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Vatican



In this Sept. 19, 1988 file photo Rev. Joseph Hart dispenses communion during an outdoor Mass celebrated for participants of the Basque Festival in Buffalo, Wyo. (AP File/Dean Wariner)

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In this Sept. 19, 1988 file photo Rev. Joseph Hart dispenses communion during an outdoor Mass celebrated for participants of the Basque Festival in Buffalo, Wyo. (AP File/Dean Wariner)

The Vatican has cleared a retired U.S. bishop of multiple allegations he sexually abused minors and teenagers, rejecting lay experts' determination that a half-dozen claims were credible and instead slapping him on the wrist for what it called "flagrant" imprudent behavior.

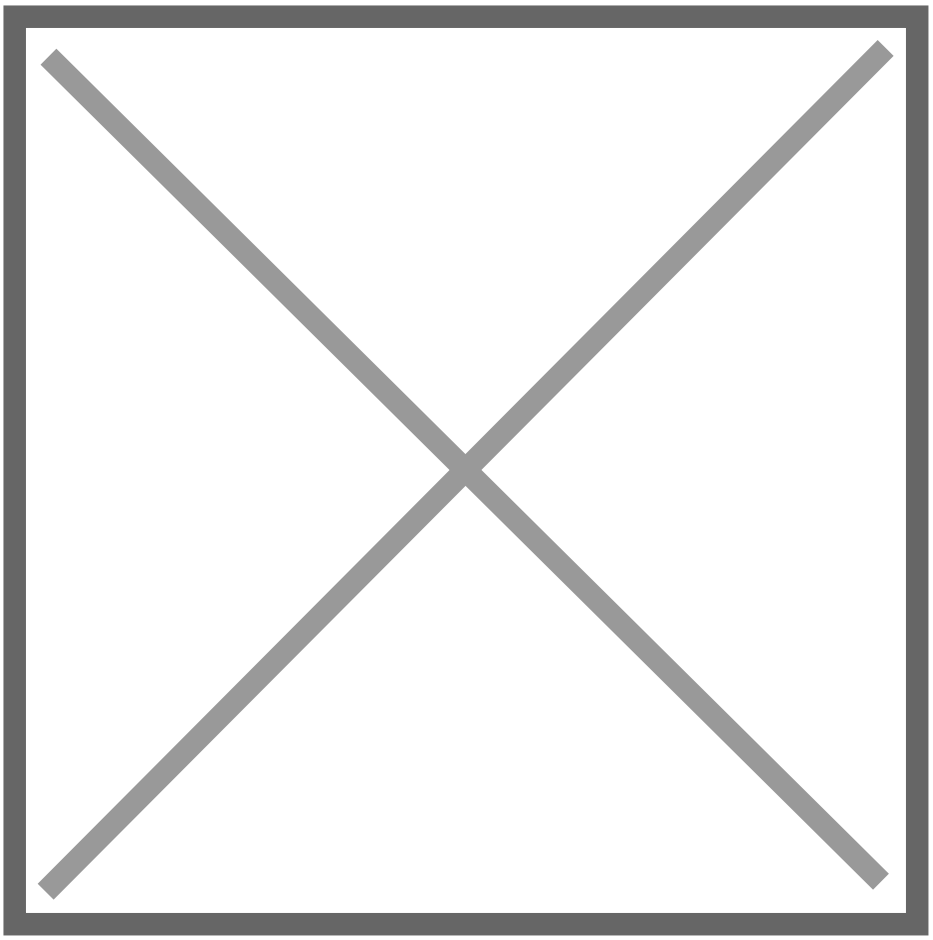
The Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith exonerated retired Cheyenne, Wyoming, Bishop Joseph Hart of seven accusations abuse and determined that five others couldn't be proven "with moral certitude." Two other cases involving boys who were 16 and 17 couldn't be prosecuted because the Catholic Church didn't consider them minors at the time of the alleged abuse, the diocese reported Jan. 25. A 13th allegation wasn't addressed in the decree.

