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Philadelphia priest guilty of child endangerment to serve up to six years in prison

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Msgr. William J. Lynn, seen leaving a Philadelphia courthouse in late May, was convicted of endangering children for his handling of priest abuse claims while secretary of clergy for the Philadelphia archdiocese. A judge sentenced him July 24 to a maximum of six years in prison. (CNS photo/Scott Anderson, Reuters)

For failing to protect children from a known predator priest, Msgr. William J. Lynn will spend three to six years in prison.

Common Pleas Court Judge M. Teresa Sarmina read the former secretary of clergy for the Philadelphia archdiocese her sentence July 24 before a standing-room-only courtroom.

"You knew full well what was right, Msgr. Lynn, but you chose wrong," Sarmina said, according to The Associated Press.

Other courtroom reports quoted the judge as telling Lynn, 61, he "helped many but also failed many," and "enabled monsters in clerical garb ? to destroy the souls of children."

When given the chance to speak, Lynn said he did his best to protect children, but acknowledged that his best wasn't good enough.

Lynn's lawyers have stated they will appeal his case. A hearing to release the convicted priest on bail during the appeal process was postponed until Aug. 6.

Present in the courtroom were many from Lynn's family and support circle, several of whom took the stand as character witnesses for the monsignor. Just as many stood beside the victim of Edward Avery, a

defrocked priest who molested the 10-year-old altar boy in 1999.

In the landmark three-month trial, the jury convicted Lynn on a child endangerment charge related to Avery, who pleaded guilty to charges of conspiracy and sexual assault in March, only days before he was to stand trial alongside Lynn and Fr. James J. Brennan. Avery is serving two-and-a-half to five-year prison sentence.

"I apologize, I have apologized before, I apologize again, and I hope some day you will be able to accept that apology," Lynn said to Avery's victim.

Marci Hamilton, law professor and counsel in multiple abuse cases, was present at the sentencing. She said Sarmina's statement, which at one point quoted Archbishop Charles Chaput's Good Friday sermon, carried the theme that being a good priest does not make up for criminal endangerment of children.

"She really contrasted the Lynn that was secretary of the clergy who was, in her words hardhearted and callous, and the Lynn who was the parish priest, who was warm and compassionate, and she said the one doesn't make up for the other," Hamilton said.

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Serving as secretary of clergy from 1992-2004 under Cardinal Anthony Bevilacqua, who died in January, Lynn is the first U.S. church official accused and convicted for his handling of priest abuse claims, and is now the first church official sentenced for his actions.

Before his sentencing, Lynn's defense lawyers pushed for a punishment of probation without jail time, arguing that their client had suffered unprecedented "shaming and vilification," and time in prison would be "cruel and unusual," since he posed no danger to society.

The prosecution had sought a maximum sentence of seven years, but said they were pleased with Sarmina's decision.

"[Lynn] locked away in a vault the names of pedophile priests. He locked in a vault the names of men that he knew had abused children. He now will be locked away for a fraction of the time he kept that secret vault," District Attorney Seth Williams told reporters outside the courtroom.

Under Pennsylvania law, Lynn must serve his minimum sentence of three years before he is eligible for parole.

The jury acquitted Lynn of conspiracy, as well as a child endangerment charge related to co-defendant Brennan. In Brennan's case, the group of seven men and five women could not come to a unanimous decision on the charges against him ? attempted rape and child endangerment ? and declared itself hung.

A day before Lynn's sentencing, Williams announced that his office will retry Brennan's case, with the first court hearing scheduled for Aug. 14.

"James Brennan used his position as a priest to prey upon and victimize this young man," Williams said in a statement. "It is extremely important that Brennan be held accountable for his crime, not just for his victim but for all victims of sexual abuse."

Brennan told reporters he's taking the news of his retrial a day at a time.

"I keep up my prayer life, stronger than ever before," Brennan said. "This has really brought me to a whole new place spiritually and personally, and I rely on friends and family like never before."

For prosecutors nationwide, Lynn's trial and sentencing will empower them to pursue cases of child sex abuse more vigorously, said Hamilton, who currently represents seven clients in cases against the Philadelphia archdiocese.

"This sent a powerful message to survivors and to bishops and to Penn State, and to every institution that has this problem, that no longer will those in power just get a slap on the wrist. They will go to jail," she said.

"We have ignored a lot of child sex abuse and prosecutors are finally stepping up to the point where they're going to go after even the people in power that created the conditions. It's a new day for survivors, no question," she said.

Survivor support groups also endorsed the sentencing.

"Considering all the kids whose innocence was shattered (or, in some whose lives were lost to suicide), we believe that Msgr. Lynn deserved the harshest punishment. Still, this sentence sends a powerful message: cover-up child sex crimes and you'll go to jail," said a statement from the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests.

"The sentence should send a clear and direct message to all of the bishops of the Roman Catholic Church: they have failed their people, and given Monsignor Lynn's defense they created and sustain a culture that fails their people," said the National Survivor Advocates Coalition.

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