

Victims group urges Philadelphia archbishop to defrock convicted priest, Monsignor William Lynn

by [David Gibson](#)

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c. 2012 Religion News Service (RNS) The leading advocacy group for victims of sexual abuse by clergy is urging Philadelphia Archbishop Charles Chaput to defrock the priest convicted last week of shielding other clerics who preyed on children. But laicizing Monsignor William Lynn is not as simple as it sounds.

Lynn oversaw clergy assignments in the Philadelphia archdiocese for a decade and is the first high-ranking church official ever found guilty of covering up for abuse, not committing it.

Lynn, 61, was convicted on one charge of child endangerment and was acquitted of conspiracy and a second endangerment charge after a closely watched three-month trial. He is in custody and could face up to seven years behind bars when he is sentenced on Aug. 13.

The request by the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests, or SNAP, came in a letter sent Wednesday (June 27) to Chaput. It highlights the unusual challenge of what punishment the church should levy on Lynn, if any.

"This is not about being vindictive. It's about being prudent," SNAP leaders David Clohessy and Barbara Dorris write in their letter. "It's about sending the most clear and severe message possible to current and future church employees who ignore, conceal and enable heinous crimes against kids."

"That message should be a 'no brainer' -- if you protect predators and hurt kids by hiding known and suspected crimes, you will be out of a job."

The first difficulty in trying to laicize Lynn, though, is that his case is unique. There appear to be few provisions in canon law or in the policies adopted by the American

bishops a decade ago for defrocking a priest who is not guilty of the actual abuse.

Laicization is a momentous action, in theological and personal terms, because it effectively undoes a sacred calling that defines a priest's very identity. So even if Chaput asked the Vatican to take such a step, it's not clear he would have a strong case. The jury itself struggled to reach a verdict, weighing the fact that Lynn was accused of covering up rather than committing abuse, and that he was acting at the behest of his superiors.

Secondly, there is little desire among church authorities to move harshly against Lynn because it could set a precedent that would potentially expose many bishops to similar penalties. In fact, any number of bishops -- including some who oversaw Lynn in Philadelphia -- made the same decisions to cover up for abusers. But death or the statute of limitations has largely put those bishops beyond the reach of criminal law, and the church's canon law would be the only recourse for punishing them.

One possible exception is Bishop Robert Finn of the Diocese of Kansas City-St. Joseph in Missouri. Finn is to go on trial in September on charges that he failed to report a suspected abuser to authorities. If convicted, Finn would present the Vatican with the dilemma of whether to let him stay on as head of the diocese. But the Vatican would certainly not defrock him.

A decision on Lynn's fate may come sooner rather than later. He may not face jail time, or if he does he is likely to be out in a couple of years, in his mid-60s and still a priest. What should he do?

Kathleen McChesney, a former FBI agent who was the first head of the Office of Child and Youth Protection at the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, said Lynn might be treated like a priest convicted of drunk driving or a similar crime -- allowing him to continue as a priest after paying his dues but giving him "meaningful work" in another context.

"It would make sense to assign him to work where he doesn't have the same type of responsibilities that he did at the time of the events charged," McChesney said. She suggested that Chaput could consult the archdiocese's lay-led review board for guidance.

Some say a desk job or an assistant pastor's job might be appropriate. That would exemplify the church's teachings about mercy and forgiveness while also demonstrating some accountability for wrongdoing and respecting the sensitivities of victims and those who felt betrayed by Lynn's actions.

But in reality, there appear to be few good solutions, and certainly none that would satisfy both victims and church authorities.

Chaput "cannot expect decades of secrecy and self-serving decisions by church employees to change if he refuses to permanently oust a proven felon and essentially unrepentant wrongdoer who put kids in harm's way, day after day, year after year," said Karen Polesir, SNAP's Philadelphia co-director.

Chaput has so far been silent on Lynn's fate, and a statement from the archdiocese after the priest's conviction made no mention of Lynn and simply reiterated apologies to all victims of clergy abuse and renewed vows to continue to pursue reforms.

Spokespersons for the archdiocese were not available to comment on SNAP's letter on Wednesday.