News



Bishop Christopher Saunders of Broome tries to play a didgeridoo during a World Youth Day media event in Sydney, Australia, on April 17, 2008. Saunders, a retired Catholic bishop, has been charged Feb. 22, 2024, with child sex abuse offenses in a remote part of Australia's northwest. (AP/Rob Griffith, File)

Rod McGuirk

View Author Profile

Associated Press

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

Melbourne, Australia — February 22, 2024

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

A retired Catholic bishop has been charged with sexual offenses including child abuse in a remote part of Australia's northwest.

Christopher Saunders, 74, will appear in the Broome Magistrates Court on Feb. 22 in the heart of the sprawling Outback diocese where he had actively served as a cleric for 45 years, a police statement said.

He has been in police custody since detectives charged him Wednesday with 19 offenses including indecent assault and indecently dealing with a child, the statement said.

The allegations date to 2008 and cover Broome as well as the far-flung northwest towns of Kununurra and Kalumburu.

Saunders has previously denied any wrongdoing.

Saunders resigned in 2021 as bishop of Broome, a diocese larger than France but with a population of only 50,000 people, after police announced they had dropped a sex crime investigation.

He had stood down a year earlier after media reported the allegations.

Advertisement

A Vatican investigation into child sexual abuse allegations against Saunders began in 2022.

That investigation became public knowledge last year when an Australian television news network reported the contents of a 200-page Vatican report on Saunders.

The Western Australia Police Force said at the time they had requested a copy of that report, which restarted the criminal investigation.

Saunders began working in Broome as a deacon in 1975 and became bishop in 1996. He is among Australia's most senior former or current clerics to be accused in a clergy abuse scandal that has rocked the church.

Cardinal George Pell was the third highest-ranking cleric in the Vatican when he was convicted in an Australian court in 2018 of sexually abusing two 13-year-old choirboys in a Melbourne cathedral in 1996, when Pell was an archbishop.

Pell spent 13 months in prison before the convictions were overturned on appeal. He maintained his innocence until his death in Rome last year.

Also in 2018, a judge quashed former Adelaide Archbishop Philip Wilson's conviction for covering up child sexual abuse by a pedophile priest in the 1970s in New South Wales state.

Wilson had served almost four months of a one-year sentence in home detention at his sister's house before his appeal was upheld.

He had been Australia's highest ranking bishop from 2006 to 2010 when he was president of the Australian Catholic Bishops' Conference. Wilson died in 2021.