Hart, 89, had long maintained his innocence and denied all allegations of misconduct. His attorney, Thomas Jubin, said multiple allegations against Hart were "specious," with some based on second- and third-hand information, and with some accusers emphasizing that Hart didn't physically touch them.

"Despite this, Bishop Hart asks me to convey that he continues to pray for all involved in this case so that they may find peace and healing. He now asks, and I ask, too, that he may now be afforded peace in the twilight of this life as he prepares to meet his God in the next," Jubin said in a statement.

The Vatican decision clearly disappointed Hart's successor, Bishop Steven Biegler, who stressed that the Vatican's findings didn't mean Hart was innocent, just that the Holy See determined that the high burden of proof hadn't been met.

"Today, I want the survivors to know that I support and believe you" Biegler said in a statement. "I understand that this announcement will not bring closure to the survivors, their family members, Bishop Hart and all those affected."



Bishop Steven R. Biegler of Cheyenne, Wyo., is seen in this 2017 file photo during the fall general assembly of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops in Baltimore. (CNS/Bob Roller)

Biegler has previously stood by the findings of his review board, which determined a half-dozen claims were credible. And his diocesan statement noted the qualifications of its members: "law enforcement; school administration; a doctor of psychology; a pediatrician; a psychotherapist, who treats sexually abused children; and a judge, who was a criminal prosecutor for 13 years involving crimes against children, primarily child sexual abuse."

On the other hand, the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, or CDF, relies on the judgment of priests and bishop canon lawyers, and ultimately the pope. The Vatican for decades has been criticized by victims' groups for giving bishops a pass when they have been accused of sexual abuse themselves or of covering it up.

A few exceptions have been made in recent years, most famously in the case of ex-Cardinal Theodore McCarrick, who was defrocked after the CDF determined he had abused minors as well as adults, including during confession — essentially the same allegations against Hart.

As a result, the sentence showed the arbitrary nature of Vatican's canonical sex abuse deliberations and judgments, which aren't public. Hart's previous diocese of Kansas City-St. Joseph reached court settlements years ago with at least 10 victims. But Wyoming criminal prosecutors also decided last year not to proceed with charging Hart.

Anne Barrett Doyle, of the online resource BishopAccountability.org, said the Vatican ruling was "heartbreaking and disgraceful" and showed that church law is biased in favor of priests and bishops.

"Defenders of canon law might point to the punishment of ex-cardinal McCarrick as evidence that the system works. But for every McCarrick, there are five Harts: bishops who retain their titles and pensions in the face of multiple allegations," she said in an email, adding that the ruling calls into question Pope Francis' vow to hold bishops accountable.

In its decree, the CDF rebuked Hart "for his flagrant lack of prudence as a priest and bishop for being alone with minors in his private residence and on various trips which could have been potential occasions endangering the 'obligation to observe continence' and that would 'give rise to scandal among the faithful,'" the diocese said.

Hart was also rebuked for failing to observe previous Vatican restrictions prohibiting him from having contact with minors and seminarians and from participating in public engagements, the diocese said, adding that those restrictions remain in place.

Jubin, Hart's lawyer, criticized Biegler for what he said was "grandstanding" and trying to disregard due process by trying to convict Hart in the "court of public opinion."

The Associated Press has learned that the CDF had tasked the investigation into Hart to Indianapolis Bishop Charles Thompson, who made headlines in 2019 when he ordered two Catholic high schools to fire teachers in same-sex marriages. After one

Jesuit school refused, the Vatican temporarily suspended Thompson's order rescinding the school's Catholic recognition.

The CDF under its current leadership seems to follow recommendations from local bishops who investigate sex crimes, while it used to take a more proactive role in sanctioning and defrocking accused clerics.

Hart was a priest in Kansas City, Missouri, for 21 years before moving to Wyoming, where he served as auxiliary and then full bishop from 1976 until his retirement in 2001. The first known allegations against Hart dated to the early 1960s and were made in the late 1980s. At least six men came forward in the past few years to say Hart abused them in Wyoming.

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Colleen Slevin contributed to this report from Denver.

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