News



Msgr. William Lynn arrives for a preliminary hearing in his retrial of his child endangerment case at the Center for Criminal Justice in Philadelphia, March 28, 2017. Lynn, the longtime secretary for clergy, was accused of sending a known predator, named on a list of problem priests he had prepared for Cardinal Bevilacqua, to an accuser's northeast Philadelphia parish. Lynn served nearly three years in state prison before appeals courts threw out his felony child endangerment conviction, and he pleaded no contest in November 2022 to a misdemeanor charge of failing to turn over records to the 2002 grand jury. (AP Photo/Matt Rourke, File)

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Twenty years after city prosecutors convened a grand jury to investigate the handling of priest-abuse complaints within the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Philadelphia, the tortuous legal case came to an end with a cleric's misdemeanor no contest plea in a near-empty City Hall courtroom.

Msgr. William Lynn, 71, had served nearly three years in state prison as appeals courts reviewed the fiery three-month trial that led to his felony child endangerment conviction in 2012. The verdict was twice overturned, leaving prosecutors pursuing the thinning case in recent years with a single alleged victim whose appearance in court was in doubt.

In the end, they said Lynn could end the two-decade ordeal by pleading no contest to a charge of failing to turn over records to the 2002 grand jury. A judge took the plea during a short break from her civil caseload last month, and imposed no further punishment.

“He lost 10 years of his life, 10 years of his priestly life,” said defense lawyer Thomas Bergstrom, speaking of the decade since Lynn's conviction. “It’s a travesty. It’s an absolute travesty.”

“You’re fighting an uphill battle because the public at large misunderstood what he was convicted of. They thought he was an abuser,” Bergstrom said.

Lynn was the first U.S. church official ever charged, convicted or imprisoned over their handling of priest-abuse complaints.

His trial attracted a packed courtroom full of press, priest-abuse victims and outraged Catholics, along with a few church loyalists. Lynn, the longtime secretary for clergy, was accused of sending a known predator — named on a list of problem priests he had prepared for Cardinal Anthony Bevilacqua — to an accuser’s northeast Philadelphia parish.

The trial judge allowed nearly two dozen other priest-abuse victims to testify about abuse they had suffered in the archdiocese over a half century. An appeals court later said their weeks of testimony over uncharged acts were unfair to Lynn — who some saw as a scapegoat for the church, given that the bishops and cardinals above him were never charged.

“This is one defendant, one count of endangering the welfare of children, with one group of children,” Judge Gwendolyn Bright said before his retrial was set to start in March 2020. “We’re not bringing in the so-called or alleged ‘sins of the Catholic Church.’”

The pandemic closed the courthouse, and the case against Lynn stalled yet again until the recent plea offer.

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A spokesperson for District Attorney Larry Krasner, who inherited the case from his predecessors, called Lynn's unannounced Nov. 2 plea “the appropriate path for bringing finality and closure to the victims, who have endured retraumatization throughout the legal process for years" and said they did not want to face another trial.

The archdiocese did not immediately return a message seeking comment.

Lynn, who remains a priest, has been saying Mass for retired nuns and hopes to assume more duties, according to Bergstrom, who declined to make his client available to the press on Nov. 21.

At his trial, Lynn said he had made a list of 35 suspected predator priests so Bevilacqua would address the matter, only to have the list be destroyed.

“I did not intend any harm to come to (the victim). The fact is, my best was not good enough to stop that harm,” Lynn testified.

In recent years, prosecutors were not sure they could get the trial accuser — a policeman’s son who testified to his long struggle with addiction — back in court for the retrial, complicating their trial strategy. Assistant District Attorney Patrick Blessington, the lead trial prosecutor in 2012, had said he could try the case without

a victim by arguing that Lynn had placed “a bomb” in the parish, whether or not it went off.

Blessington is now retired. And, ultimately, District Attorney Krasner decided not to try that strategy.

“The victims in this matter expressed to the commonwealth that proceeding (with another trial) ... would cause irreparable harm and further victimize them," his office said in its statement.

The trial accuser said that he had been abused by two priests and his Catholic school teacher. One of them, defrocked priest Edward Avery, took a plea offer days before trial. Fr. Charles Engelhardt, who said he had never met the accuser, was convicted at a 2013 trial and died in prison. Teacher Bernard Shero was released in 2017 after his conviction was overturned and, like Lynn, pleaded no contest to lesser charges.

The priest-abuse scandal has cost the Roman Catholic church an estimated $3 billion or more, and plunged dioceses around the world into bankruptcy.