

Catholic official jailed for sexual abuse cover-up

by [David Gibson](#) in the [August 22, 2012](#) issue

Monsignor William J. Lynn, the first U.S. Catholic official convicted for covering up the sexual abuse of children, has been sentenced to three to six years in prison.

Lynn, 61, has been in jail since his June 22 conviction on endangering the welfare of a child. Prosecutors were seeking the maximum penalty—up to seven years.

“You knew full well what was right, Monsignor Lynn, but you chose wrong,” said Common Pleas Court Judge M. Teresa Sarmina in sentencing him on July 24. Sarmina told Lynn that he enabled “monsters in clerical garb . . . to destroy the souls of children, to whom you turned a hard heart.”

Lynn was head of priest personnel for a dozen years and was one of the highest-ranking officials in the Archdiocese of Philadelphia. He worked alongside Cardinal Anthony J. Bevilacqua, a powerful churchman who died earlier this year just before the trial began.

Lynn was the first church official to be tried for what many see as an unaddressed crime in the decades-long tally of abuse throughout the church: no U.S. bishops or officials who covered up and enabled the abuse had previously been held accountable in criminal court.

He was charged with recommending that James J. Brennan and another former priest, Edward Avery, be allowed to live or work in parishes in the 1990s despite indications that they might abuse children. Avery later sexually assaulted a ten-year-old altar boy. He pleaded guilty before the trial and is serving up to five years in state prison.

Prosecutors said that Lynn demonstrated an “apparent lack of remorse for anyone but himself.” Lynn told the judge that he did his best to mitigate the damage done by the abusive priests and repeated his argument that he lacked the authority to do anything more. “But the fact is, my best was not good enough—and for that I’m truly sorry,” he said.

Joelle Casteix of the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests said she was pleased that Lynn would go to prison. The sentence, she said, “sends a powerful message: cover up child sex crimes and you’ll go to jail. Not house arrest. Not community service. Not a fine. You’ll be locked up.”

The sentencing does not necessarily mean the end of the case for Lynn, or the end of the run of ugly headlines about clergy sexual abuse that have plagued the Catholic Church for more than a decade.

Lynn's lawyers said they plan to appeal his conviction, and legal experts say he could have a strong case. Moreover, victims' advocates and others say they want to see Lynn defrocked, or "laicized," just as the church now does with most priests who abuse children.

Lynn's case could be eclipsed this September. Bishop Robert Finn of the Diocese of Kansas City-St. Joseph in Missouri will be tried 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.

"If Finn gets convicted, that is certainly going to send a message" to other church officials, said Thomas J. Reese, a Jesuit priest and political scientist who is a fellow at the Woodstock Theological Center at Georgetown University. —RNS