

'It re-traumatised me again and again going through his system': a survivor on George Pell's death

For victim-survivors of child sexual abuse in the Catholic Church, the death of George Pell has dredged up traumas old and new.

JULIA BERGIN JAN 13, 2023

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CARDINAL GEORGE PELL IN 2008 (IMAGE: AAP/TRACEY NEARMY)

Warning: this story may cause distress to some readers.

The death of George Pell, Australia's most senior Catholic, has drawn a mixed response but the news hit home hardest for the thousands of survivors of child sexual abuse in the church.

"I felt pissed off that the bastard died before the victims and the family had a chance to have their day in court," survivor and founding board member of the In Good Faith Foundation Richard Jabara told *Crikey*.

"It sounds a cliché, but death was too good. He didn't have to face the reality that came out of the royal commission."

Jabara came forward with his own story of abuse in 2002. He was raped by Father Terry Pidoto at Melbourne's Corpus Christi College — [Pell's alma mater](#) — of which Pell became rector in 1985. Jabara decided to pursue Pidoto in court. Pidoto was collectively charged with 22 offences against seven boys, found guilty of 11 involving four boys (this included Jabara's rape), and sentenced to seven years behind bars.

Many more victim-survivors came forward with allegations of abuse following the ruling, but Pidoto died in prison before those cases were prosecuted.

For 25 years, Pidoto was known to the archdiocese of Melbourne as a prolific offender. Pell was appointed archbishop of Melbourne by Pope John Paul II in 1996. In 2001 he was appointed archbishop of Sydney. From 1990 to 2000 Pell also sat on the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, the committee responsible for a global sweep of sexual abuse in the Catholic Church.

"When I got the news of Pell dying, I felt sad for other victims who didn't get their chance to have a voice. They were suffering in silence. Some of them may have taken their lives. A lot of them did," Jabara said through tears.

"This was a man who was head of the church. He was in a position to stop a lot of this and he didn't. I wanted to be their voice and to fight this prick who covered up. But he's dead now."

Pell himself was charged in 2017 with multiple child sexual abuse offences, convicted in 2018, sentenced to six years in jail, and two years later absolved of all wrong-doing when the High

Court of Australia overturned his conviction. A [separate civil case](#) against the dead cardinal is still under way.

The [Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse](#) found Pell knew about abuse in the church, especially in the Ballarat diocese, and did not take proper steps to act on complaints about certain priests. In [Pell's own words](#), the crimes of paedophile priest Gerald Ridsdale weren't "of much interest" to him.

For Jabara, Pell's silence facilitated the abuse of thousands, but his public response to revelations of sexual assault protracted the trauma.

Pell announced the Melbourne Response in 1996, the archdiocese's answer for people who had been sexually abused by priests, religious and lay persons within its diocese. Victims were declared happy with the response, but Jabara said that rang hollow.

"We weren't happy. I not only battled my own demons, I had to battle the courts and fight to get justice, and then I had to fight for proper compensation," he said describing round after round of threatening correspondence from the church, dare he open his mouth.

"[Pell] tried to champion that he was on the victims' side, but I went through his Melbourne Response personally and it was very non-victim-friendly. In fact, it retraumatized me again and again going through his system."

For survivors of sexual abuse, triggers are aplenty. In February 2019 on the day of Pell's conviction for historic sexual abuse (later quashed), [national counselling service 1800RESPECT](#) received a 30% surge in calls.

Since his death, there has been an outpouring of support for survivors of sexual abuse. Victorian Premier Daniel Andrews ruled out any possibility of a state funeral saying it would be a "deeply, deeply distressing thing for every victim-survivor of Catholic Church child sexual abuse".

These experiences of victim-survivors are deeply personal, but Jabara said it was the sense of "shared grief" that hit home hardest. It's also what heals: "As a victim it's always very comforting and helpful to speak to another victim. So when I talk they go: 'Oh I get that, that's

me.’ ”

Jabara considers himself lucky to have decided to resist suicide, reach out for help, confront the abuse, fight it tooth and nail in court, and turn around to help others do the same through the In Good Faith Foundation. His focus is squarely on others, but news of Pell’s death did dredge up painful memories of his own.

“I had many years of therapy to come to terms with the impact that the event had on my life. So now when I have a bad thought, it’s just a bad thought, it’s not real,” he said.

“I have counsellors and friends who I’ll probably call this afternoon. All I have to do is just call them. I don’t have to explain. That’s a release. It allows me to keep going to the next day and not do anything silly.”

Survivors of abuse can find support by calling Bravehearts at 1800 272 831 or the Blue Knot Foundation at 1300 657 380. The Kids Helpline is 1800 55 1800.

If you or someone you know is affected by sexual assault or violence, call 1800RESPECT on 1800 737 732 or visit [1800RESPECT.org.au](https://www.1800RESPECT.org.au).

In an emergency, call 000.

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Julia Bergin is a reporter for *Crikey* focused on science. Prior to this, she covered foreign (particularly Asia Pacific) affairs as a freelance journalist and producer.

