Vatican
Vatican News



Cardinal George Pell answers a journalist's question during an interview with The Associated Press inside his residence near the Vatican in Rome, Nov. 30, 2020. Pell, who was the most senior Catholic cleric to be convicted of child sex abuse before his convictions were later overturned, has died Tuesday, Jan. 10, 2023, in Rome at age 81. (AP/Gregorio Borgia, File)

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Rome — January 10, 2023
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Cardinal George Pell, who was the most senior Catholic cleric to be convicted of child sex abuse and spent 404 days in solitary confinement in his native Australia before his convictions were overturned, died Tuesday in Rome. He was 81.

Pell died after undergoing hip surgery at Salvator Mundi hospital, said a friend, Fr. Robert McCulloch, a Rome-base priest. He had been in Rome to attend the funeral last week of Pope Benedict XVI.

"This news comes as a great shock to all of us," Sydney Catholic Archbishop Anthony Fisher said in a statement on Facebook. "Please pray for the repose of the soul of Cardinal Pell, for comfort and consolation for his family and for all of those who loved him and are grieving him at this time."

Pell, the former archbishop of Melbourne and Sydney, became the third-highest ranked official in the Vatican after Pope Francis tapped him in 2014 to reform the Vatican's notoriously opaque finances as the Holy See's first-ever finance czar.

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He spent three years as prefect of the newly created Secretariat for the Economy, where he tried to impose international budgeting, accounting and transparency standards.

But Pell returned to his native Australia in 2017 in an attempt to clear his name of child sex charges dating from his time as archbishop.

A Victoria state County Court jury initially convicted him of molesting two 13-year-old choirboys at St. Patrick's Cathedral in the latest 1990s shortly after he had become Archbishop of Melbourne. Pell served 404 days in solitary confinement before the full-bench of the High Court unanimously overturned his convictions in 2020.

During his time in prison, Pell kept a journal documenting everything from his prayers and Scripture readings to his conversations with visiting chaplains and the prison guards. The journal turned into a triptych, "Prison Journal," the proceeds of which went to pay his substantial legal bills.

In the diary, Pell reflected on the nature of suffering, Pope Francis' papacy and the humiliations of solitary confinement as he battled to clear his name for a crime he insists he never committed.



Cardinal George Pell walks onto the stage for the opening mass for World Youth Day in Sydney, Australia, July 15, 2008. (AP/Rick Rycroft, File)

Pell and his supporters believe he was scapegoated for all the crimes of the Australian Catholic Church's botched response to clergy sexual abuse. Victims and critics say he epitomized everything wrong with how the church has dealt with the problem.

"Looking back, I was probably excessively optimistic that I'd get bail," Pell said in a 2021 interview at his home in Rome, crediting his "glass half-full" attitude to his Christian faith.

Even after he was acquitted, Pell's reputation remained tarnished by the scandal.

Australia's Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse found that he knew of clergy molesting children in the 1970s and did not take adequate action to address it.

Pell later said in a statement he was "surprised" by the commission's findings. "These views are not supported by evidence," Pell's statement said.

With his rather brusque, no-nonsense Australian sensibilities, Pell clashed frequently with the Vatican's Italian old guard during the three years he lived in Rome trying to get a handle on the Vatican's assets and spending. He was vindicated when Vatican prosecutors put 10 people, including his onetime nemesis, on trial in 2021 for a host of alleged financial crimes.

After Pell returned to Rome following his release from prison, he had a well-publicized private audience with Francis.

"He acknowledged what I was trying to do," Pell said of the pope during a 2020 interview. "And, you know, I think it's been sadly vindicated by revelations and developments."

Pell was born on June 8, 1941, the eldest of three children to a heavyweight champion boxer and publican also named George Pell, an Anglican. His mother Margaret Lillian (nee Burke) was from an Irish Catholic family.

Pell grew up in the Victorian regional town of Ballarat. At 193 centimeters (6 foot, 4 inches) tall, he was a talented Australian Rules Footballer. He was offered a professional football contract to play for Richmond but opted for a seminary instead.

While in Melbourne, he set up the Melbourne Response which was a world-first protocol to investigate complaints of clergy sexual abuse and to compensate victims.

However many abuse victims were critical of the system and of compensation payments.