News



French Cardinal Philippe Barbarin, center, arrives at the Lyon courtroom for his appeal trial Thursday, Nov.28, 2019 in Lyon, central France. The French cardinal's career is on the line as an appeals court decides whether to uphold his conviction for covering up sexual abuse of children. (AP/Laurent Cipriani)

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A French cardinal said Thursday he did not understand why he was found guilty of covering up sexual abuse of children, speaking at an appeals court hearing that will help determine his future within the Catholic Church.

Cardinal Philippe Barbarin tried to resign after his original conviction in March for failing to report a predator priest to police. But Pope Francis refused to accept the resignation until the appeals process is complete.

Barbarin, the archbishop of Lyon, was given a six-month suspended sentence for "non-denunciation of sexual violence against minors."

He told the court that he filed an appeal because "I cannot see clearly what I am guilty of."

The appeal occurs at a time of increasing scrutiny around the world of the Catholic Church's role in hiding abuse.

The case involves French priest Bernard Preynat, who has admitted to abusing Boy Scouts from the 1970s to the 1990s.

Several church officials were accused of covering up for Preynat over many years, but some of the accusations were outside the statute of limitations and only Barbarin was convicted.

The cardinal's lawyer, Jean-Felix Luciani, said that there was no legal basis for the original court decision and that "we hope that at the next step, justice will be done."

The case against Barbarin hinges on a 2014 discussion with Alexandre Hezez, who told the cardinal about sexual violence he had suffered in the 1980s by Preynat during scout camps. Hezez felt the priest should no longer lead a parish.

The Lyon court found in March that Barbarin, "in wanting to avoid scandal caused by the facts of multiple sexual abuses committed by a priest ... preferred to take the risk of preventing the discovery of many victims of sexual abuse by the justice system, and to prohibit the expression of their pain."

Barbarin told the appeal hearing that he followed Vatican instructions following the 2014 discussion with Hezez. He suggested he could not have done more.

Preynat was moved to another parish and continued to work with children until his retirement in 2015.

Preynat is believed to have abused as many as 85 boys and will be tried in Lyon in January on charges of sexual assault of minors.

In July, France's Catholic Church pronounced him guilty of sexually abusing multiple Boy Scouts over several years and defrocked him, an unusually strong move.

The case has pushed the French church into a long-awaited reckoning with abuse. Bishops voted this month for financial compensation to sexual abuse victims, after years of complaints.

At Thursday's hearing, abuse victim Hezez said: "I was certain that an investigation would begin. I was naive."

Francois Devaux, who founded a group called Parole Liberee that has helped victims speak out about sexual abuse by priests, described to the court his disappointment after calling Barbarin to seek help.

"I was convinced that the church had changed," Devaux said Thursday. "We had all heard about Boston," where Catholic Church officials were found to have covered up widespread sexual abuse by priests over decades.

"But it wasn't the case."

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