

“As most of you know by now, Cardinal Pell of Australia, once the third most powerful prelate in the church, lost his appeal to overturn his conviction for child sexual abuse earlier this week. This decision was in no way guaranteed. Overturning Pell's conviction would have been a decisive setback for survivors and reform. Instead, the court's decision was truly a victory for survivors everywhere and a confirmation of the rule of law. **The clergy abuse issue has always been a showdown between constitutional law and church law. Basic human rights versus clerical privilege. There is absolutely no reason and excuse when it comes to child rape and institutional cover up that church law and civil law cannot be brought into alignment. And until they are this crisis will not be over.** It's not over with Pell, either. He has one more appeal left to the Australian High Court and 28 days to file, which undoubtedly he will. Additionally, there are his rights (privileges) to a Vatican trial. Unlike victims of sexual assault, he is afforded the full exercise of his rights under both "legal" systems. Francis, who had appointed Pell as the Vatican's powerful Secretary for the Economy and one of his closest advisors, has indicated he has no intention of removing Pell from being a Cardinal, bishop or a priest anytime soon, if at all. He responded to the Pell ruling with a cryptic twitter message, which seems to give Pell and his supporters some papal oxygen--but as is customary with Francis who knows what it actually means. Once again, when the church is in the throws of the abuse crisis, the pastor isn't in the pulpit. Pell was convicted by a jury of his peers--his real peers, not his fellow Cardinals, bishops, or priests. 12 fellow citizens found him guilty beyond a reasonable doubt in a trial where the wealthy and famous Cardinal hired that country's most expensive and seasoned legal defense team. That verdict has been upheld. What more cover does Francis need? The Vatican said it will open its own investigation. Many if not most of his colleagues at the Vatican probably believe Pell is innocent. Without some genuine demonstration of transparency, the investigation and trial, if there ever is one, will be encased in secrecy, and the results will likely be divisive. After Francis finally removed Washington DC Cardinal McCarrick from the priesthood after decades of abuse--a decision for which he had little choice because it was impossible even for him to justify not doing it--it's hard to imagine Pell can remain one himself. This would be the ultimate punishment for Pell because of the clerical universe he lives in. It is something that should have occurred with his conviction. Being a priest is everything to Pell. He needs to be permanently removed from the priesthood, as must any cleric who uses the priesthood to commit criminal acts against children. Around the globe this is not church law or mandatory practice. There is still no universal church law for zero tolerance of child rape and sexual assault. Like McCarrick, when Pell gets out of prison he will still be taken care of by the church and he has abundant personal resources. He will have a very comfortable and safe place to live out his days with full health care. How many victims are provided this kind of lifetime guarantee? Still, that bishops Cardinals and bishops who are child molesters might (and it's a big "might") be removed from the priesthood is a big line to have crossed. It has taken decades of revelations of abuse and cover up from around the world by thousands of survivors to even make this a possibility. That's progress, at least in church time. But only in church time. The final tipping point with the abuse issue, as we all know, concerns the cover up of these crimes and dismantling the vast system of hierarchical protection of abusers and abuse. Catholics reject this system but don't know what to do about it other than leave or withhold donations. In a recent nationwide survey by the Pew Foundation, 70 percent of Catholics in the US believe that clerical abuse is an ongoing problem and not a thing of the past that has been dealt with by the hierarchy. Every effort by the bishops and the Vatican to push a contrary narrative has utterly failed. This message has still not reached them. They still think they can change things without changing themselves. But the majority of Catholics across the political, theological and culture divides agree, which tells you something.”