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THE AUSTRALIAN

Bombshell charges but Pope ‘on side’



Cardinal George Pell, at the Holy See press office in the Vatican yesterday, responds to news of the charges against him. Picture: AFP

JOHN FERGUSON JACQUELIN MAGNAY THE AUSTRALIAN 12:00AM June 30, 2017

Cardinal George Pell has stood down as the Catholic Church’s global financial chief and vowed to fight historical sex abuse charges in Australia with the broad support of Pope Francis and the Holy See.

Victoria Police announced in unprecedented circumstances yesterday that Australia’s most senior Catholic would be forced to attend court in Melbourne on July 26 to face multiple historical sex-offence charges affecting multiple alleged victims.

Those charges will include alleged offending in the Ballarat suburb of Sebastopol, 120km west of Melbourne, between January 1, 1973, and August 22, 1976.

Cardinal Pell has vowed to vigorously fight the allegations.

He is the most senior Catholic in the world to be charged with sex offences, rocking the Vatican and the church in Australia, where its two most senior leaders also stood by the 76-year-old.

While Cardinal Pell vowed yesterday to return to the Vatican, senior church insiders in Rome indicated that regardless of the outcome it will be the end of the road for his career at the seat of power, pointing to likely retirement after court proceedings end.

Cardinal Pell appeared tired and unhappy yesterday and was helped to his feet after his Rome news conference, which was called almost eight hours after *The Australian* broke the news of the police decision.

“I’m looking forward, finally, to having my day in court; I’m innocent of these charges,” he said.

“They are false. The whole idea of sexual abuse is abhorrent to me. News of these charges strengthens my resolve ... and court proceedings now offer me an opportunity to clear my name and then return here back to Rome to work.”

However, a Vatican insider said: “That is the end of the road for George Pell in the Vatican, regardless of the outcome. He will be pensioned off when the court case finishes.”

Victoria Police Deputy Commissioner Shane Patton said Cardinal Pell had been charged on summons and was required to appear at the Melbourne Magistrates Court for a filing hearing next month. “It is important to note that none of the allegations that have been made are yet to be tested in any court,” he said.

“As with any other person who is charged with a criminal offence, Cardinal Pell is entitled to due process. Preserving the integrity of that process is of the highest importance to Victoria Police.

“It is essential that the proceedings be allowed to follow their course unhindered in order to ensure fairness and justice for all parties involved.”

Cardinal Pell will be forced to fund his legal defence — certain to cost hundreds of thousands of dollars — but the Sydney archdiocese will fund his accommodation in Australia and living expenses. It is possible his defence will be funded by wealthy church supporters, including legal figures.

It is unclear how Cardinal Pell, who had a heart condition, will return to Australia but he revealed he had spoken to his doctors about how best to travel. There has been speculation he could take a boat from Europe or charter a jet.

The decision to charge the cardinal was greeted warmly by victims of Catholic sex abuse but was not considered a surprise by his legal team, which had factored in charges as long ago as October.

Pope Francis appeared to provide strong support for Cardinal Pell, who for three years worked as Prefect of the Secretariat for the Economy of the Holy See, which made him among the world’s most senior Catholics and highly influential in the everyday workings of the church. He was considered a noted reformer of the often dysfunctional and corruption-ridden financial system.

The Holy See said in a statement it regretted news of the charges, and pointedly referred to the cardinal’s work setting up the Melbourne Response, the church’s first, but controversial, compensation scheme for abuse victims.

“The Holy Father, who has appreciated Cardinal Pell’s honesty during his three years of work in the Roman Curia, is grateful for his collaboration, and in particular, for his energetic dedication to the reforms in the economic and administrative sector, as well as his active participation in the Council of Cardinals,” it said.

“The Holy See expresses its respect for the Australian justice system that will have to decide the merits of the questions raised. At the same time, it is important to recall that Cardinal Pell has openly and repeatedly condemned as immoral and intolerable the acts of abuse committed against minors.”

The decision to prosecute Cardinal Pell comes about 18 months after news broke that Victorian detectives, working with the sex abuse royal commission, were investigating him.

Born in the Victorian city of Ballarat, Cardinal Pell was ordained a priest for the Diocese of Ballarat in 1966. He served as an assistant parish priest in the Murray River town of Swan Hill from 1971 to 1972 before moving back to Ballarat until 1985. While he always denied knowledge of abuse in the diocese, it would emerge as the epicentre for offending in Australia, with hundreds, probably thousands, of victims.

Cardinal Pell described as a mistake his decision in the early 1990s to attend court to support pedophile Gerald Ridsdale, despite Ridsdale being considered among the worst of all offenders.

His relationship with sex-abuse victims never recovered from his decision to back Ridsdale.

Child sexual abuse survivor Andrew Collins said he had spoken to other alleged victims who were overjoyed that a decision had been made to charge the cardinal.

However, others in Ballarat who would be upset. “Cardinal Pell is like an icon in this town, not just because of the church, he was a phenomenal footballer ... Cardinal Pell is Ballarat. If (the charges) are true, it’s going to affect the whole community,” he said.

Archbishop of Sydney Anthony Fisher praised Cardinal Pell’s record, referring to Pope Francis’s reference to his honesty.

“Having known him for the best part of three decades myself, I can only support that judgment: the George Pell I know is a man of integrity in his dealings with others, a man of faith and high ideals, a thoroughly decent man,” he said.

Archbishop of Melbourne Denis Hart described Cardinal Pell as a friend and brother priest.

“The Archbishop is conscious of the cardinal’s many good works which have been acknowledged both nationally and internationally,” a spokesman said.

In a statement last night, former prime minister Tony Abbott said: “Obviously, the legal process must now take its course. But the George Pell I have known is a very fine man indeed.”

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