News



Cardinal Philippe Barbarin 's lawyer Jean Felix Luciani answers reporters at the Lyon courthouse, central France, after a French appeals court acquitted French cardinal Philippe Barbarin of covering up the sexual abuse of minors in his flock, Thursday, Jan.30, 2020. Behind are striking lawyers denouncing French President Emmanuel Macron's plans to overhaul the pension system (AP/Laurent Cirpriani)

Nicolas Vaux-Montagny

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A French appeals court on Jan. 30 acquitted a French cardinal of covering up the sexual abuse of minors in his flock, a decision culminating a drama that has produced angst for the Roman Catholic Church and reawakened a past of pain and shame for some victims seeking justice.

Initially, the appeals court in the southeastern French city of Lyon gave no explanation while pronouncing its decision to wipe the legal slate clean for Cardinal Philippe Barbarin. The court, however, later released a 38-page document with the reasoning behind its decision and said it found no "intentional element" showing a cover-up.

Barbarin, archbishop of Lyon, had been convicted in March and given a six-month suspended sentence for failing to report a predator priest to police. But Pope Francis refused to accept the cardinal's decision to resign until the appeals process is complete.

A lawyer, Yves Sauvayre, representing victims in the cover-up case against the cardinal, said they plan to appeal to France's highest court.

The verdict comes at a time of increasing scrutiny around the world of the Catholic Church's role in hiding abuse by its clergy.

The prosecutor's office had sought the acquittal accorded by the court, as it did in Barbarin's initial trial in March, in which he was convicted and handed a six-month suspended prison sentence. Prosecutors had recommended already in 2016 that the case be dropped because of a lack of proof of a cover-up.

"This decision is logical," one of Barbarin's lawyer's, Jean Felix Luciani, said outside the courtroom. He said the cardinal had faced down "public rumor and calumny."

Barbarin, 69, said at his appeals trial in November that he filed an appeal because "I cannot see clearly what I am guilty of."

The court had ruled 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."

Bernard Preynat, the now-defrocked priest at the center of the scandal, described to a court at his trial earlier this month how he systematically abused boys over two decades as a French scout chaplain. Preynat said his superiors knew about his "abnormal" behavior as far back as the 1970s.

"Had the church sidelined me earlier, I would have stopped earlier," Preynat said.

Preynat, now 74, faces up to 10 years in prison in what is France's biggest clergy sex abuse trial to date. He's suspected of abusing around 75 boys, but his testimony suggests the overall number could be even higher. That verdict is expected in March.

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

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

At the trial of Preynat, victims testified about how much power the priest had held over them and the lifelong damage that his abuse caused.

"I saw this community that admired this man, and I was his protege, his pet," said abuse victim Francois Devaux.

Devaux had a sober reaction after Thursday's court ruling, saying "It is a disappointment."

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