a giant step backwards, not least for the Church in Australia. It has been shamed time and again by the most appalling evidence not just of the systematic abuse of minors by clerics but of a systematic failure – for which Cardinal Pell himself bears some responsibility – to root out the abusers.

It would be a mistake for the Church to take much comfort from the prospect of an appeal against Pell's conviction to a higher court. A jury of twelve honest citizens has carefully sifted the evidence in his case and found the prosecution case credible beyond reasonable doubt. It would be disrespectful to them and to the Australian criminal justice system to conclude that they must have been swayed into a perverse verdict by anti-Catholic prejudice or by hostile public opinion. It is not infallible, but the jury system, with its safeguards, is the best method so far invented for sifting truth from falsehood.

As a working hypothesis at least, therefore, Cardinal Pell has to be treated as guilty. He has already been removed from all public ministry, and he must now be dismissed from the post he still holds at the Vatican as the head of its finance office and proceedings to dismiss him from the clerical state should commence. Of course it is a tragic outcome, likely to crush a sickly old man. But justice has to be seen to be done, and the Catholic Church's reputation in this area so far, not least in showing more concern for abusers than for their victims, is a miserable one. Zero tolerance – a phrase worryingly omitted from the summit's final documents – has to be shown to convicted abusers, without exception and irrespective of rank.

This was the fundamental reason why the Vatican summit of presidents of bishops' conferences from all over the world, plus their equivalents in religious orders, had become so urgently needed. The most telling feature was the testimony of clerical abuse survivors from five continents, which arose from an understanding by Pope Francis and others that the issue of abuse has to be approached by the heart as well as by the head. Bishops had to share the suffering, not just by recognising how grave was the Church's failure in not preventing it but also by putting themselves in the shoes of those who suffered. The victims' experience of abuse was devastating, deeply damaging psychologically, spiritually, and, in many cases, permanently. No one could have left the summit still privately thinking it was a marginal concern.

But they would have been deeply misled if they had been consoled by Pope Francis's observation, in his final address, that the Catholic Church's problem with paedophilia was simply part of a wider spectrum of the abuse of children in all sections of society. That was not helpful. Of course abuse occurs elsewhere, and is deplorable; but there is something about a Catholic priest abusing children that puts it in a unique category of awfulness. The power gradient between them, so to speak, is extreme; the victim's ability to do anything about it is small; the abuser's scope for escaping detection is unlimited; faith is crushed, trust destroyed; the deepest damage is done to mind, body and soul; and the sexual life of that person will carry the wound for ever. That includes the ability to love. A clerical child abuser is not much better than a murderer. And a bishop who gives him any sort of cover or protection is an accessory to that crime.

This is where the summit stumbled. Cardinal Blase Cupich of Chicago was commissioned to outline suitable mechanisms within the Church structure for dealing with bishops who either abused children themselves or were accessories to abuse. But his approach is fundamentally flawed. It proposes that senior bishops like metropolitan archbishops should investigate diocesan bishops in their province. They would of course reach outside the hierarchical structure for advice and assistance, even to secular agencies. It was good that Cardinal Vincent Nichols of Westminster has acknowledged, in an interview with *The Tablet*, that the Church has much to learn from the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse, which is currently scrutinising child protection procedures in the Church in England and Wales. But one lesson from IICSA is clear already: no matter how good its safeguarding procedures, the Catholic hierarchy cannot police itself.

This is a serious structural and indeed theological problem. Bishops are accountable upwards, but not downwards. Under the Cupich proposals, they answer to a metropolitan archbishop, and to the Holy See. But public – including lay Catholic – confidence in bishops to manage their responsibility to vulnerable children diligently is at rock bottom. And the Cupich proposals will do nothing to lift it from there.

The Church has to look itself in the mirror, and realise that what is missing from the image reflected back is any serious role for the laity in church governance. The hierarchy is not the People of God. This crisis has shown us that the Church as it stands is an incomplete Church. Bishops cannot report downwards even if they want to, and cannot be held to account by those of God's People to whom they have been allocated to lead and teach. The old phrase "pray, pay and obey" still hovers over lay people as a summary of their duties. Bishops are like little medieval

sovereigns in their own domain, exercising something akin to a Divine Right. This is obviously not their fault. But nor is it good.

The independent lay role is not absent. Indeed the child abuse crisis has brought it to the fore. But it is largely exercised in the secular sphere, by royal commissions, police detectives, investigative journalists, social workers, and indeed juries in criminal trials. Despite child safeguarding structures, opportunities for the independent audit of bishops and archbishops by lay Catholics still barely exist, because the structure has no room for them. Hence the Church is not a self-righting vessel with the in-built checks and balances necessary to restore its peace and equilibrium amidst the present storm. It is, in short, top heavy. And that is almost the very definition of clericalism.