

Australian archbishop convicted of covering up child sexual abuse

The test case was another step toward holding the church to account for a global abuse crisis.

by [Rod McGuirk](#) in the [June 20, 2018](#) issue



St. Francis Xavier Cathedral in Adelaide, South Australia. [Some rights reserved](#) by [Bahudhara](#).

An Australian archbishop on May 22 became the most senior Roman Catholic cleric in the world convicted of covering up child sexual abuse.

Magistrate Robert Stone handed down the verdict against Philip Wilson, archbishop of Adelaide, in Newcastle Local Court following a magistrate-only trial. Wilson, 67, had pleaded not guilty to concealing a serious crime committed by another person: the sexual abuse of children by priest James Fletcher in the 1970s. Fletcher died in prison of a stroke in 2006 while serving an eight-year sentence.

Wilson had made four attempts in the past three years to have the charge struck out without a trial.

The conviction is another step toward holding the church accountable for a global abuse crisis that has also engulfed Pope Francis's financial minister, Australian cardinal George Pell.

Frank Brennan, an Australian Jesuit priest, human rights lawyer, and academic, said Wilson had to stand aside as archbishop. He noted that as a young priest in the 1970s, Wilson was complying with the nondisclosure expected from the church.

"Archbishop Wilson in recent years," Brennan said, "has been one of the bishops in the Catholic Church who have been trying to clean things up."

Jason Parkinson, a former police detective who is now a Canberra lawyer specializing in representing victims of clergy child sexual abuse, said he hoped police would now pursue Catholic orders of teaching brothers that responded to families' complaints by transferring perpetrators to other schools.

"These brothers-headmasters should be investigated—starting with the ones still in the teaching system," Parkinson wrote in a text message.

An Australian inquiry into child abuse recommended in December that the Catholic Church lift its demand of celibacy from clergy and that priests be prosecuted for failing to report evidence of pedophilia heard in the confessional.

Australia's longest-running royal commission, which is the country's highest form of inquiry, had been investigating since 2012 how the Catholic Church and other institutions responded to sexual abuse of children during the past 90 years. The report collected testimony from more than 8,000 survivors of child sexual abuse. Of those who were abused in religious institutions, 62 percent were Catholics.

Stone told the court May 22 that Wilson had concealed Fletcher's abuse of two altar boys by failing to report the allegations to police. Stone said he was satisfied that one of the altar boys, Peter Creigh, had been a "truthful and reliable" witness. The second abuse survivor cannot be named for legal reasons.

Wilson was released on bail until he appears at a sentencing hearing on June 19. Prosecutors will argue for a custodial sentence.

In a statement issued by the Catholic Church, Wilson said he was disappointed by the conviction.

“I will now have to consider the reasons and consult closely with my lawyers to determine the next steps,” he said.

Prosecutor Gareth Harrison had submitted that Wilson was involved in a cover-up to protect the church’s reputation and that there were doubts about his honesty. Harrison argued that in Wilson’s mind, victims came second.

Wilson, who is suffering from the early stages of Alzheimer’s disease but maintains that medication has helped his memory, told the court last month that he could not remember the two altar boys telling him in 1976 that they had been abused by Fletcher.

One of Fletcher’s victims, Daniel Feenan, said if Wilson had gone to the police in 1976—the year Feenan was born—Fletcher “would never have got to me.”

In Chile, a crisis over sexual abuse by priests is affecting the entire national bishops conference. In May, Pope Francis called the Chilean bishops to a rare emergency meeting at the Vatican. According to a Vatican report, Francis charged the bishops with destroying evidence and hindering investigations.

At the end of that meeting, the 31 active bishops and three retired ones offered to resign—which may be the first time an entire national bishops conference took such an action. It was up to Pope Francis whether to receive or reject the resignations now or later. —Associated Press

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