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INTERVIEW / FR. JOSEPH HAMILTON

In memory of Cardinal Pell: a living martyr of the faith

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On the evening of 10 January 2023, not even a week after the funeral of Benedict XVI, the news of the sudden and unexpected death of Cardinal George Pell sent shock waves across the globe. Initial disbelief was replaced by grief among those who had known and

admired him, either in person or through his writings. Some time before, the cardinal had written that 'the scales of justice are rebalanced in eternal life, just as surely this does not always happen in earthly life'. Words of great consolation to cling to in the face of the death of a spiritual reference point for so many, of a priest whose skin had been branded with the fresh mark of contemporary persecution against Catholicism in the West that was its cradle. A year after the cardinal's return to the House of the Father who, more than anyone else, demonstrated how anachronistic the oath usque ad sanguinis effusionem is today. The Daily Compass interviewed his faithful secretary, Fr Joseph Hamilton, who was close to him right until the end and who, in a splendid homily in Sydney, remembered this great man for what he had irrefutably been: "another Clemens August Graf Von Galen, a lion of the Church, a magnet for vocations, a bishop confessor, a true cardinal priest".

Cardinal Pell's last public appearance took place in St Peter's Basilica, when he was noticed praying in front of Benedict XVI's body. Fr Hamilton can you tell us something about his last days?

I remember telling the Cardinal on the morning that Benedict died that I was quite upset, as he had been the inspiration for me to enter seminary. In turn, his Eminence told me that he was also feeling the loss—which surprised me, because he rarely spoke about his own feelings. Cardinal Pell just said to me, "well he(Benedict) is with Jesus now".

Do you know if Cardinal Pell had the opportunity to meet Pope Benedict after his return to the Vatican?

They met on two occasions, and once by chance in the Vatican Gardens. Like many old friends they reminisced about shared experiences. World Youth Day in Sydney 2008 left a lasting impression on the pope emeritus and the Cardinal considered it one of the great events of his life as a priest and bishop.

Is it true that a number of bishops and priest paid great reverence to the Cardinal after his return to Vatican? One commented: "I considered him a living martyr's faith"..

His Eminence, according to the patristic measure, was a confessor of the Church. Whenever we walked from the Vatican to our Holy Hour at San Celso, numerous persons would frequently stop him and ask for his blessing. It reminded me of the writings of St. Cyprian, and the devotion the early Church in North Africa demonstrated in the presence of the confessors. Our earliest forebears in the Church believed that the Confessors had received an outpouring of the Holy Spirit in a particular way. It was as

though the faithful sensed that in him—the charisms of the Confessors. There was a house troubled by evil spirits that I had blessed a number of times. After each blessing, the house would become quiet for a time, and then the disturbances would return. I asked the Cardinal to bless the house, he did, and there has been no trouble since! Cardinal Pell manifested the twin charism of 'confessorship' and apostolic anointing. We should pray that other priests and bishops model themselves on his example.

After his death, there were different reactions: a part of public opinion in Australia even wished him to go to the Hell, on other hand we can't remember a similar demonstration of love in memory of a contemporary cardinal from catholics worldwide. Which of these two reactions surprised you the most?

In most countries a certain level of decency expected to surround the funeral rites of even controversial people. That this was manifestly absent in certain sectors of Sydney society is lamentable, but, as I said last February, the distasteful behaviour of a few was massively, and definitively, drowned out by the outpouring of prayers and love of the many.

I remember so many families in tears at his funeral. What was the secret of Cardinal's apostolate among lay people?

Again, the people sensed in Cardinal George Pell, the charisms poured out upon every faithful priest of Jesus Christ. He was a spiritual father, and he greatly cared for the welfare, material and spiritual, of those entrusted to his vocation.

How did his self-awareness change after the injustices he suffered in Australia?

He became more reflective, he had more time to pray. He would spend an hour in the chapel in the morning, we would go to our Holy Hour most evenings either at San Celso or Santo Spirito in Sassia. And then in the evenings, when I went to bed, I would often hear his footsteps going into the chapel. The Cardinal loved Jesus. He bore witness to, and suffered for, Him.

Did he ever feel "the pioneer" of the famous prophecy of Cardinal Francis George on the persecution of the Church? (*"I expect to die in bed, my successor will die in prison and his successor will die a martyr in the public square. His successor will pick up the shards of a ruined society and slowly help rebuild civilisation, as the church has done so often in human history."*)

Actually, he told Cardinal George that that was too pessimistic!

When the Cardinal was convicted in 2019, a few journalists described him as a man that loved the luxury. Actually, Pell was the promoter of the most

important economic reform in Vatican and Pope Francis said that “we owe him so much”. In your opinion, why his work regarding the Vatican's finances is worth to be remembered? You’re also a former banker..

For financial markets to operate efficiently there simply has to be a presumed level of compliance with international standards with respect to fair dealing, money laundering, and general compliance, not to mention an overall endeavour to achieve excellence and efficiency in the areas of asset allocation, risk management and optimisation of fee structures. But all of this, all of this, flows from the Thomistic principle of justice, and so in that regard the Holy See should be a trailblazer not a loss-leader. Cardinal Pell endeavoured to revivify those principles in Rome for the good of the Universal Church, and for those whom we should have particular care; the poor, the sick, the elderly and the defenceless.

How do you believe he would like to be commemorated?

I think the best commemoration for him, is that which was requested for the inscription on his tomb; *Ecclesiam vehementer amavit*