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Jury convicts priest, teacher in Philadelphia abuse case

Brian Roewe | Jan. 30, 2013 NCR Today

On Wednesday afternoon, a Pennsylvania jury found two men guilty of sexually assaulting the same altar boy in the late 1990s, the latest convictions in the ongoing sexual abuse scandal in the Philadelphia archdiocese.

The jury of eight men and four women found Fr. Charles Engelhardt guilty of indecent assault of a minor, corruption of a minor, and conspiracy, but could not come to agreement on a count of indecent sexual assault, according to The Associated Press [1].

In addition, Bernard Shero, a former Catholic school teacher at St. Jerome Catholic School, was found guilty of rape and indecent sexual assault, among other charges.

Engelhardt's conspiracy charge was tied to former priest Edward Avery -- accused as well by the same boy, who was 10 years old at the time of the abuse -- who pleaded guilty in March 2012 to charges of conspiracy and sexual assault.

Avery appeared during Engelhardt-Shero trial, taking the stand and testifying [2] that he issued a false guilty plea, denying he abused the boy and only said he did in order to avoid a longer sentence. He is currently serving two-and-a-half to five years in prison.

The two convictions become the latest in the fallout of a 2011 grand jury report conducted by the Philadelphia district attorney's office.

In June, Msgr. William Lynn, the archdiocese's former secretary of clergy, was found guilty [3] of one charge of child endangerment, which was tied to Avery. Lynn, the first U.S. church official convicted for his role in mishandling abuse claims, is currently serving a three- to six-year prison sentence.

The 2011 investigation revealed the story of "Billy Doe," the now-24-year-old man who accused Engelhardt, Shero and Avery of serially raping and abusing him. The report presents a picture where the three men passed Billy among one another. The young man, who has battled a drug addiction since his teens, took the stand for several hours during the trial.

Both Shero and Engelhardt, a priest of the Oblates of St. Francis de Sales, were originally scheduled to stand trial with Lynn and his co-defendant, Fr. James Brennan, but won a motion to have their trials separated, given neither had direct ties to the archdiocese.

The next trial is expected to come later in the spring, when Brennan will be retried for allegedly abusing a 14-year-old boy after his case alongside Lynn resulted in a hung jury.

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