In ‘Prison Journal,’ Cardinal Pell shows faith in the face of persecution

Suppose you’ve been convicted of a crime you didn’t commit and are in jail waiting for your appeal to be heard — how would you pass the time?

Cardinal George Pell prayed, watched cricket and rugby on TV, and he walked in a postage stamp-sized outdoor pen. He read hundreds of letters of encouragement and support, tackled Leo Tolstoy’s epic novel “War and Peace” and talked to his lawyers. And he kept a journal.

That was barely a year ago. Now, Cardinal Pell, freed by a unanimous decision of the High Court of Australia in April, has published “Prison Journal, Volume 1” (Ignatius Press, $19.95), which covers the first six months of his imprisonment. It paints a memorable picture of a man who suffered a grave injustice yet managed to remain strong in his faith, avoid bitterness and stay mentally and spiritually resilient.

At one point, he writes, “I don’t want to suggest for one moment that I have enjoyed my time in jail … but I have received many blessings.” On the evidence of his journal, you’d have to agree.

Back in 2017, when his troubles began, Cardinal Pell, then 76, had served as archbishop of Melbourne and archbishop of Sydney, and he was appointed prefect of the Vatican’s newly created Secretariat for the Economy, a job in which he was responsible for untangling the Holy See’s tangled financial affairs.

Then came the accusation. A man identified in the journal only
as “J” claimed that two decades earlier the cardinal had sexually abused him and another choir boy (by now deceased) after high Mass in the Melbourne cathedral. Whoever J is in real life, Cardinal Pell strongly suggests that he was a tool of other, unnamed interests attempting to bring down a high-ranking Catholic churchman.

Determined to clear his name, the cardinal returned to Australia to stand trial. But in what many consider a shocking miscarriage of justice, a jury found him guilty in December 2018.

The evidence against him was flimsy from the start. The time and place of the alleged incident were such that it was virtually impossible for anything of the kind to have happened. And eyewitnesses testified that the cardinal was greeting people outside the cathedral at the time. But the jury, apparently prepared to believe anyone claiming victimhood, found him guilty.

The “Prison Journal” covers the time from February to July 2019 while he waited for what he hoped would be exoneration by a regional appeals court. The second volume will pick up with that court’s shocking 2-1 decision against him — a ruling whose sting nevertheless was lightened by a long, carefully argued dissent by an experienced judge named Mark Weinberg, which systematically demolished the case against the cardinal.

The Weinberg opinion apparently played an important part in the Australian High Court’s unanimous decision last April overturning the conviction. The prosecution had simply failed to prove its case, the High Court said, thus creating “a significant possibility that an innocent person has been convicted.”

During his 13 months in prison, Cardinal Pell had ample opportunity to reflect on the surge of anti-Catholic sentiment surrounding these events. He also had time to ruminate on
issues and controversies in the Church, and the “Prison Journal” contains many illuminating insights on these matters, as well.

In the eyes of his enemies, it appears, the cardinal’s real crime was being prominent, conservative and articulate — a highly competent upholder of his rights and the rights of the Church. “There seems little doubt that my social conservatism and advocacy of the Judaeo-Christian ethic have sharpened popular hostility, especially among the militant secularists,” he writes.

Elsewhere, he makes it clear that some journalists and police were part of the opposition. Overall, he says, the “Get Pell” project — a “witch hunt and a smear campaign” — was part of the larger campaign to undermine and effectively destroy the Catholic Church in Australia. Nor was this only a human effort. “I began to believe that there was more than a whiff of evil and, in fact, the presence of the Evil One in the accusations against me,” he writes.

Facing all this, he had his hands full to avoid hating his opponents. “I accept the obligation to forgive my enemies and pray for them,” he says, “but I choked on the idea that God loved one or two people, e.g., prominent personal opponents and enemies of Christianity, as much as he loved me. But of course that is true.”

Being in solitary confinement — for his safety, it was said — the cardinal had no direct contact with other prisoners, but he exchanged letters with some who wrote him in friendly terms and sometimes offered him advice.

Prison, however, was no summer camp. Although run by “decent people,” he remarks, “prison is a place of punishment. … Requests are always responded to tardily, confusions abound. A couple of days’ delay is customary, and the Spartan conditions in the cell and the impeding of the light are part of the
pattern.” To which one might add – as the cardinal also does – the frequent shouting and banging by disturbed prisoners at all hours of the day and night.

Still, in the end what emerges most memorably here is the picture of a brave man striving – successfully – to respond as a Christian to grave injustice. There are important lessons in the “Prison Journal” for the Church in the United States and other places where aggressive secularism is rampant. We have good reason to look forward to Volume 2.

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