

Catholic priest convicted of shielding abusers

by [David Gibson](#) in the [July 25, 2012](#) issue

A Philadelphia priest was convicted June 22 of one count of child endangerment, becoming the first cleric in the Catholic Church's long-running clergy sexual abuse scandal to be tried and found guilty of shielding molesters.

Monsignor William Lynn, 61, was acquitted of conspiracy and a second endangerment charge after a three-month trial that had seemed on the verge of a hung jury two days earlier.

The jurors said they were deadlocked on attempted rape and endangerment charges against Lynn's codefendant, James J. Brennan, also a priest. Common Pleas Court Judge M. Teresa Sarmina declared a mistrial on the Brennan charges, which means prosecutors could decide to try him again.

Lynn, who was head of priest personnel in the Archdiocese of Philadelphia for 12 years, was charged with recommending that Brennan and another priest, Edward Avery, be allowed to live or work in parishes in the 1990s despite indications that they might abuse children.

Avery pleaded guilty before the trial to sexually assaulting a ten-year-old altar boy in 1999 and is serving two-and-a-half to five years in state prison.

The charges against Lynn drew intense scrutiny because he was the first church official to be tried for covering up and enabling abuse. Both prosecutors and victims' advocates claimed victory.

"This day—and the relief, vindication and healing it gives clergy sexual abuse victims—is long overdue," said Barbara Dorris of the Survivors Network of Those Abused by Priests. "The guilty verdict sends a strong and clear message that shielding and enabling predator priests is a heinous crime that threatens families, communities and children and must be punished as such."

The survivors network, in a letter January 27 to Philadelphia Archbishop Charles Chaput, urged him to remove Lynn from the priesthood. But Catholic experts say policies and canon law do not exist to laicize Lynn since he was accused of covering up rather than committing abuse and he was acting at the behest of his superiors.

Terence McKiernan, head of BishopAccountability.org, another victim advocacy group, called Lynn's conviction "a watershed moment in the Catholic abuse crisis."

During the trial, jurors and the public heard graphic testimony from nearly 20 victims of abuse at the hands of priests in the five-county archdiocese, which includes about 1.5 million Catholics. They also saw thousands of church records about clergy abuse that had been hidden away by Lynn and others, mainly during the tenure of former Philadelphia Cardinal Anthony Bevilacqua.

Lynn's defense team argued that he was ordered by Bevilacqua not to say anything about the abuse and had no authority to remove priests from the ministry. "I did my best with what I could do," Lynn testified in his defense. His lawyers said they will appeal.

Lynn, who is in custody, could face up to seven years behind bars when he is sentenced on August 13.

Bevilacqua, who was archbishop from 1988 to his retirement in 2003, died in January on the eve of the trial, and many saw Lynn as something of a stand-in for the man prosecutors wanted to charge but could not.

In Missouri, Bishop Robert Finn of the Diocese of Kansas City-St. Joseph is scheduled to go on trial in September on charges that he failed to report suspicions that one of his priests might be an abuser. If Finn is convicted, he would be the first bishop ever found guilty in the abuse scandal. —RNS