

George Pell Sex Abuse Conviction Unsealed in Australia

By Livia Albeck-Ripka

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MELBOURNE, Australia — Cardinal George Pell, the highest-ranking Roman Catholic leader ever convicted of sexual abuse, will not face a second trial on an additional round of assault allegations involving young boys.

The earlier verdict was unsealed on Tuesday only after prosecutors decided they could not proceed with the second trial after a legal setback.

The decision came just days before the cardinal was set to be sentenced for abusing two 13-year-old choirboys more than two decades ago.

Cardinal Pell, 77, was found guilty in December of sexually assaulting the boys. But a judge barred news outlets from publishing anything about the verdict, citing concerns that coverage might influence a jury in the second trial.

On Tuesday, with the new trial no longer in the works, the judge lifted the gag order.

The earlier case related to abuse that took place in 1996.

A former adviser to Pope Francis, the cardinal was found guilty of forcing oral sex onto a 13-year-old boy after Sunday Mass in the sacristy of St. Patrick's Cathedral in Melbourne. At the time, Cardinal Pell was the city's archbishop.

He was also convicted of an assault in which he grabbed a boy's genitals.

Sentencing proceedings in that trial are expected to begin on Wednesday.

The second trial was to focus on allegations of child abuse dating to the 1970s, when he was a parish priest in his hometown, Ballarat, Australia.

A jury was expected to hear testimony from three complainants, who were children at the time of the alleged assaults.

One child accused the cardinal of touching his genitals on multiple occasions from 1978 to 1979, as they played in the local swimming pool.

Another said he had also been abused at the pool, between 1977 and 1979. He said the cardinal had touched his testicles as he was throwing him into the water.

A third complainant, whose allegations were not made part of a formal charge, said that in 1975 or 1976, he was playing in the water with Cardinal Pell at Lake Boga, about 200 miles from Melbourne.

At one point, he said, he slipped from the cardinal's shoulders and was hit in the face with his erect penis. The cardinal smiled, the boy said.

"Don't worry, it's only natural," he said, the boy recounted.

The verdict in the first trial was made subject to a suppression order that barred publication in Australia of any news related to the case.

[Read the article about the conviction that was blocked from online publication until now.]

Prosecutors preparing for the second trial had hoped to prove that his history of abuse proved that Cardinal Pell had a tendency toward molesting children.

Under Australian law, a judge may admit such only evidence if its evidentiary value outweighs the risk of prejudice to the defendant.

In this case, Judge Peter Kidd of County Court in Victoria ruled, it did not. The prosecution then decided to drop the new cases.

The sister of one of the complainants, who asked she not be named to protect her brother, said that while her family was disappointed at the collapse of the second trial, it was “overjoyed” that Cardinal Pell was found guilty in the earlier one.

She said she hoped that other people would be encouraged to come forward with their own stories of abuse.

“This has been David and Goliath type stuff,” she said.

The Pell cases come at a time of stepped-up action by the church against abusive clergy members.

Last week, the pope expelled Theodore E. McCarrick, a former cardinal and archbishop of Washington, from the priesthood after the church found him guilty of sexually abusing minors and adult seminarians. It was the first time a cardinal was defrocked for sexual abuse, though the scandal has tarred the church for decades.

In a landmark summit at the Vatican this week, Pope Francis called an “all-out battle against the abuse of minors.”

But survivors and advocates have been disappointed by what they say is a continued lack of action by the church.

After his conviction, Cardinal Pell’s career effectively ended. Once often called the third-most-powerful man in the Vatican, the cardinal oversaw the church’s finances. But he was expelled from a group of papal advisers in December.

“There are no winners,” said Andrew Collins, a clergy sexual abuse survivor from Ballarat. But, he said, “It’s part of the bloodletting that’s needed to happen for the Catholic church.”