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Judge sentences priest, former teacher in latest chapter of Philadelphia abuse scandal

by Brian Roewe

NCR Today

A Philadelphia judge issued sentences Wednesday for an Oblates priest and former Catholic school teacher embroiled in the region's clergy sex abuse scandal.

Common Pleas Court Ellen Ceisler sentenced Bernard Shero to eight to 16 years for sexually assaulting a former altar boy in 2000, and Fr. Charles Engelhardt to a six-to-12 year prison term for abusing the same child in the late 1990s. Both also received five years probation following their sentences' conclusions.

The sentences exceeded the guidelines for both men.

"This prison sentence sends a clear message to sexual assault victims in Philadelphia. If you come forward, you will be heard," Philadelphia District Attorney Seth Williams said in a statement. "I would also like to compliment the jury for its hard work in carefully sifting through the evidence, and coming up with a just verdict."

In late January, a jury found Shero, a former teacher at St. Jerome Catholic School, guilty of rape, deviate sexual intercourse with a child, indecent assault of a minor, endangering the welfare of children and corruption of minors.

Engelhardt, a priest of the Oblates of St. Francis de Sales, was convicted of indecent assault of a minor, child endangerment and corruption of minors. The jury acquitted declared itself hung on an indecent sexual assault charge, and Ceisler granted Wednesday a motion to acquit a conspiracy charge of which the jury found him guilty, as well.

At the sentencing hearing, both Engelhardt, 66, and Shero, 50, spoke, according to media reports.

‘I have accepted this injustice and will continue to do so until it is righted, because I believe it will be righted. I had no interaction with (the accuser) in any way,’ Engelhardt said, the Associated Press reported.

At the Philadelphia crime blog Bigtrial.net, veteran journalist Ralph Cipriano in his play-by-play coverage of the sentencing reported Shero claimed his innocence, accused the prosecutor of ‘twisting the facts’ and described himself as ‘a target’ due to his congenital cataracts.

Attorneys for both men stated in court their intention to appeal, according to the *Philadelphia Inquirer*.

The convictions against Shero and Engelhardt related to the victim ‘Billy Doe,’ a central figure in the Philadelphia archdiocese clergy sex abuse cases. Doe’s accusations of abuse also extended to former priest Edward Avery, who entered a guilty plea before he was set to stand trial in March 2012 alongside former archdiocesan secretary of clergy Msgr. William J. Lynn and Fr. James Brennan.

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In late April, Cipriano reported for *NCR* an extensive examination of Doe’s role in the trial, including how he became the star witness of the prosecution, his numerous drug addictions and his seemingly ever-changing recollections of the assaults.

In June 2012, Lynn was found guilty on one of five counts, a child endangerment charge related to Avery. The first U.S. church official convicted for mishandling claims, he was sentenced to three to six years in prison. The jury declared itself hung on charges against Brennan, whose retrial has been scheduled for October.

During the Shero-Engelhardt trial, Avery took the stand and testified that he never assaulted Doe and had pled guilty in order to avoid a lengthier sentence. He is currently serving a two-and-half- to five-year prison sentence.

Originally to be tried alongside Lynn, Brennan and Avery, Shero and Engelhardt had their trials severed on the basis they had no direct ties to the archdiocese and the conspiracy charges prosecutors sought related to the others.

In a statement on his order’s website, Fr. James Greenfield, provincial of the Oblates of St. Francis de Sales Wilmington-Philadelphia province, expressed disappointment in the sentencing and vouched for his priest’s innocence.

‘This is a sad day for Father Charles Englehardt because, I believe, an innocent man has been sent to prison. Yes, child sexual abuse is wrong. It is criminal, and it is evil. Yet, Fr. Engelhardt did not commit this crime,’ Greenfield said.

The provincial said Engelhardt had passed a polygraph test prior to the trial, and cited the frequent changes that occurred in the victim’s story each time he told it.

‘While I respect the jury system in our country, I do believe that they erred egregiously in this case. I am fully convinced that if Fr. Englehardt had not been a priest, this case would never have been brought to

trial. I know that he is an innocent man,? Greenfield said.

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