

The cardinal Down Under

By George Weigel

In the Baltimore of the 1960s, my canny pastor devised a neat scheme for getting “Father Visitor” (as the confessional doors read) to fill in during the summer for his vacationing curates: bring over newly-ordained Australians from their studies in Rome. There were no language issues (save for those of, er, accent); by the standards of student priests fresh from the Urban College of Propaganda Fidei, the young Aussies were recompensed handsomely and got see something of the United States; it was win-win, all around.

Thus in the summer of 1967 I met Father George Pell of Ballarat, who, with the oils of ordination still wet on his forehead, spent several months at my parish before embarking on doctoral studies at Oxford. If anyone had told Pell or me that, 38 years later, he would be electing the successor to a pope whose biographer I had become, I think we both would have thought the prognosticator a little mad.

I recently spent several days with the cardinal archbishop of Sydney on his home turf, where I was giving a series of lectures in support of Campion College, a new Aussie adventure in Catholic liberal arts education of which Cardinal Pell has been a strong supporter. Seeing my old friend up close and personal, in venues ranging from solemn high Mass in his beautifully restored cathedral to a wildlife preserve featuring all the strange and wondrous fauna of Australia (the cardinal, inspecting a particularly ungainly wombat: “I wonder what the Creator had in mind here?”) gave me an opportunity to ponder just how great Cardinal Pell’s accomplishment has been.

Pell, who is more a Melbournian than a Sydneysider (although he has been metropolitan archbishop of both great sees), sometimes makes reference to his great Melbourne predecessor, Daniel Mannix, archbishop of the capital of Victoria for 46 years and a leading figure in Australian public life for decades. Well, if Mannix set the 20th-century pattern for Catholic prelates Down Under, George Pell will be regarded by historians as the man who set the pattern for the 21st century. In doing so, he saved Catholicism in Australia and set it on course toward a vibrant future,

evangelically and publicly.

When Pell became archbishop of Melbourne in 1996, Catholic Lite was the order of the day throughout the country, with the usual results: goofball liturgy (one bishop celebrated Mass made up as a clown); dumbed-down catechesis; a collapse in religious vocations and seminary applications; the Church bureaucracy joined at the hip to the hard left in Australian public life. Reversing this drift toward theological and moral incoherence and public irrelevance was going to be very hard work. Then Pell caught a break: when his seminary faculty threatened to resign en masse because he insisted that the seminarians attend daily Mass, Pell called their bluff, accepted their resignations, filled the seminary with new faculty—and never looked back.

Religious education was reformed; new and vibrant orders of religious women were brought into the archdiocese; a John Paul II Institute on Marriage and the Family was launched; orthodoxy, no longer optional, became interesting again. Transferred to Sydney in 2001, Pell set about reinvigorating his new archdiocese by seeking, and getting, World Youth Day 2008. Its effects are still rippling through the Sydney metropolitan area—visible, for example, in the 300-plus young people I spoke with at a Theology-on-Tap evening in Parramatta (whose bishop, Anthony Fisher, O.P., is a Pell protégé).

And while doing all this at home, Cardinal Pell has become a major figure on the international Catholic scene. He helped create Vox Clara as a check on English-language liturgical translations. And in recent years he has become a thoughtful critic of environmental radicalism, in which he detects a new paganism filling the piety-gap in post-Christian societies.

All of this has not been without cost, as the cardinal is regularly vilified by his opponents. But the former Australian Rules football star is a battler, who knows the truth of “no pain, no gain.”

Australia and the entire world Church, owe George Pell a large debt of gratitude.