George Pell and cardinals warn Pope of Catholic Church collapse

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George Pell has joined 12 other cardinals in a letter warning the Pope that the church is in danger of collapsing like liberal Protestant churches in the modern era. Source: News Corp Australia

Civil war has erupted at the top of the Catholic Church, with 13 cardinals, including Australia’s George Pell, warning the Pope in a letter that the church is in danger of collapsing like liberal Protestant churches in the modern era.

The cardinals say the threat of collapse has been accelerated by the “abandonment of key elements of Christian belief and practice in the name of pastoral adaptation”.

As well as Cardinal Pell, the Vatican’s Secretary for the Economy, cardinals from Bologna, Toronto, New York, Galveston, Nairobi, Mexico, Utrecht, Durban and Caracas signed the letter, as well as other senior Vatican officials. These included Guinean Cardinal Robert Sarah, the church’s Prefect for Divine Worship, and German Cardinal Gerhard Mueller, the Prefect for Doctrine.

The row centres on the three-week Synod on the Family under way in Rome and being attended by about 300 delegates, mainly bishops, from around the world.
While the Pope encourages free debate, the cardinals’ move is courageous. Some analysts believe they have put their careers on the line in defence of church teaching on the indissolubility of marriage and the eucharist.

At the synod, one participant said “a little bit of smog or fog has entered the aura (auditorium)”, a reference to Paul VI’s statement 50 years ago that “the smoke of Satan” had entered the church.

Late on Monday, veteran Vatican journalist Sandro Magister, a correspondent for Italian magazine l’Espresso, published a letter he said was sent to the Pope by the cardinals a week earlier, criticising the synod process.

The letter complained the process seemed “designed to facilitate predetermined results on important disputed questions”. Several of the signatories, including Cardinal Pell, have also raised concerns inside the synod.

The leaking of the letter to Magister is significant. Francis’s press secretary, Frederico Lombardi, banned Magister, 72, from the Vatican press corps in July after he published an early leak of the Pope’s controversial green-Left encyclical, Laudato Si.

One point of contention is whether long-established rules should be changed to allow divorced and civilly remarried Catholics to receive communion. Such a change is being pushed by a group of German bishops led by Cardinal Walter Kasper, 82.

In a statement released after the leaking of the letter, a spokesman for Cardinal Pell said: “There is strong agreement in the synod on most points but obviously there is some disagreement because minority elements want to change the church’s teachings on the proper dispositions necessary for the reception of communion. Obviously there is no possibility of change on this doctrine.” The spokesman also said private letters should remain private.

Critics of the synod process fear a subtle undermining of doctrine, leaving the bishops’ conferences of individual nations, or dioceses, to set their own rules on communion for remarried divorcees whose first marriages have not been annulled. Such an approach would draw the Catholic Church closer to liberal Protestantism, under which different rules apply in different regions and different countries.

The Pope, who will ultimately decide the issue, has not yet expressed a view.

Much of the synod discussion has been kept under wraps, but on Tuesday last week — the day after receiving the letter — the Pope made an unscheduled intervention, reportedly urging synod fathers not to indulge in a mentality that saw plots and conspiracy theories, which he said were “sociologically weak and spiritually unhelpful”.

Tensions over the synod have been building for a month since the Pope invited retired Belgian Cardinal Godfried Daneels, 82, to be one of his 45 personal appointees to the event. A fortnight ago, at the launch of his biography in Brussels, Cardinal Daneels boasted about his membership of the shadowy “St Gallen mafia”, a group of cardinals opposed to Benedict XVI who met secretly in Switzerland before and during the German’s pontificate. The group favoured Argentinian Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio (Pope Francis) to lead the church, which they believed should be modernised radically.