News



Archbishop Philip Wilson of Adelaide, Australia, leaves the Newcastle Local Court May 22. Wilson, who was convicted of covering up clergy sexual abuse, says he will consult his lawyer before he decides next steps. (CNS/EPA/Peter Lorimer)



by James Dearie

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Update May 23, 8:30 am CDT: Archbishop Wilson announced that he is stepping aside from his duties as archbishop for the time being. "I have taken the opportunity overnight to consider His Honour's reasons," Wilson said in a statement. "I am still considering those reasons together with my legal advisors. While I do so, it is appropriate that, in the light of some of his Honour's findings, I stand aside from my duties as Archbishop." Wilson says he will be stepping aside as of Friday.

"If at any point in time it becomes necessary or appropriate for me to take more formal steps, including by resigning as Archbishop, then I will do so," he added.

In his own statement, Australian Catholic Bishops Conference president Brisbane Archbishop Mark Coleridge said "We, his brother bishops, believe Archbishop Wilson's decision, though difficult, was appropriate under the circumstances."

The original story, which carried the headline "Australian archbishop found guilty of covering up child sexual abuse," continues below.

The original story was also updated with comments from Australian Catholic writer Paul Collins.

Archbishop Philip Wilson of Adelaide, Australia, was found guilty of failing to report child sexual abuse in Newcastle Local Court May 22.

Wilson is scheduled to be sentenced June 19. The prosecution is asking for a jail sentence.

"I am obviously disappointed at the decision published today," Wilson said in a statement the morning of the ruling. "I will now have to consider the reasons and consult closely with my lawyers to determine the next steps."

Wilson, who was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease in November but refused to resign, claims that he does not recall a 1976 conversation with a then 15-year-old victim of Fr. James Fletcher in which the victim had detailed abuse allegations, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation reported the morning of the decision.

Fletcher was convicted on several charges of child abuse in 2004. He died in jail in 2006.

Magistrate Robert Stone said that he was "satisfied" that the victim had made a report to Wilson, who "knew he was hearing a credible allegation of abuse," but "wanted to protect the church and its reputation."

Brian Coyne, the editor and publisher of the online journal Catholica.com.au, told NCR that "this is a hugely significant decision by a civil court. Archbishop Wilson is the most senior Catholic leader in the world to have faced such a conviction."

The conviction comes at an already difficult time for the Catholic Church in Australia, according to Coyne. The Australian Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse released its final report in December, in which it found that over 60 percent of victims abused in religious institutions were abused in Catholic ones, and suggested several changes to church practices and law to prevent further abuse.

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"The morale of the Catholic Church in Australia has been crushed for a long time now — over 90 percent of baptized Catholics no longer regularly participate in the sacraments," Coyne said. "The Royal Commission has shattered the faith of many in their religious leaders and now this conviction of Archbishop Wilson, and the [other] pending trials ... have only made the situation worse. It's going to be generations and decades before the institution can recover from the crushing of morale and faith."

The president of the Australian Catholic Bishops' Conference, Brisbane Archbishop Mark Coleridge, said in his own statement, "Archbishop Wilson maintained his innocence throughout this long judicial process. It is not yet clear if he will appeal the verdict."

Australian Catholic writer Paul Collins told NCR that many Australian Catholics are "reacting with weariness" to the conviction.

"For practising Catholics (we're now down to 9% to 10% of the Catholic population going to Mass on a reasonably regular basis), there is both anger and sadness that our bishops and leaders have so comprehensively failed the Catholic community," he added. "That anger is increasing with the way most of the bishops have run for cover and refuse to engage with active Catholics who want to be part of discerning

the solution."

Attorney Craig Caldicott, co-chair of the South Australian Law Society's criminal law committee, told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's Adelaide radio station that he anticipates more cases like Wilson's will be brought. "There's a whole series of cases right across Australia where the Roman Catholic Church and indeed other churches have not reported offenses," he said.

Coyne shared with NCR something he had written on his website: "There must be a heck of a lot of priests and bishops, who have known about cases of clerical abuse in the past, who are thinking in the wake of this decision, 'there, but for the grace of God, go I!' This is yet another of the many watershed moments that the Church has been brought to confront in recent decades. There are more yet to come before the collapse in morale and the declining participation is to be addressed."

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A version of this story appeared in the **June 1-14, 2018** print issue under the headline: Prelate steps aside after cover-up conviction.