

Highest-Ranking Vatican Official: The Church Made 'Enormous Mistakes'

Australian Cardinal George Pell, the highest-ranking Vatican official to testify on Catholic Church abuse, said on Sunday the Church made "enormous mistakes" and "let people down" in its handling of systemic child sex abuse by priests.

Giving evidence in front of abuse victims in a Rome hotel room, Pell told Australia's Royal Commission into Institutional Response to Child Sexual Abuse that children were often not believed and abusive priests shuffled from parish to parish.

"The Church has made enormous mistakes and is working to remedy those, but the Church in many places, certainly in Australia, has mucked things up, has let people down," Pell said via video link to the commission in Sydney.

"I'm not here to defend the indefensible."

The Australian inquiry into sexual abuse cases that occurred decades ago has taken on wider implications about accountability of Church leaders because of Pell's high position in the Vatican, where he now serves as finance minister.

Pell, 74, has become the focal point for victims' frustration over what they say has been an inadequate response from the Catholic Church. Pell himself is not accused of sexual abuse and has twice apologized for the Church's slow response.

Pell said several times that he was aware of rumors and complaints against pedophile clergy when he was a young priest in the 1970s, but that Church superiors tended to give priests

the benefit of the doubt, something he acknowledged was wrong.

When pressed on specific situations involving particular priests, Pell repeatedly said he couldn't recollect the incidents being put to him, at one point citing "a senior moment," angering witnesses in both Rome and Sydney.

"He is an intelligent man, he is in such a high position, we all have our seniors moments but not on something like this," Trish Charter, who says she was abused between the ages of four and eight at an orphanage run by the Sisters of Mercy, said in Sydney.

David Ridsdale, who was abused by his priest uncle, Father Gerald Ridsdale, who was later convicted of 138 offenses against 53 victims, said Pell's tone was more conciliatory than previously but "we have a long way to get to the truth."

Ridsdale was among 15 abuse victims and supporters who traveled to Rome on the back of a crowd-funding campaign to see Pell give evidence after he said he was unable to travel to his native Australia because of heart problems.

In Sydney, victims' supporters gathered outside the Commission's hearing rooms, holding hands in prayer and carrying signs saying "Pope Sack Pell Now" and "Pell go to hell."

Too Many Cases Dismissed

Last year, Pell denied accusations made at Commission hearings that he had tried to bribe a victim to remain quiet, that he ignored another complaint and that he was complicit in the transfer of a pedophile priest.

Pell said on Sunday that too many allegations of abuse were "dismissed in absolutely scandalous circumstances," adding he believed the faults were personal rather than structural

failings.

“Unfortunately, original sin is alive and well,” Pell said. “There’s tendency to evil in the Catholic Church too and sometimes it’s better, sometimes it’s worse but for good or for ill the Church follows the patterns of the societies in which it lives.”

On Sunday, Pell’s office released a photo of the Cardinal tying a yellow ribbon around a fence in the Vatican Gardens, joining a campaign started by the Australian Loud Fence movement. The group first hung colored ribbons on a fence outside a Catholic school in the rural town of Ballarat, where abuse was rife, with the bright colors designed to give a voice to child victims who were silenced.

Church sexual abuse broke into the open in 2002, when it was discovered that bishops in the Boston area moved abusers from parish to parish instead of defrocking them. Similar scandals have since been discovered around the world and tens of millions of dollars have been paid in compensation.

Ironically, the Rome hearing started just hours before the Oscar ceremony in Hollywood, where “Spotlight,” a film about the systematic cover-up of sexual abuse in the Church in Boston, was nominated for six Academy Awards.

Pell is scheduled to give further evidence over the next three days. {eoa}

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