



Australian Cardinal George Pell is pictured during the extraordinary Synod of Bishops on the family at the Vatican in this Oct. 6, 2014, file photo. (CNS/Paul Haring)



by Michael Sean Winters

[View Author Profile](#)

Follow on Twitter at [@michaelswinters](#)

[**Join the Conversation**](#)

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. [Learn more](#)

April 7, 2025

[Share on Bluesky](#)[Share on Facebook](#)[Share on Twitter](#)[Email to a friend](#)[Print](#)

I got an [email](#) from the Napa Institute founder Tim Busch with the subject line: "Cardinal George Pell's First Miracle?" The email linked to an [article](#) at the Catholic News Agency which reported that Archbishop Anthony Fisher of Sydney, Australia, claimed that a toddler in Arizona was healed miraculously through the intercession of his late predecessor, Cardinal George Pell.

We can all imagine the joy of the family of the child, who had fallen into a pool and was not breathing for an extended period of time. According to the story, the parents had met the late cardinal when he was on a book tour, so their recourse to him as a saintly intercessor makes sense.



15-month old Vincent Robinson is carried in the arms of the Phoenix Police officer who first arrived at the Robinsons' home on the morning Vincent's father found him March 2 face-down at the bottom of the family's hot tub that was not turned on, in Phoenix March 26, 2025. (OSV News/Courtesy of Phoenix Fire Department)

I hope Pell is in heaven, that he is, in fact, a saint. When St. Pope John Paul II canonized St. Josemaria Escriva, the founder of Opus Dei, I was visiting friends in Mexico City. We went to Mass with Dona Clara, the matriarch of the family, and afterwards took her to lunch. She asked me what I thought of Escriva being canonized despite all the controversy surrounding him and the organization he

founded.

"I am delighted," I told her. "You are?" she asked. "Yes," I said. "If a megalomaniac like Escriva can become a saint, there is truly hope for us all."

I feel the same way about Pell, but am not sure he will make it through the process of canonization by which the church confirms a person is in heaven. Before getting to the miracles, the process first requires a determination that the putative saint displayed "heroic virtue." Does the public record confirm such heroic virtue?

Pell's champions point to his imprisonment on charges of sex abuse. The High Court of Australia tossed out his [conviction](#) after a jury found him guilty. I am not an expert on Australian jurisprudence. I was not on the jury that heard the case. I have no basis for questioning either the original verdict nor its being overturned on appeal. Those who claim with certainty that he was guilty or that he was innocent are making a large claim.

We do know with absolute certainty that when Pell became a cardinal in 2003, he took an [oath](#): "I, George Pell, Cardinal of Holy Roman Church, promise and swear, from this day forth and as long as I live, to remain faithful to Christ and his Gospel, constantly obedient to the Holy Apostolic Roman Church, to Blessed Peter in the person of the Supreme Pontiff ..."

In the days after Pell's death, Italian Vaticanista Sandro Magister revealed that Pell was the author of an anonymous memo that had been published the previous year under the pseudonym "[Demos](#)." It is a bit hard to find. The links we included in our NCR reporting at the time all now lead to one of those "404 - page not found" notices. But the full [text](#) can be read at California Catholic Daily.

It is not subtle. "Commentators of every school, if for different reasons, with the possible exception of Father Spadaro, SJ, agree that this pontificate is a disaster in many or most respects; a catastrophe," it begins. The memo lists a hodgepodge of complaints, from fiscal policy to doctrinal statements, all with a common denominator: The pope did not take Pell's advice. Did I miss the asterisk in the oath that permits disloyalty if one's advice is not taken?

Advertisement

To be sure, in every pontificate, there are cardinals who disagree with certain policies adopted by the pope. They certainly communicate their frustrations to each other. Publishing an anonymous screed is something different, and that difference is more than bad form, or *bruta figura* as they call it in the Vatican. It is bad faith.

Could it be that the cardinalial oath is not specific enough? Pell had pledged to be "faithful" to the successor of St. Peter, but the oath does not insist it be good faith. The memo Pell wrote was written in bad faith and, being published anonymously, cowardly bad faith at that.

Pell is dead and buried. Truly, I hope his soul is in heaven. What worries me is that the next few months will witness a cult of Pell develop among Francis' critics. Just as some episcopal critics have grown beards which one prelate told me they plan to shave off when Francis dies, that same group of prelates will likely go hunting for miracles they can attribute to Pell's intercession. Archbishop Paul Coakley of Oklahoma City has a spiffy beard and he is the "[ecclesiastical advisor](#)" to the Napa Institute. Did Busch run his praise of Pell by Coakley? What did the "ecclesiastical adviser" advise?

Jesus was the only person who merited admittance to heaven. (In his case, it was readmittance.) If any of us make it to heaven, it will not be because of our heroic virtue or our miracles or anything else. It will be because we threw ourselves on God's mercy. In the words of the old hymn: "Rock of Ages, cleft for me ... only to thy cross I cling."

So, with Busch, let's all celebrate the possibility, even the likelihood, that the late cardinal is in heaven. But any attempt to create a cult around Pell should be seen for what it is: Another avenue of attack on Francis.