

Pell, Hart were leaders in addressing child sex abuse

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Cardinal George Pell in Sydney and Archbishop Denis Hart in Melbourne have become public targets for criticism concerning sexual abuse by priests and brothers within the Catholic Church in Australia. The evidence suggests that paedophiles have been active in religious and secular institutions and elsewhere over the years, particularly between the 1950s and the 1980s. The situation within the Catholic Church has been particularly serious.

During their recent appearances before the Victorian parliamentary inquiry into child abuse, Pell and Hart were subjected to hectoring by some parliamentarians, along with occasional demonstrations and generally hostile media coverage, particularly on the ABC and in *The Age*. Yet it appears they were among the first Catholic leaders in the world to address the issue in a serious way.

A lot of the commentary on this issue has been replete with an ignorance as to how the Catholic Church operates by those who should know better. For example, on ABC1's News Breakfast last week Wayne Chamley of Broken Rites said the Church "runs on anarchy". It doesn't. Last July, the *Four Corners* program "Unholy Silence", by Geoff Thompson and Mary Ann Jolley, failed to make the point that Pell is not responsible for archdioceses or dioceses other than his own. Each bishop reports direct to the Pope in what is an authoritarian structure.

More seriously, *Four Corners* refused to run Pell's comment to this effect, either in the program itself or in the extended interview which is on the *Four Corners* website. The latter omission looks like censorship. This was important since the cases of sexual abuse covered in the program pertained to crimes committed by a one-time priest identified as "F" in the dioceses of Armidale and Parramatta, which are outside Pell's immediate control.

The bishops of Armidale and Parramatta commissioned a report into the management of F by retired Federal Court judge Antony Whitlam, QC, (a non-Catholic).

Whitlam identified a significant error in the *Four Corners* program. He found that the program incorrectly claimed that F had made admissions to the Catholic Church authorities in Sydney which should have been reported to police. This claim remains uncorrected on the *Four Corners* website - some six months after the report was handed down.

Whitlam was extremely critical of the administration of the late Bishop H. J. Kennedy, who ran the Armidale diocese between 1972 and 1991 when F was abusing young boys. Moreover, Whitlam described the behaviour of Kennedy, with respect to the treatment of an abused child's parents, as "a disgrace". Writing in *Eureka Street* on January 21, Father Frank Brennan commented that "Bishop Kennedy was not the only one out of his depth in the saga of Father F, practitioners in law and psychology were found wanting".

Kennedy was not the only member of the Catholic hierarchy out of his depth when paedophilia was at its height. During his evidence to the Victorian Parliament, Pell said that when he became Archbishop

of Melbourne in 1996 there were no extant records of sexual abuse allegations kept by his predecessor Archbishop Frank Little. Little, himself, had not inherited any such documentation from his predecessor Cardinal James Knox.

It gets worse. In the Victorian diocese of Ballarat, where many of the worst clerical paedophile offenders were based, Bishop Ronald Mulkearns destroyed files. He was the Bishop of Ballarat between 1971 and 1997.

In 1996, Hart was appointed as Pell's vicar general. Soon after becoming archbishop, Pell set up the Melbourne Response to deal with clerical sexual abuse. Hart continued the process when he succeeded Pell in 2001. A similar initiative, Towards Healing, was established in the other dioceses in 1997 and continues today.

Like Kennedy in Armidale, Little and Mulkearns were weak men who were in denial and who put their misplaced sense of loyalty to the church, and fear of scandal, before their duty to the victims.

Pell and Hart do not claim to have handled an extremely difficult situation without error. But they did well enough. It's just that these days, whatever they do is criticised: if they point out that each bishop is responsible only for his own diocese, they are accused of avoiding responsibility; if they acknowledge the errors made by the likes of Little, Mulkearns and Kennedy, they are accused of shifting the blame and; if they apologise, they are invariably told by the victims or their families that they are not genuine or lack sufficient remorse.

Yet, in spite of the critics, the likes of Pell and Hart were leaders in the community in addressing child sexual abuse. It is unfashionable to say so, but it's true nevertheless.

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