

*ALLOCUTIO, LEGION OF MARY, MELBOURNE SENATUS, 3 MARCH 2019*

As you know, it has been a sad and painful week, with the news of the verdict against Cardinal Pell. Many people would have already known this from various sources since December, but it's only now that the courts lifted their suppression order on the news. I'm sure you will have heard at your own Sunday Mass the priest speaking about the case, but I thought it might help if I add my own words.

You would be aware that there were two trials on the same matter. In the first trial in August, the jury was divided, and couldn't reach a unanimous decision. The second trial reached the verdict in December, now public. So based on the verdict, the sentencing will take place on 13 March. As we know, the Cardinal maintains his innocence against the conviction, as he firmly has all along; and, his lawyers have lodged an appeal against the conviction. So this means that the legal process is still continuing.

You may likely have seen Archbishop Comensoli's 'Letter to Parishes', which I commend to your reading. We thank God for our Archbishop, who through no fault of his own has been given this incredibly difficult role in this time and place, and who is carrying that out the very best he can.

As he alludes to in his letter, these recent days have seen strongly polarised opinions expressed, by Catholics and non-Catholics alike, for and against the verdict. Obviously, it's not part of our faith whether this or that individual is good or bad. In principle, Catholics can legitimately hold either opinion – with the understanding that we do and say all things in charity; we follow justice, reason, and truth; and we treat every person with respect. On the one hand we listen to, and act on, complaints and accusations that are made. On the other hand, as individuals, morally we may treat no one as guilty until it is rationally clear to us that such a judgement is deserved.

Rationally, of course, in general an individual would normally accept the correctness of a legal verdict, unless aware of strong objective grounds to the contrary. (And in any case, juries should be respected, as well as the courts – the presumption is they've done their best. So we respect the jurors – necessarily indeed of both trials: jurors who voted to convict, and jurors who voted to acquit.)

Obviously, juries aren't infallible, and in a democracy individuals are not legally obliged to believe in the rightness of this or that legal outcome. As many would have seen, in the media in these few days since the news broke, various writers in the different newspapers who attended the trial have explained their conviction that there do indeed exist 'strong objective grounds' for doubting the correctness of the verdict. And it is argued that from the witness testimony the sequence of events as described by the prosecution seems virtually physically impossible to have occurred. Honesty does require that we take these things into due rational account.

This is not the place to discuss the details of the case. The Holy See and the Archdiocese of Melbourne have simply expressed their confidence in the continuing legal process, and so will patiently await the outcome of Cardinal Pell's appeal. Perhaps some are disappointed that our Archbishop, and priests in general, aren't all openly denouncing the verdict. But here among other things we might consider that there seems a reasonable possibility that the Cardinal's legal appeal will be successful. If this occurs, that will be his vindication; but if that is perceived to have come about through 'Church pressure', then it would lose some of its value in the court of public opinion.

Leaving aside the specific case of Cardinal Pell, it's always good when you're discussing this with people to repeat the clear absolute principles: Church teaching has always utterly condemned this kind of crime as intrinsically and gravely evil without exception. And let them know that actually, a proper understanding of our faith should lead us to an even deeper awareness and rejection of the evil than society generally. That some Church leaders have indeed been shown to have violated Catholic teachings should be a reminder that the true faith is not, and never has been, in the holiness of any Church leader. Our Catholic faith is in Jesus Christ and his promises, which remain utterly unchanged and untarnished, and which never fail.

We repeat once again our total support for the victims of all the terrible crimes of this nature. We recommit ourselves to all the policies and procedures laid down over recent decades and continuing to be refined, for prevention of crimes and safety for all, especially the most vulnerable. And we keep in our prayers all those individuals who have been hurt or suffer in any way from this whole sad story revealed in recent days. I know that as legionaries, prayer warriors, you will be redoubling your prayers in these times, that love, justice and truth will prevail.

And finally for yourselves, suffering in your own way in the midst of all this; maybe unjustly facing contempt because of your faithfulness to Christ, even though you have done nothing wrong in this matter. You've kept to the path God has shown humanity, so it's not possible that could be something to be ashamed of. It's only right that you too can receive comfort.

Take courage from the assurance of Our Lord: the reality of each one's faithfulness in difficult times won't be hidden forever from people who would want to condemn, but the truth of every person's heart will one day be known, to all, and for all eternity. No injustice is for ever. In Jesus' words: 'Have no fear of them, for nothing is covered that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be known.' (*Mt 10:26*) 'In the world you will have tribulation, but take heart; I have overcome the world.' (*Jn 16:33*)